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Transnational Connections

Transnational Connections Symposium:
Challenges and Opportunities for Political Communication Research

Introduction

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Political communication scholars today do not suffer from a shortage of issues to study. On the contrary, the opportunities abound. One need only recall the WikiLeaks scandal, which underscored the unprecedented access to political information available to citizens and the decreased elite control over the backstage messages received by them (see Benkler, 2010). Other timely examples include the debate as to whether to publish the postmortem photos of Osama bin Laden or the technologically-deterministic claims as to the still ongoing Facebook and Twitter revolutions in the Middle East, claims paired with cautionary evidence that revolutions will not be tweeted (see Gladwell, 2010).

These events are taking place across the globe and have large-scale ramifications. They are among the many phenomena in which the sociopolitical intersects with "old" and "new" media to affect citizen attitudes, social polarization, and systemic changes, and which provide political communication scholars with a daily overdose of new research topics. Nevertheless, we still have a limited understanding of the issues involved: how various communicative processes relate to these events (and to their antecedents and consequences); how these events are understood by those affected; and whether and how they are changing what it means to be a citizen, to have a voice, and to be (or not be) heard, among others.

This is partly because political communication research has been primarily conducted in and on the Western hemisphere, often by scholars based or trained in the United States. Various phenomena in other contexts are less frequently studied, although, fortunately, this has been changing. In a similar vein, many cutting-edge ideas within political communication, such as deliberation or selectivity, have been primarily researched in the U.S., and with some notable exceptions, the findings have not been replicated elsewhere. Hence, we know relatively little about how contextual factors such as electoral structures, political culture, media systems, and information flows affect citizen participation in the democratic and especially, in the nondemocratic political process. In addition, insights into various international events, which the academic public gains through conferences and publications, are naturally filtered through a framework that has certain normative underpinnings and particular scientific epistemologies that may or may not be applicable to dramatically distinct sociopolitical contexts.

This relative ethnocentrism of political communication scholarship has faced increasing demands for adaptation (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). On the one hand, these demands are encouraged by new media technologies, including tools such as Twitter, YouTube, and social media that alter the ways in which citizens interact with each other as well as with the elites (and vice versa) and that affect the dynamics of political communication as both research and practice. This factor is well-covered, although not well-theorized in some recent publications (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010).

In addition, though it may seem a cliché, we are reminded daily that the world is increasingly "globalized," that communication is transnational, that new media technologies can transcend geographical boundaries, and that sociopolitical problems in one region generate far-reaching effects. This second factor, although well-theorized (e.g., Appadurai, 1996, 2001), has not been well-incorporated into political communication theory, research, and practice. I address these issues in the conclusion.

These interrelated factors give political communication scholars a unique opportunity—and, I would add, an obligation—to engage in dialogue and comparative research and to focus on such insufficiently addressed questions as:

- What can be learned from thinking about media and political communication as transnational phenomena?

- What are the similarities and the differences in academic and professional approaches to political communication in various contexts?

- What are the challenges and the opportunities for transnational cooperation and international research in the field?

Some scholars have undertaken these tasks, calling for an internationalization of the field (Esser & Pfestch, 2004; Norris, 2001), establishing international collaborations (Iyengar et al., 2010), publishing comparative works in our flagship journals (Goldman & Mutz, 2011) and—as this special section demonstrates—seeing political communication as inherently and increasingly global in orientation. It also needs to be noted that these questions and others can be tackled only through theory-building rather than by attempting to explain idiosyncratic phenomena, an issue that I return to later.

To add to this momentum and to engage with the questions that were noted in the preceding paragraph, the IE School for Communication and the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, organized the international symposium Transnational Connections: Challenges and Opportunities for Political Communication Research, which took place at IE University in Segovia, Spain, in March 2010.[1] The Symposium brought together numerous

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[1] The Symposium was organized in partnership with the Political Communication Division of International Communication Association (ICA), International Political Science Association (IPSA), International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and European Communication Research and

communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and social psychologists from 15 countries around the world, with the goal of reflecting on the state of political communication and discussing new theoretical and methodological frontiers facing the field.

The Symposium consisted of a series of roundtables, and the articles gathered in this special section reflect the ideas of the participants in these roundtables.[2] Because there were no formal paper presentations, and panelists simply received a set of guiding themes, this special section sought to achieve an unusual aim—to create unified statements from disparate roundtable discussions to see what common ground could be found. The result is an attempt to capture these somewhat raw and unscripted debates, which reflect the sometimes divergent perspectives of the various co-authors, in a form that is readable in a journal and beyond a simple transcript. Although the task was difficult, the collective *post factum* reflections presented in this special section fill some gaps in extant political communication theorizing and research, and also offer stimulating grounds for further discussions and developments.

The essays presented here address two interrelated factors—new media technologies and increased transnationality of the contemporary world—from various angles. They touch on a range of issues: theoretical and conceptual trends in political communication (by Moy, Bimber, Rojecki, Xenos, and Iyengar); differences and similarities between U.S.-based and non-U.S.-based political communication research (Moy, Mazzoleni, and Rojas); how to integrate theory and findings among the United States, Europe, and other regions (Rojas et al.); and how to study political communication in an environment dominated by new information technologies (Garrett et al.).

The first essay, by Moy, Bimber, Rojecki, Xenos, and Iyengar, departs from the premise that the two aforementioned factors—the evolving new media environment and global sociopolitical and economical trends—invite scholars to explore new theoretical and research grounds.

With regard to new media technologies, Moy, Bimber et al. encourage us to ponder the issues that are related to the changing nature of communicative dynamics associated with citizenship and participation. New media alter existing modes of political engagement and afford new possibilities by challenging the distinction between vertical information transfer between citizens and elites and horizontal citizen-to-citizen interactions. This shift underscores the need for studies on whether and how the unprecedented insight into elite actions translates into efficacy, trust, and interest, as well as how these

[2] Seminar participants and two other roundtables also addressed the following: the state of political communication outside the United States; whether non-U.S.-based political communication research is underrepresented in journals and associations; and the challenges and opportunities for transnational cooperation.

attitudes interact with each other and with individual predispositions in affecting content selection, message reception, and various participatory actions.

When it comes to global trends toward transnationalism, the authors note that most scholarship on individual attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors originates in democratic states, where normative presumptions regarding an active citizenry may be more applicable than they may be in the insufficiently studied authoritarian states. Thus, in addition to good theories crossing national boundaries, researchers should test whether systemic boundaries can also be crossed.

Equally important, these two factors—the new media environment and increased transnationalism—interact. Hence, researchers will need to account for media systems, political structure(s), and local cultures concurrently shaping citizens' identities and the ways citizens understand and enact their citizenship (see Curran, Iyengar, Anker Brink, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009). Studies that address these issues would not only test the cross-systemic generalizability of our theories, but also put under scrutiny the normative values that researchers implicitly or explicitly bring to their scholarship.

How, then, to study these newly emerging trends and phenomena? The authors observe that the two factors—networked information technologies and global interconnectedness—afford new tools that facilitate addressing the very questions they pose (e.g., international panels for experimental designs and computer-assisted text analysis software programs). In addition to new tools, explorations of these questions also require more sophisticated research designs, an issue touched on in the conclusion.

The provocative essay by Moy, Mazzoleni, and Rojas continues to address these topics, asking whether the development of cross-national and cross-systemic theories that can be tested, falsified, and generalized has been hampered by differences between political communication as practiced, theorized, and studied in various contexts. These differences relate to macro level conditions and how scholars view their research (its methods and goals, for example).

With regard to the first factor, the authors note that such institutional arrangements as the electoral system, public versus private broadcasting, or media independence from governments are important in determining research questions and findings, issues that bring us back to the first essay (Moy, Bimber et al.) and underscore the need for cross-systemic research.

Because, as Moy, Mazzoleni et al. note, "political communication as a science follows to a large extent the blueprint of political communication as phenomenon," they also outline various differences in theoretical and methodological approaches. They note that positivist epistemologies and quantitative methodologies tend to be more dominant in the broadly conceived North American scholarship (which includes research done by an American scholar working in Asia or by a U.S.-trained European scholar, among others), while communications practiced in Europe tends to be more relativist, relying on qualitative methods, and prioritizing critical theories over methodological advancements. The authors note that these gaps, hotly debated by the Symposium participants, have been decreasing, thus moving us closer to meaningful international collaborations.

These differences notwithstanding, Moy, Mazzoleni et al. outline increasing similarities in poltical comunication scholarship as practiced internationally. These are mostly attributable to the interrelationship bewteen global information technologies and political transnationalization, as outlined by Moy, Bimber et al. in the first essay. In addition to internationalizing the discipline and making its epistemological differences decreasingly relevant, these factors have also affected macro level conditions, leading to the Americanization of various political and media processes, as well as bringing commercialization, personalization, and campaign professionalization to contexts where these trends were foreign a decade or two ago. Testable questions as to the extent to which similar trends have emerged outside Western democracies and to the effects of these trends remain to be answered.

Extending these issues, the article by Rojas et al. addresses such questions as: How do we integrate theory and findings among the U.S., Europe, and other regions? What can be learned from thinking about media and political communication as transnational phenomena? The authors invite us to reflect on an overarching question: Do scholars need to develop context-specific theories, or should they integrate the context—be it a region, country, or culture—as a factor in theories and research designs? This question reflects the divergence between those Symposium participants who argued for a universalist approach to political communication research and those who maintained that the field would be best served if indigenous theories were developed to suit differing systems and cultures. The authors prefer the second option. Employing sociopolitical polarization as an example, they show that accounting for macro level variables allows scholars to paint a more comprehensive picture of the ways in which citizens understand and engage with politics.

While such factors as political culture, electoral structures, and media systems are the usual suspects increasingly interrogated by political communication researchers, there are multiple other context-dependent variables that influence the findings and the interpretation of specific theories in divergent contexts. These variables include the timing of the research, the issues analyzed (e.g., politics in general or specific topics), and external sociopolitical events, among others. Rojas et al. touch on these factors, using recent studies as examples. It is not clear, however, whether these contexts should also be included as factors in our designs and analyses, at which level of "context" we should stop, and how the multiplicity of these various idiosyncrasies problematizes the development of general theories that can be applied across contexts.

Rojas et al. also touch on issues such as the dominance of American political communication research and identifying and defining this dominance, as well as the general reliance on English as the lingua franca in our journals—issues that generated disagreement among Symposium participants. In addition to diagnosing these challenges, the authors offer some feasible solutions on how to facilitate meaningful transnational research, which would move us closer to understanding what role contextual factors play in political communication.

The article by Garrett et al. complements the preceding observations, shedding light on how new information technologies have changed the study of political communication. The authors outline the challenges and the opportunities—ethical, practical, analytical, theoretical, and sociopolitical—that new

media present for the study of political communication and that will certainly continue to be debated by the community of scholars and practitioners.

Garrett et al. start by outlining the significance of new media technologies for empirical research. The authors explicate the methodological opportunities forecasted by Moy, Bimber et al. in the first essay (e.g., international respondent panels for survey experiments) and additionally direct our attention to "implicit" data conspicuously collected by Internet providers or cell phone operators—data that are not voluntarily given by individuals, but that reveal rich information on their interests, behaviors, and interactions. Garrett et al. touch on the growing, and particularly timely, ethical concerns related to protecting people's privacy, the relative unavailability of these data for scientific validation, and the still hypothetical situations when these data are applied to populations without civil liberties.

Moving from political communication research to political communication as practice, Garrett et al. explore the thread that runs through all the articles in this volume, noting that the new media change the ways in which politics is enacted, understood, and perceived. The authors remind us that this was also the case with the "old" technologies, and they correctly note that the various technological developments may or may not translate into social change. It is thus crucial to focus on "how technologies are used and by whom, not by what they enable." This important point echoes the concerns raised by Moy, Bimber et al., namely "who can speak, who is heard, and to what extent political voices are critical."

In addition to outlining the changes that new media bring to research and practice, Garrett et al. focus on theory. The order in which these issues are addressed shows that scholars are trying, either concurrently or *post factum*, to theorize the emerging phenomena, rather than advance theories that explain the future. The authors acknowledge this, proposing that new media may deepen our understanding of established theoretical mechanisms, challenge these mechanisms, or radically shift our theoretical paradigm(s).

Lastly, the authors propose several research areas that they see as increasingly relevant for political communication in the Internet era. These include: (1) investigating when, where, and how deliberation happens and whether online deliberation should be evaluated by different standards than those proposed by the classic deliberative theory: (2) reengaging with organizations and networks in addition to individual-level analyses; and also (3) deepening comparative research to shed light on how new media shape political communication in a global setting, an issue developed by Rojas et al..

The research agendas identified as timely and important in the collected pieces are relatively common and mostly revolve around the meaning of citizenship and identity, as well as political voice, participation, and citizen polarization in the face of growing media diversification.

Naturally, all the collected pieces emphasize that these agendas need to be pursued via international collaborations. All the contributing authors agree that the field should adopt a cosmopolitan approach to theorizing and studying political communication—one where the focus on specific countries and societies yields to scholarship on the intersections among local cultures, national contexts, international processes, and transnational information flows. All these factors influence individual

interactions with the media and the sociopolitical world. Consequently, the authors also agree that it is necessary to foster transnational generalizations through comparative research designs that overcome language barriers or varying methodologies and that account for differences in political landscapes and media markets in different nations.

The authors are optimistic about such collaborations, noting that we can see many "hopeful signs," and that these may lead to "theoretical breakthroughs" that advance the field. Research optimism aside, there seems to be a shared concern about the field not catching up theoretically. That is, as new phenomena and new methods emerge, it is essential to consider whether the abundant research topics and the new methodological advances will go hand in hand with theory building and greater understanding of the intersections between the media, public opinion, citizen participation, and political governance, nationally and internationally. As some scholars have noted (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Lang, 2011), the confluence of sociopolitical and technological developments necessitates a reexamination of the explanatory power of our theoretical models. While some calls for "re-theorizing" the field have focused on technological factors—for example, channel proliferation, selectivity, and audience fragmentation (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008)—the essays collected in this special volume add the necessary transnational scope to political communication and begin to conceptualize these technological developments in their natural global context.

Also, the essays gathered here add new and necessary foci to a discipline that has largely examined persuasive effects, be it attitude change (see Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) or formation and reinforcement (see Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). These new foci include: (1) the interplay between institutions—both political and non-political—and citizens and information flows; (2) systems, understood as macro level, institutional conditions that include political structure, media ownership, and media independence and that also influence the interactions between citizens, technologies, and sociopolitical contexts; and (3) deliberation and political talk, which, although excluded from some definitions of political communication (e.g., McNair, 2004), are more prevalent than are voting, protesting, or donating money and which also are affected by the new technologies, media systems, and electoral structures.

Largely absent in the essays presented here and in our theorizing are entertainment media, such as fictional television shows. Although their ostensible purpose is nonpolitical, fictional dramas often convey political messages, address political issues, reference current events, and shed light on such sociopolitical problems as the presidency, health care, or the death penalty. Hence, although political science and political communication traditionally have not focused on fiction as a factor in public opinion, scholars increasingly acknowledge its significance for attitudes, behaviors, and even systemic changes (see, e.g., Holbert, 2005). This significance seems to be crossing national and cultural barriers, as exemplified by *Eagle Four*, a television show popular in Afghanistan, financed largely by the American Embassy and aimed at raising public favorability toward the Afghan police force.

Other challenges implicit and not fully addressed in these essays pertain to how to —in a balanced way—approach the phenomena being studied. First, when analyzing how the old and the new media affect citizens, organizations, information flows, and national systems, scholars will need to avoid the natural tendency to think of new media as primarily political tools. After all, political websites account

for less than 1% of all web traffic, news sites for roughly 3% and "adult pages" for over 10% (Hindmann, 2008, pp. 58–82). Also, we will need to strike the right balance between technological determinism and how new technologies are shaped by society. On the one hand, we need to avoid the former when analyzing the impact of new media. That said, we need to acknowledge that the speed with which new media emerge is now greater than ever before. For example, it took roughly 200 years from the invention of the printing press to the publication of the first large-scale daily newspaper in 1650. Yet, it took only eight years between the invention of the Morse code and the use of the first long distance electric telegraph line in 1843; only two years between the first cross-Atlantic call and the first radios with tuners in 1916; and only one year between the first Internet, floppy disc, and microprocessor and cable TV in 1972. Hence, we need to pay attention to both—how the existing institutions and power structures affect and often limit the myriad possibilities offered by the new media, as well as how the new media affect the established relations on structural and systemic levels (see Hindmann, 2008).

While attending to these issues, we also need to touch on a perennial concern in communications: namely, how to theorize, conceptualize, and measure the longitudinal cumulative effects of the phenomena studied, not only on attitudes and behaviors but also on values, norms, perceptions, and socialization. In addition, to fully understand the interplay among systemic arrangements (e.g., the electoral or economic systems), the media industry, and individual-level cognitive, attitudinal, or behavioral outcomes in different countries, we will need to employ multilevel designs that link these various factors in one theoretically grounded empirical model (for more on Multi Level Modeling, see Pan & McLeod, 1991). The subsequent challenge will be to link these systemic- and individual-level factors to information flows, message contents, and to societal-level processes related to collective action or social movement mobilizing.

When it comes to diagnosing the challenges to political communication theory, scholars will need to avoid binary thinking, which assumes that the new media and increased transnationalization will annihilate our theories and the dominant paradigm (if we have one to begin with) or lead to their modification. Perhaps some theories such as those that emphasize users' motivations and interests will be fruitfully revived, while others—especially those premised on centralized communication channels and information flows—will be either challenged to adapt or be replaced by new theoretical mechanisms better suited to explaining our contemporary communication and information environment.

When addressing these theoretical issues, we will need to properly identify and delimit our role as a field relative to other related fields, such as sociology, political science, or social psychology. What differentiates us from these disciplines? What is our unique theoretical contribution to science and societies? Perhaps we should analyze communicative acts, per se, as our outcome measures rather than look at how various communicative acts influence outcomes that are the hallmark for other fields (e.g., voting, which defines political science, or attitudes, which defines social psychology). By answering these questions and establishing what unique knowledge political communication brings to the marketplace of ideas, we will be able to define ourselves as a field and then offer insights to other disciplines.

Lastly, open to further explication are the normative values and prescriptions underlying our theory and research. Attention to normative underpinnings is especially important in an interconnected world, particularly given our growing international collaborations.

- How do we overcome the challenges related to addressing the aforementioned newly emergent questions and to using new methodological tools—challenges such as the digital divide, inequalities in effective new media access, insufficient infrastructure, and macro level barriers to study undemocratic systems?

- How do we ensure that these challenges do not interfere with progress toward cross-systemic comparisons and limit the advances in political communication scholarship to free and better-off parts of the globe?

- Is polarization or extremism a problem?

- Is a political voice inherently desirable, or do its contributions to individuals and society depend on the context, the culture, the system, and the people or groups having the voice?

- Can political participation and citizen mobilization be problematic, for example, when a system lacks traditions that channel conflicts or when elites are not committed to civil rights? (see Chambers & Kopstein, 2001)

Political communication will need to honestly ponder and explicitly answer these and similar questions, thus revealing, or perhaps formulating, the normative assumptions for the field.

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