Toward a New Vocabulary for Political Communication Research

A Response to Michael X. Delli Carpini

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The current scientific vocabulary is one vocabulary among others . . . there is no need to give it primacy, nor to reduce other vocabularies to it.

~Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 142

Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is . . . a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.

~Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 9

For students of political communication, Michael Delli Carpini has recently made two very important contributions to the field—the article in this volume, and his new book with Bruce Williams, *After Broadcast News* (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). I mention the latter because it is an essential, but missing, contribution to the discussions here about research methods and epistemological traditions in a time of transformative change in both media and engaged citizenship through media. Williams and Delli Carpini spend considerable time detailing how changes in the media landscape signal a sea change in what political communication and media studies scholars are now studying. As they describe it, the previous "media regime"—which they define as "a historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes, and actors that shape the expectations and practices of media producers and consumers" (ibid., p. 16), and label as the "Age of Broadcast News"—is now gone. The type or form of regime that has taken its place has yet to emerge or be determined, they contend. What is certain is that central aspects of the old regime—including an information hierarchy that privileged news discourses and practices over other forms of media, as well as a rigid dichotomy of assumed value of news and public affairs programming over "entertainment" or citizen-generated media—can no longer be sustained given these revolutionary changes (see Jones, 2006, for an earlier statement of this thesis). Genres have collapsed.

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New platforms and sources for information proliferate. An expanded range of actors and genres dealing with politics now exist. No one group retains control over the discursive environment. The authority and legitimacy of actors who previously controlled information and information flows have been called into question. And citizens have a much wider range of discursive and interpretive opportunities in the new environment. Thus, political communication scholars must realize, whether they like it or not, that many of the closely held understandings and assumptions that have guided political communication research about what constitutes the media environment during the old regime have fundamentally changed.

But with the change in regimes, scholars are nevertheless left with a very important question: Does the demise of the old media regime also signal the demise (or needed evacuation) of the positivistic scholarly paradigm that was intimately connected to the study of that regime—a "discourse" (in Foucauldian terms) that bolstered the validity of the scholarly approach and partially constituted the regime itself? Williams and Delli Carpini seemingly recognize this connection between media regimes and scholarly paradigms when they note the following:

> [M]ainstream political communication research was built on implicit acceptance of the media regime in place at the time. In turn, the research produced by it, focused as it was on news rather than entertainment, served to further *reinforce and naturalize* this regime. (ibid., p. 65, emphasis added)

Indeed, they conclude, "many journalists, scholars, and citizens continue to use intellectual frameworks rooted in the media regime of the mid-20th century, which are woefully inadequate for understanding the potentials and pitfalls of this new environment" (ibid., p. 102).

Delli Carpini notes the continuing dominance of the paradigm by examining the scant numbers of articles dedicated in the field's leading journal to issues of political entertainment. Kevin Barnhurst, like Williams and Delli Carpini, contends that amidst such unprecedented change and turbulence in media/politics,[1] the field of political communication has responded to such changes poorly. He argues that it has "remained cautious in method and theory, its firm traditions and horizons generating few new ideas and rendering inert the drama going on in the world today" (2011, p. 574). Barnhurst advances the critique further by suggesting that a continued reliance on the old positivist paradigm, including by scholars who study new phenomena (such as political entertainment), renders few original insights or advances our understanding, precisely because of its paradigmatic constraints:

> In the mode of normal science, political communication tends to move deductively from accepted notions, follows predictable procedures, and so reaches foregone conclusions. The pattern develops backwards, the ease of familiar ideas and tasks leading the researcher along an already determined path. Path dependency can reduce social science to boilerplate, reproducing set assumptions about methods based on obsolete theories without confronting how conditions have changed. (ibid., p. 575)

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[1] The compound term "media/politics" is similar to Foucault's usage of "power/knowledge," employed to demonstrate their mutual dependence on each other.

Both Barnhurst's and Williams and Delli Carpini's readings are, I suggest, correct, although they do render Delli Carpini's defense of the positivistic framework here somewhat more puzzling. It is precisely at the foundational level of positivism's ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological (defined below) *modernist* assumptions and tenets that the need for a reassessment of positivism's utility (and viability) under current conditions is suggested. And while Delli Carpini states that he wants to untether positivism from reductive or dismissive characterizations of it as an intellectual approach, I am not so sure that current postmodern conditions—ones he analyzes with Williams through numerous chapters of the book—allow for such easy transpositions into the new era.

In what follows, I take up this line of inquiry by first analyzing the relationship between positivism and the broadcast-era media regime as one that is dependent on modernist conceptions of truth, including how truth is obtained through scholarly and journalistic techniques and practices. I then examine why the changes in media, politics, and regimes necessitates either a change in paradigms or the adoption of a new language (my suggested course of action) to sufficiently deal with the postmodern and cultural dimensions of such changes. Next, I propose specific components of a new language—a new vocabulary that opens up (not closes down) our understanding of what constitutes citizenship and avenues for civic engagement. I then take up one such object of inquiry, the study of fictional narratives (or narratology), to exemplify how and why such narratives might offer fresh insights into the processes of citizen meaning making in complex media environments. This also includes the recognition of how the study of narratives might contribute to a reconstitution of our understanding of "citizenship." The article concludes with a discussion of how the adoption of a new vocabulary might encourage collaborative research by breaking disciplinary boundaries that were so easily maintained within the old political communication paradigm, and in turn, by offering the potential for true interdisciplinarity in the study of media/politics.

To be clear, and as with the spirit and intention of this project, my argument is ultimately directed toward this *necessary* collaboration across the epistemological divide of political communication scholars—necessary in the sense that neither school or tradition possess sufficiently established tools and theories in this new landscape to go it alone, and that both could benefit from much more intimate interactions (as Delli Carpini also argues). To get to that spot, though, we must engage in an honest reassessment of the reigning paradigm—one dominated by an entrenched vocabulary that has become a nuisance, as Rorty put it—and be open to a new vocabulary and language with the potential for fresh insights into the nature and functioning of mediated *citizenship* in the digital era. Paradigmatic critique is first necessary, though, and thus we turn our attention to an analysis of how the assumptions that guided and supported the broadcast-era media regime were built into the positivist paradigm chosen to study it, how the two were mutually reinforcing in a modernist era, and why that is no longer sustainable.

Positivist Paradigms, Modernism, and the Broadcast-Era Regime

In his contribution in this Special Section, Delli Carpini smartly engages with Anderson and Baym's (2004) heuristic mapping of the discipline of communication, as well as the philosophical

understanding of the ontological ("the way we define the nature of our objects of study"), epistemological ("how we define what it means to 'know' these objects"), axiological ("the normative values we ascribe to both these objects and our efforts to understand them"), and praxeological ("the methods we use to understand them") tenets that structure our studies. Delli Carpini examines positivism's relationship to these practices, and he attempts to demonstrate positivism's continuing value to other theoretical and methodological traditions (such as critical-cultural scholarship), while also "decoupling" quantitative methods from positivism. Yet scholars working from a critical, poststructural perspective would be quick to note that the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological are not easily disentangled, because they work as a set of mutually reinforcing components of an overall *discourse* that gives them coherence and unity—not to mention persuasive power. They are the building blocks of (or justifications for) what Michel Foucault called an "episteme," an "accepted, dominant mode of acquiring and organizing knowledge in a given period of history" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 149; see also Foucault, 1994). Social science positivism was the episteme for much of the 20th century, a period in which the formal study of political communication was conceived. That episteme is comprised of shared presuppositions and theoretical frameworks that are manifest in *discourses* that structure, license, and constrain perceptions of reality. As Foucault argues, discursive practices are characterized by a "delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories" (quoted in Mills, 2003, p. 57). Discourses not only establish and maintain how to properly think and what to think about, but also what is not acceptable to entertain. That is, discourses also exclude certain sets of practices, keeping them cordoned off and safely out of circulation.

Thus, key to the discussion here is the mutually reinforcing nature of the broadcast-era media regime and social science positivism. Delli Carpini correctly notes that the previous regime severely limited the objects of investigation by focusing primarily on government actors, with additional concern for citizens, conceived primarily as *voters*. But the regime's limitations were more than that. News and journalism were seen as the proper avenue *through which* citizens should and would attend to politics. Social scientists focused on how citizen engagement with news resulted in information acquisition, or affected very specific and particular "measures" of citizenship, such as trust, participation, voting, partisanship, knowledge, opinions, attentiveness, and self-efficacy, among others. Likewise, attention primarily to news media allowed for assessments and measures of news organizations as the primary agents responsible for framing issues, priming the electorate, or setting the agenda. In short, positivist political communication research dedicated itself to the duties and obligations of media audiences that social scientists construed as measures of good citizenship.

The problem, of course, is that these are severely truncated assessments of what constitutes citizenship, and ultimately, they are also measures of how communication services the needs of the state and its continuing legitimacy through the rudimentary dimensions of participation within institutional political life, traditionally construed (see Barnhurst, 2011, p. 580, for a similar summary). By limiting these measures, the old regime announces what is important to citizenship and what isn't. What is more, it closes down potential meanings in media texts and the understanding of types and forms of audience engagement with those texts. By limiting the fields of potential experience, the needs of social science for valid, reliable, significant, replicable, generalizable results are more easily obtained without the sloppy

renderings of polysemic meanings and engagements that citizens are typically involved with when attending to media.

But such truncations were also beneficial to news media. Their claims to authority and legitimacy as the rightful and proper agents for the mediation of what is and isn't "reality"—politics and public life included—were bolstered and affirmed by social science's focus on news, even if or when news practices were seen as deficient for the needs of democracy. Social scientists seek to discover the way things really are, while journalists assert that they, too, can identify and establish "the way it is." In theory, journalism models social scientific practices by establishing supposedly "objective" reporting techniques designed to protect against bias. Viewed through a political economic lens, news media's own rationalized needs to reduce the available data to limited numbers of actors, voices, and events that would be covered and rendered as "meaningful" on any given day replicate the same truncation practices undertaken by social science. As with social science, news media could reduce chaotic data into a specific and manageable language, assigning specific "news values" to what is or isn't considered newsworthy. And like social science, specialists—in this case, reporters and experts—would determine those values. Finally, and importantly, both social scientists and journalists operate by the modernist assumption that truth is out there to be discovered and is knowable. And what is more, that it is through their particular methods of discovery that such truths are to be uncovered.

Yet, one of the keystone theoretical concepts that Williams and Delli Carpini turn to in explaining the demise of the broadcast-era media regime is "hyperreality." Working from the writings of John Fiske (himself working from Baudrillard), they define hyperreality as the condition "where there is no clear distinction between a particular media text and the reality that text purports to describe" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 118). Political life is thus comprised, they argue, of a world in which "the media itself operates to construct alternative and competing versions of reality that cannot . . . be objectively distinguished as more or less real" (ibid.).

What they are describing is the demise of the modernist assumption of the correspondence theory of truth—that there is a necessary relationship between representation and that to which it refers (what philosophers call the appearance-reality distinction), and that truth is discoverable, accessible, and capable of being uncovered. Postmodernists argue that what is taken as "true" is only that which is constructed as true, that which has use-value. Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty goes so far as to say that there is nothing we can ultimately say about truth, that we must, instead, talk about justification or that which we justify as being true. The modern positivist and journalistic conceit, ultimately, is that we can know truth, and that it is best understood and achieved through a routine set of practices, procedures, and methods. But what we see when returning to Foucault is that what such claims are establishing isn't *truth*, per se, but rather, a complex justification for the claimant's version of truth.. As one Foucault scholar has argued on this point:

> [T]hose who are in positions of authority who are seen to be "experts" are those who can speak the truth. . . . Truth is something that is supported materially by a whole range of practices and institutions: universities, government departments, publishing houses, scientific bodies, and so on. All of these institutions work to exclude statements

which they characterize as false and they keep in circulation those statements which they characterize as true. . . . Even if we are asserting something which as far as we know it is "the truth," our statements will only be judged to be "true" if they accord with, and fit in with, all of the other statements which are authorized within our society. (Mills, 2003, p. 58)

There is, of course, nothing neutral in this enterprise. As a discourse, both social scientists and journalists aren't just directing inquires. They ontologically define what constitutes the objects of study (and what doesn't), how these objects will be studied (and how not), what it means to know them (or not), and what will be seen as valuable (and what will not). Journalists and social scientists mutually construct the paradigm and object of study, legitimating each other in turn. Barnhurst echoes the arguments here in his critique of the social science paradigm employed by political scientists and media effects scholars:

The institutional boundaries of two large disciplines, their perspectives on the political communication field, their tendencies to focus on established ideas, and their practical structure and connections to occupational practice have created conditions that reproduce functional ideas (how to make existing politics and media work) and discourage representational ideas (how the polity imagines, narrates, and values politics and media) in political communication. (Barnhurst, 2011, p. 580)

These disciplines are complicit, then, in constituting what Foucault also called a "regime of truth," a regime that is comprised of the following:

the types of discourse [a society] harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorized for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (quoted in Morris & Patton, 1979, p. 46)

In sum, it is difficult to divorce positivism from the modernist paradigm that largely structures and defines the bulk of political communication research, and more difficult still to divorce it from the discourse constructed in conjunction with news organizations that suggested both could, through their mutual techniques and objects of "study," discover and report truth or reality.

On a related point, I wish to make one final qualification to Delli Carpini's discussion and characterization here of critical studies as an intellectual approach directed toward a critique of power, the state, or media. It is also a critique of mutually reinforcing discourses that constitute all power blocs, including those that structure how we see and know realities available to us through scholarship. Thus, critical studies questions the tremendous influence that positivistic social science has had on how we see and know ourselves as citizens, whose voices matter, what forms of political practice are legitimated, what constitutes citizenship, etc., as well as on how those discourses are wedded to other structures of power, such as media/politics. Thus, with the "opening up" of media and avenues for political engagement

through the collapse of the old media regime and the proliferation of myriad forms of politically relevant media, we have an opportunity to rethink, to see anew, to adopt a new language and vocabulary outside the confines of the old paradigm that can open up new opportunities for examining citizenship and civic practices through a new lens.

Yet, to think of a shift in intellectual paradigms, we must also realize, as Thomas Kuhn suggests, that the normative dimensions of paradigms are strong. The shift to a new paradigm is constrained by the forces that are keeping the old one in place. As Kuhn notes:

> [P]aradigms differ in more than substance, for they are directed not only to nature but also back upon the science that produced them. They are the source of the methods, problem-field, and standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time. As a result, the reception of a new paradigm often necessitates a redefinition of *the corresponding science*. (Kuhn, 1962, p. 103, emphasis added)

What Kuhn notes is that both the science and the scientist are required to change:

> At times of revolution, when the normal scientific tradition changes, the scientist's perception of his environment must be re-educated—in some familiar situations he must learn to see a new gestalt. After he has done so the world of his research will seem, here and there, incommensurable with the one he had inhabited before. (ibid., p. 111)

To adopt the language of Kuhnian paradigm shifts as a result of scientific *revolutions* is perhaps intellectually dishonest, in that Kuhn's thesis is a description of *science* with limited transferability to the social sciences or humanities (as Kuhn himself warns in the postscript of latter editions of the book). Yet the concept of an intellectual paradigm—how it is formed and operates, and how it structures and regulates scholarship—has proven significant enough to merit attention and discussion across disciplines. And as I have argued above, the concept of a paradigm accurately describes the intellectual arrangement of scholarship around specific ontological, epistemological, axiological, and praxeological principles and approaches, as well as how those working within the paradigm protect it and further it through various practices, such as the conduct of research as "normal science."

Rorty is clearly aligned with Kuhn, yet he doesn't speak of revolutions, or even formally of paradigm shifts. Rather, he argues that, to change dominant modes of thinking, we must speak differently (rather than argue well); we must use a different vocabulary. By employing the old vocabulary, he contends, the philosopher is destined to fail because the language has already been established on incommensurable terms, terms that favor those within the paradigm that established and normativized that language. Rather, the new "method," he argues, is to do the following:

> [R]edescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior. . . . This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing

thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like "try thinking of it this way"—or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions." It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. (Rorty, 1989, p. 9)

My argument here is that this moment of transformative change in media/politics allows us an opportunity to craft a new vocabulary, new ways of thinking, and new questions that seemed impossible when we spoke in the old ways. Some components of a proposed new language for the study of media/politics are offered below. But first, we should pause to examine the current postmodern moment, one in which culture has become a necessary means for understanding the relationship between citizens and the media they engage within political practice.

Paradigm Shift or Postmodern Cultural Turn?

Perhaps the most important unanswered question is, "What exactly is political entertainment?" As noted earlier, Williams and Delli Carpini have offered a thorough analysis of how the previous normative and, at times, institutionally-structured boundaries between "information"-centric media and "entertainment" media have fully collapsed, in terms of programming or product, as well as in the intentions of the producers and the activities and engagements of audiences. In particular, genres—as programming markers that previously were instrumental in distinguishing what content was supposedly politically relevant and what was not—have collapsed. And without the ability to define precisely what "media regime" is now in place (if any) after the demise of the broadcast era, Williams and Delli Carpini are left with little option but to call the object of interest "politically relevant media" (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 14).

But given the enormously broad and nondescript nature of such a term, can we still speak of "political entertainment" as a category, genre, or subset of other politically relevant media? Has all political programming now simply become "entertainment"? Certainly, one can make the case that news networks and public affair programming and events are crafted or conducted with strong inflections of entertaining performances, and that they are often engaged in the same audience-attracting strategies as their non-political counterparts (Jones, 2012a). The Republican presidential primary debates of 2011, for instance, seemed eerily similar to a reality TV show, and Glenn Beck's theatrical performances on Fox News were far more entertaining than most of his entertainment talk show competitors in that time slot. Even tuning into Twitter and Facebook feeds during or after a presidential address suggests that citizens may now view such events as moments for performative and entertaining engagements with politics, more so than the assumed rational information-seeking citizen of old. Or is political entertainment defined by the intentions of corporate media producers, and their supposed ends and goals? Or, as was already suggested, is it best understood by emphasizing certain audience uses and engagements over others?

Without good answers to these questions, we can note that everyday life is thoroughly imbued with media, and that *most* forms of media can be, and increasingly are, politically relevant (Jones, 2006; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). From the perspective of scholarly research, what seems imperative, then, is a rejection of the old paradigm's assumption that specific aspects of citizen engagement with limited forms of political media can be seemingly cordoned off, with specific "good" citizen activities somehow segregated from "bad" or non-citizenship related media. Similarly, research models that also extract citizens from their meaning-making environments (through surveys and experiments and the like), or that attempt to isolate particular aspects of a citizen's logical reasoning abilities divorced from other forms of cognitive reasoning (such as narrative reasoning or emotional affectations),[2] now seem highly suspect (if not untenable) in the new media environment (Bruner, 1986, pp. 11–13; Jones, 2011; Marcus, 2002; Richards, 2004). What seems much clearer is that politics is thoroughly imbricated both in media and with citizen engagements in the course of daily living, at least as much as any citizen wants it to be.[3] The lived-with quality of media/politics is now, in a word, cultural.[4]

Like social scientific behavioralists, anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued that "behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior—or more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation" (1973, p. 17). Yet for Geertz, social action was best understood through its signification or symbolic dimensions. To do so, he argued, "we must place these things in some sort of comprehensible, meaningful frame. That frame is, for lack of a more precise word, culture" (ibid., p. 30). As Geertz and others have explained, culture is a process, not a product; a lived experience, not a fixed outcome. It is comprised of everyday practices, as well as highly formalized and ritualized ones. It emanates from such engagements as looking, sharing, talking, relating, acting, and performing, and also through which meanings are exchanged. Thus, the study of culture is the study of meaning making, and as such, the analysis of culture is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (ibid., p. 5). Sturken and Cartwright similarly recognize the social or communal aspects of reality construction when they contend that such "meanings are produced not in the minds of individual viewers so much as through a process of negotiation among individuals within a particular culture and between individuals and the artifacts, images, technologies, texts created by themselves and others" (2009, p. 4).

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[2] For instance, assessing citizen attitudes toward a candidate such as Sarah Palin through traditional political communication measures (e.g., trust, policy positions, partisanship, ideology) without simultaneously considering issues such as those taken up in celebrity studies, gender studies, or political psychology (e.g., celebrity affectations, motherhood and masculinity, anxiety and fear).

[3] The choice to attend to the likes of Honey Boo Boo over Jon Stewart, Wolf Blitzer, or viral political videos is and always will be an option.

[4] With all the many manifestations of politics now thoroughly imbricated in media content, politics, too, becomes lived-with in myriad ways. I thoroughly reject the critique, then, that this is somehow the skewed view of an elite researcher, divorced from the realities of a public that hates and avoids politics. If social science surveys suggest the masses don't pay attention to politics, a strong case can be made (unfortunately not here) that such surveys employ deficient measurements (see below for one example).

What I am arguing is that it is highly problematic that politically relevant media, including whatever distinctions of political entertainment versus political information media might still (mistakenly) be made, can be treated as just another variable to be tested or measured by its extraction from the *processes within culture* through which meaning is created and derived. In particular, we must recognize that, as we take up cultural texts such as *The Daily Show*, a Bruce Springsteen song, *The Newsroom*, *2016: Obama's America*, or *The O'Reilly Factor*, we aren't examining how they *change* us in limited ways, but how they participate in our broader understandings of the language and meaning of what it means to be citizens. Cultural objects—images, songs, narratives, rhetoric, myths—are active agents that draw us to look, to feel, and to speak in particular ways. As John Street argues, culture "gives form to our feelings, but does not dictate those feelings in a manipulative way" (1997, p. 167). Quoting Simon Frith, he notes the following:

> Songs don't *cause* people to fall in love, but provide people with the means to articulate the feelings associated with being in love. . . . The most significant political effect of a pop song is not how people vote or organize, but how they speak. (ibid.)

Foregrounding culture as the soil where meaning is made recognizes that media are central to our ability to articulate our identities, understandings, and feelings as citizens, and that the increase in form and number of politically relevant media simply increases our opportunities for tending to that citizenship.

Critics of the argument I present here might be tempted to assert that it simply favors, over others, the reflexive-analytic quadrant or postmodern cultural theory (as per Delli Carpini's discussion of Anderson and Baym's graph). Instead, what I am asserting is the incompatibility of modernist and postmodernist understandings of truth and the resulting effects on paradigmatic thinking. The foundational-empirical quadrant may not *necessarily* be locked in a modernist paradigm (as Delli Carpini's own explicit intentions and implicit assumptions attest), but as per Thomas Kuhn, unless scientists unlearn the normative assumptions that structure the paradigm itself, for all intents and purposes, it is so locked. The scholarly approaches that fall within the foundational-analytic (i.e., critical theory, divorced of its formal Marxist tenets) and empirical-reflexive quadrants (i.e., ethnographic approaches, among others) have no necessary moorings in modernism; both are or tend to be, in practice, constructivist in their understanding of how we arrive at truth (or, with Rorty, at justifications of it). Both can and do coexist with cultural theory, and both have applicability to the contemporary landscape of mediated politics.

To be clear, my argument isn't that quantitative methods are problematic as tools of analysis, only that the positivistic paradigm that unselfconsciously asserts that the changed landscape of postmodern media and political reality can still be processed through normal science is problematic. What is more, the positivist paradigm has tended to ignore broad swaths of human experience that are central to meaning making. As Barnhurst argues:

> [It] ignores the qualities underlying human activity by focusing on relational, causal operations, excluding what builds intrinsic value in social relations, what makes life worth living, and "what it is like" (the *qualia*, in philosophical terms) for individuals to experience, feel, and know subjectively. Finally, the functional paradigm relies on a

background assumption that its objects of study . . . simply exist on the political landscape. But they do not. Publics and politicians must imagine that land. (2011, p. 574)

Those imaginations and their articulations are, I contend, best accessed not by recalibrating the old paradigm to see the new landscape. Rather, with Rorty, I suggest we adopt a new language in political communication, one more adept at accessing meaning making within lived culture, where such complex engagements with media reside. Whether this constitutes a new paradigm or would be best understood as a cultural turn is less significant than the need for seeing the world through new eyes and articulating that world through a new vocabulary.

A New Vocabulary for the Study of Media/Politics

Whether or not a new, post-broadcast news media regime is in development (as per Williams and Delli Carpini), what seems clear is that there have been significant changes in the *discursive regime* toward a popularization of politics. While a political economic analysis would point to the tremendous control over mediated political discourse still exerted by corporate capital (Calabrese & Sparks, 2004; Compton, 2004; Klaehn, 2010), there has nevertheless been an opening in post-network television transformations and digital-era communication flows and interactivity. This has allowed for a variety of voices and pluralist contestations, for bottom-up production and circulation of messages and meanings, and for collaborative and noncorporate constructions of reality. Instead of approaching this more-popularized discursive regime with the same path-dependent measurements used in the old political communication paradigm (i.e., trust, knowledge/learning, attentiveness, agenda setting, priming, framing, etc.), we might adopt a new way of seeing or new language that emphasizes properties of citizenship not so centrally wedded to the state or the old normative model of "good citizenship" or "good" media.

Citizenship's redefinition in a popularized discursive regime might be developed from a vocabulary comprised of notions such as *representation* (Barnhurst, 2011; Coleman, 2005), *fandom* (Sandvoss, 2012), *celebrity* (Marshall, 1997), *consumption* (Scammell, 2003), *performativity* (Austin, 1975; Jones, 2012b), *play* (Caillois, 1961; Glasser, 2000; Meikle, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997), *narrative* (Bruner, 1986; Nussbaum, 1995; Rorty, 1989), *ironic authenticity* (Day, 2011), *spectacle* (Compton, 2004; Debord, 1994), *DIY/DIWO citizenship* (do-it-yourself/do-it-with-others) and *participation* (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013; Hartley, 2010), *convergence* (Jenkins, 2006), *governmentality* (Ouellette & Hay, 2008), *networks* (Benkler, 2007; Russell, 2011), *monitoring/surveillance* (Andrejevic, 2007; Jones, unpublished), and *emotions* and *affect* (Marcus, 2002; Neuman, Marcus, Crigler, & Mackuen, 2007; Staiger, Cvetkovich, & Reynolds, 2010; Westin, 2007).

Although space here won't accommodate a thorough unpacking of these terms or an explication of why I have chosen these particular candidates over others for inclusion in a new language, as with Delli Carpini's discussion of the HBO television show *The Wire*, I, too, will use the program as example of how and why one of these—fictional *narratives*—is important in addressing a new understanding of citizenship

in relation to citizen engagement with post-journalism news[5] and politically relevant media. Although, on its surface, *The Wire* might be seen as a "cop show," the program proved instead, during its five-season run, to be an intensive examination of the failures of American political and social institutions (including city hall, police departments, court systems, unions, schools, and newspapers) to address the human cost of post-industrial urban decay. In particular, the show cast a jaundiced eye on the war on drugs as something best seen as a permanent war on America's underclass (Sheehan & Sweeney, 2009). The program is, in many ways, a dystopic tale that could just as easily lead viewers toward despair as it could offer hope that meaningful institutional reform is possible. Yet the show's creator, David Simon, admits that, while the show isn't journalism (his prior profession), he nevertheless recognizes the power of television's potential affect:

> If I can make you care about a character, I may make you think a little longer about certain dynamics that might cause you to reconsider your own political inertia or your own political myopia. You might be more willing to accept a critique of the prevailing political and social systems. Or not. (quoted in Beiser, 2011, para. 33)

Simon's desire for audiences to see the world and themselves more clearly through his narratives is precisely the potential that Richard Rorty extols as the virtues of fiction and the novel, narratives he deems vital to public solidarity, democratic discourse, and the moral imagination that is necessary for "achieving our country" (as he put it elsewhere, in Rorty, 1999):

> Fiction gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction . . . gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi)

It is the ability of fiction to transport readers and viewers into an uncomfortable, yet potentially productive, position of moral and ethical evaluation that leads Rorty to conclude that "the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress" (ibid., p. xvi). What is more, these narratives are vital to human understanding, cooperation, and empathy, precisely because they engage the reader's moral imagination. He argues the following:

> [H]uman solidarity would be . . . achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. . . . This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of

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[5] Thanks to John Hartley for the particular formulation of this term that references the continuing presence of news as a genre, although one no longer driven by the norms of professional journalism. See also Jones (2012a).

> detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. (ibid., p. xvi)

For philosopher Martha Nussbaum, fictional narratives likewise engage the reader and viewer in highly affecting ways that other forms of social discourse, such as philosophy, history, and social science writing, do not. Fiction often leads the reader to subjective relationships with the characters that populate these imaginary landscapes, positions that hold particular relevance for public life. I quote Nussbaum at length in two key passages from her work *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*:

> Novels[6] . . . present persistent forms of human need and desire realized in specific social situations. These situations frequently, indeed usually, differ a good deal from the reader's own. Novels, recognizing this, in general construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters. In this way, the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader invites the reader to see how the mutable features of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires—and also, in fact, on their very structure. (1995, p. 7)

As with Rorty, it is the process of making the strange familiar and disconcerting that offers the greatest potential for "developing moral capacities" (ibid., p. 12) in the reader. As she contends further:

> Because [literature] summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties, and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about people in one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation. (ibid., pp. 5–6)

By my reading, Nussbaum and Rorty are identifying key factors that can be associated with the narrative of *The Wire* and the viewer's engagement with it. Through the almost 40 central characters in the program, the viewer (typically with little firsthand knowledge of Baltimore) is invited to identify with the daily struggles of the city's many citizens—to experience their needs, hopes, desires, fears, and frustrations in concrete ways. Through specific institutional engagements, viewers watch (often in horror) as the contingencies of misguided institutional action (populated by other fallible humans), intransigence, or apathy can come to bear on people's lives. In the end, the viewer is offered a position of identification

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[6] Nussbaum considers film and television also to be "morally serious yet popularly engaging narrative" media (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 6).

with these "others" as *humans*, however unlike the viewer those humans may be. These moments and engagements produce insights and feelings with the potential for solidarity that newspaper articles, television documentaries, sociological and anthropological tracts, government white papers, and think tank reports attempt, but are typically less successful in creating (or are less often attended to by mass publics).

What television fiction does well, in particular, is serve as a cultural forum through which various subjective positions are entertained, and often in ways that invite viewers to struggle with the specific and particular applications of their own conflicted feelings and beliefs. In his 1999 book, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, Andrew Gibson illustrates how fiction is politically important precisely because readers may struggle with their own deeply held beliefs, particularly when the text leads viewers to challenge and assess those values within themselves. Fictional texts become sites for the working out of those struggles. Citing Nussbaum, he argues the following:

> It is literature and the novel . . . rather than philosophy, that best express contradictions between significant values or systems of values ("*the existence of conflicts among our commitments*"). They also best capture the ethical importance of contingency and the passions, and admit the *priority of the particular* over the general. (ibid., p. 8, emphasis added)

Thus, Americans famously possess such generalized yet conflicting beliefs in, for instance, "equality of opportunity" and "justice for all," with simultaneous commitments to "limited government," "local control," and "low taxes." A program such as *The Wire* leads viewers to confront those often-contradictory feelings and beliefs as they are given life (so to speak) in any type of wrestling with the implications of the story and its "message."

It is precisely because of this engagement with competing and conflicting values that fiction's role in a post-broadcast news, post-truth world becomes all the more imperative for citizens. As Nussbaum put it, fiction advances "the conversation among readers that is necessary to the Aristotelean project, whose aims are ultimately defined in terms of a 'we,' of people who wish to come together and share a conception of value" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 14). As scholars working in the old paradigm fret over the isolation of viewers and Internet users through niche news (Stroud, 2011) and the "daily me" (Sunstein, 2002), and their supposed march toward a "me" or "my group" over a common "us" or "we," perhaps we should examine how a new vocabulary might lead us to look for, see, or speak differently about the ethical callings and moral imaginations of fictional narratives. How might they mobilize a "we" that would be hard to discover within the old paradigm? And how and why is this significant? The newly formulated "we" might not be the mythical national viewing public of broadcast news from days of old (however romanticized), but a "we" that could be constituted in different ways.

For instance, in David Simon's answer to an interview question as to whether he hoped his show might lead to reform of America's social institutions, he offered a particularly interesting response, one that points to how the construction of such "we's" might be rethought:

> I'll tell you what, this would be enough for me: The next time the drug czar or Ashcroft or any of these guys stands up and declares, "With a little fine-tuning, with a few more prison cells, and a few more lawyers, a few more cops, a little better armament, and another omnibus crime bill that adds 15 more death-penalty statutes, we can win the war on drugs"—if a slightly larger percentage of the American population looks at him and goes, "You are so full of shit" . . . that would be gratifying. (quoted in Rothkerch, 2002, para. 37)

Simon points to how, in a post-broadcast news world, fictional texts might elicit types of feelings, knowledge, and solidarity amongst viewers—understandings and feelings that specifically enable a rejection of conventional political pieties and unexamined rhetorical bromides—yet also construct a "we" that is arrived at through means different from those employed in the past.

This function of fictional narratives, to construct a "we," might also be extended to other vocabulary in the new language, such as the "we" constructed through the "play" and "ironic authenticity" of fake news and parody programs, or through the "representation" and "performativity" of contingent and unconventional political "Rallies to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" produced by unconventional political actors (Jones, Baym, & Day, 2012). Viewed through the lens of the old paradigm, these forms of political communication may seem meaningless or perhaps even detrimental to democracy because they distract from "proper" forms of civic engagement. Using a new language, however, we are licensed to offer serious inquiries into these communicative forms, including positing assessments of their contributions to new understandings of citizenship, political participation, and civic engagement.

Yet, we must still deal with the question (as per Delli Carpini's arguments about *The Wire*) of whether fictional narratives can or should be assessed using the traditional paradigmatic approach of political communication (especially since, axiologically, the traditional approach has typically demonstrated little interest in exploring fiction as important or meaningful to citizenship). When fiction is examined within that paradigm, it is all too often plugged into the path-dependent methods of normal science, weighing its value (or the lack thereof) on the traditionally favored good citizenship measures. For instance, Doris Graber (2012) has recently investigated the political potential of television narratives such as *24, ER*, and *Grey's Anatomy* in the United States, Greece, and the Netherlands. Working within the old paradigm, her research assesses viewer attitudes via survey, and is focused on "learning" and "information acquisition" by viewers. So, when asked the question, "Is there anything you have learned from the show that you can use in your life?," the top response in each country was "Nothing," which, in two of the three countries, was more than double the next closest response (ibid., p. 130).[7] While Delli Carpini argues that positivist and quantitative-based social science can make meaningful inquiries into such fictional programming texts as these, and thus, by extension, needs not necessarily ask such poor

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[7] Certainly, I assume that the potential for learning is always present. Rarely does one engage with external stimuli in life and walk away having gained "nothing" from the exchange, including learning *something* (as such, a null exchange more often points to a failure of insight or inquiry than it does the stimuli's meaninglessness). However, the assessment of whether what one has "learned" has "application" to one's life, I would argue, is yet another failure of the research questions and design.

questions, my response (as with Kevin Barnhurst, discussed above) is that, unfortunately, it all too often does.

More importantly, the old language tends to close down opportunities for investigating, in much richer and more nuanced ways, what pluralistic media forms might offer a revised vision of citizenship. What seems more productive, as I have argued here, is that we change the language that guides our thinking. What such a change also allows, ironically enough, is precisely the forms of collaborative thinking and research that Delli Carpini and this Breaking Boundaries project express an interest in achieving.

Breaking Boundaries

In the spirit of the undertakings in this volume, the argument here is intentionally pushing the boundaries of what has constituted the primary paradigm for studying political communication under the broadcast news-era media regime. Like Delli Carpini, I, too, think there are opportunities for collaboration between those trained in quantitative methodologies and those versed in qualitative methods, perhaps initially at the location of the empirical-reflexive quadrant that he recommends. But as I have argued, the positivistic paradigm that structured social science's ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments[8] as a *modernist* scholarly approach is outdated for the postmodern context that now shapes media/politics and the study of it. Following Richard Rorty's advice, I advocate that "we might want to stop doing those things and do something else" (1989, p. 9).

In the process, I have offered a preliminary vocabulary (as with Rorty's point in the epigraph, perhaps "half-formed" would be an apt descriptor) of what might constitute a new language in the study of media/politics. Reviewing that list, what is noticeable is that these aren't ideas emanating from any one school of thinking. These are terms used in such disparate fields and disciplines as philosophy, political psychology, new media studies, political economy, literary theory, critical studies, cultural studies, and queer theory—and even within political communication as practiced in the UK and Europe. In a word, the new language is interdisciplinary. Following Roland Barthes, we do not look to interdisciplinarity to bring together existing scholarly paradigms, or even disparate disciplines' preferred methods, in an uneasy marriage. Rather, we look for ways in which the congregation of new ways of thinking may produce entirely new languages made of new vocabularies:

> Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins *effectively* (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down . . . in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together, this unease in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation. (Barthes, quoted in Moran, 2010, p. 15)

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[8] As with Delli Carpini's argument, the praxeological—quantitative methods—need not be committed solely to a positivist paradigm.

As scholars interested in the study of media/politics in the post-broadcast news regime—not to mention this somewhat new area of scrutiny called political entertainment—we are faced with a new object of study. I would argue that circumstances, both internal and external to the academy, have led to the breakdown of solidarity of the old paradigm. Thus, a new vocabulary and new language is precisely the way to break boundaries and chart a new path for coming to terms with how contemporary manifestations of media/politics shape new understandings of citizenship and new possibilities for democratic engagement in the 21st century.

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