



An Engagement with Jeffrey Jones’ “Toward a New Vocabulary for Political Communication Research”

A Response to Jeffrey Jones

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“Meaning isn’t something you find, Detective Johnson; it’s something you give.”
The Closer (Season Five, Episode Five)

Jeffrey Jones provides a thoughtful and challenging response to my essay “Breaking Boundaries: Can We Bridge the Quantitative Versus Qualitative Divide Through the Study of Entertainment and Politics,” and the editors have generously given me space to engage with it. Let me start by acknowledging areas of agreement (there are many). I agree with Jeff’s descriptions of both the argument in my book with Bruce Williams (2011) and the new information environment in which we now live. I agree that this transition can be described as a shift from one “truth regime” to another, that both regimes are ultimately politically and discursively constructed, and that positivist research was part of the “implicit collusion” that helped maintain and naturalize the former regime during the latter half of the 20th century. I agree that the current moment offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between politics, citizenship, news, and entertainment, and that doing so requires “seeing the world through new eyes and articulating that world through a new language.” In turn, it seems that Jeff can imagine this paradigm or cultural shift including the use of quantitative methods (admittedly the least controversial part of my argument).

Where we appear to disagree is on the possibility and desirability of positivism being part of this new discursive regime. His reasoning is clear: Positivism assumes an underlying truth we can objectively know and attempts to uncover this truth by reducing complex webs of interrelationships to discrete “variables” and (largely) one-way causal relationships. Not only is this ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically anathema to the current postmodern information environment (and to cultural and critical

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scholars), but it also obstructs any effort to reimagine a new way of understanding politics and media and to bolster a truth regime that arguably affords very thin notions of democracy and citizenship. In short, Jeff suggests my argument is both praxeologically and normatively problematic.

I say “appear” to disagree because I hope to clarify my argument in a way that might alleviate at least some of these concerns. I am not defending “capital P” (P)ositivism, that is, the notion that a singular “truth” about the social and political world can be uncovered objectively and cumulatively (except for the most mundane of things). Rather, I am defending “small p” (p)ositivism, that is, the value of testing hypotheses in ways that allow for the possibility that we are wrong. Consider, for example, the quote Jeff used from David Simon (creator of *The Wire*) in response to a question regarding his hoped-for impact of the show: “If a slightly larger percentage of the American population looks at him [the drug czar] and goes, ‘You are so full of shit’. . . that would be gratifying.” Embedded in this quote is *exactly* the kind of testable “hypothesis” that (p)ositivism can address, doing so in a way that allows for the possibility that Simon’s hope (or the researcher’s expectation) is unrealized. Similarly, what of Jeff’s example regarding Doris Graber’s research on the political potential of fictional television narratives, in which most people responding to the survey question “Is there anything you have learned from the show that you can use in your life?” Answered “no”? Jeff uses this as an example of the limits of positivist research (i.e., that it *mistakenly* concludes people have not learned anything useful), but I actually see it as an example of two reasons why we need such research. First, it allows a critic to assess the quality of the research design (i.e., to conclude that this is a poor way to “test” whether people learn anything from fictional narrative). Second, it forces the critic to provide contrary evidence (i.e., Jeff is assuming *as a given* that people learn useful things from watching these narratives, but why should we accept this assumption?).

In short, (p)ositivism keeps us honest by actually allowing citizens (in admittedly highly structured and ritualized ways) to speak for themselves rather than assuming that something is so because we say or hope it is. One can certainly decide this approach is too crude to tell us anything meaningful about the complex, context-dependent nature of media and politics in the new information environment, or that its tendency to assume simple, one-way cause-and-effect relationships misses the interactive, “coauthored” nature of making meaning. But except for the most postmodern of postmodernists, critical and cultural scholars steeped in either foundational–empirical or foundational–reflexive approaches would agree that people are only “semiautonomous” actors. I can think of only one way to assure that scholars do not impose their interpretation of the nature of this semiautonomy and how it plays out in the construction and maintenance of political meaning: developing and testing interpretations empirically.

Lastly, I see Jeff’s point that “language matters.” (P)ositivism carries so much linguistic baggage that using the term may inevitably make it impossible to create an new ontological, epistemological, and axiological space for understanding the relationship between media and politics. He has convinced me of this, and I would be happy to jettison both the capitalized and lowercase versions of the term, as long as we retain the underlying praxeology of (p)ositivism (and quantitative research more broadly) in the process.