

The Role of Qualitative Methods in Political Communication Research: Past, Present, and Future

Introduction

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This article makes the case for a new era of qualitative research to contribute to the study of political communication at a time of rapid media change. We detail the history of a tradition of mixed-methods research in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s, and chart the rise of the currently dominant quantitative methodological consensus from the 1970s onward. We examine key works within this older tradition of mixed-methods research for examples of how scholars used field research and other qualitative methods to build theory and analyze social life. We conclude with a discussion of the ways qualitative research, including the articles in this special section, can complement quantitative work and advance the field of political communication.

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Introduction

For 40 years, a particular methodological consensus has underpinned the study of political communication. Quantitative research methods generally, and content analysis, experiments, and surveys in particular, have defined the core of legitimate research, especially in the United States.² Although some scholars have produced qualitative work, and some of it has been very influential, most political communication research is quantitative, and this is the tradition into which new generations of researchers are trained and socialized. Moreover, the assumptions underpinning quantitative research often serve as the standards by which scholars judge political communication research. This methodological consensus not only provides the main tools scholars have at their disposal for empirical work on political communication; it also shapes the very questions they ask, the answers they provide, and the theories they develop.

Since the 1970s, scholars working within this consensus have generated a remarkable body of findings. They have advanced our understandings of agenda setting, the dynamics of public opinion, the influence of news media and campaign communications upon political attitudes and behavior, and the limits of both citizens' independent reasoning and elites' ability to manipulate the public. Political communication research has, with increasing sophistication, uncovered the cognitive and affective processes that underlie many kinds of political attitudes and assessed the relative importance of mediated appeals versus other factors in shaping political outcomes. Normatively, scholars have made forceful arguments, backed by quantitative data, about journalistic and political practices, detailing the many shortcomings of the news media when it comes to serving democracy.

And yet, despite these advances, over the last decade cracks have appeared in the edifice of political communication research. In a sweeping essay aimed at the very foundations of the field as it exists today, two leading scholars, W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar (2008), have pointed out that theoretical advances have not kept pace with social and technological changes. They argue that well-established research programs all too often plod on, seemingly oblivious to the changing world around them. Others have leveled similar criticisms at political communication research (Barnhurst, 2011; Bimber, 2015) and at the broader media effects paradigm behind much of it (Lang, 2013; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). Although some have questioned whether the foundations of political communication research are in fact as fragile as these critics claim (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010), there seems to be widespread uneasiness at the very heart of the field. The core concern is that we, as political communication researchers, are not always well equipped to understand our objects of analysis and that we have not kept pace with a world that looks radically different today politically, socially, and technologically from the time of the founding of the field in the 1970s. News media organizations, political campaigns, and interest groups, as well as the tools and techniques they use to communicate with

² In this article, we are primarily concerned with political communication research as it is practiced in the United States. Other traditions of political communication research exist and, although many are (often heavily) influenced by U.S. research, they also differ in important ways both methodologically and theoretically. The piece builds on work previously published by Karpf, Kreiss, and Nielsen (2014).

citizens, have evolved, as have the broader social and technological contexts in which political communication processes occur.

Although we admire much of the work done over the past 40 years, we share the concerns expressed by scholars such as Bennett and Iyengar that our field has not kept pace with the changes around us. The question, then, is how to proceed. In this article, we argue that the problems political communication researchers face today stem in part from the very methodological consensus that has helped facilitate advances in the study of agenda setting, opinion formation, and media effects. As Bruce Bimber (2015) has argued, the very same kind of methodological and intellectual consensus that facilitates accumulative work can also be deeply conservative and orient research toward the testing and incremental extension of existing theories dealing with familiar phenomena. In the process, scholars often fail to pursue empirical analysis of new phenomena, the development of new theories, or the opening up of new areas of inquiry. In our view, the reigning consensus in political communication research has marginalized qualitative methods, resulting in an unnecessary and counterproductive narrowing of our ability to understand central aspects of political communication and how they are changing.

Whereas much of the conversation about the state of the field has focused on whether new *theories* are needed, we take a different *methodologically* oriented approach. We make a case for a new era of qualitative research, especially firsthand field research in the contexts where political communication occurs through methods such as observation, participant observation, and in-field interviews, as well as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and process tracing. These are precisely the methodological tools of an older and mixed-method tradition of political communication research, exemplified by the work of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his various collaborators as well as by Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang. These scholars employed a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore *how* citizens, journalists, and political elites interact, experience, and engage in political communication. As scholars such as Lazarsfeld and the Langs knew, qualitative research, and fieldwork in particular, often excels at answering empirical questions that are a precondition for developing new theoretical understandings. Qualitative approaches help us answer the *how* and *what* questions that must be addressed in order to answer the *why* and *so what* questions. Field research, in particular, is well equipped to take on this challenge as a method that, in the words of Herbert J. Gans (1962), "gets the researcher close to the realities of social life" (p. 449).

In the pages that follow, we argue that the specific question of method needs to be at the forefront of scholarly debate about the future of political communication research. Our goal is to make the case that much can be gained by learning from exemplary works of the past and again embracing qualitative methods as a necessary part of the empirical and theory-building enterprise of political communication research. First, we outline the form political communication research took with the institutionalization of the field in the United States in the 1970s and identify an older tradition of interdisciplinary and mixed-methods work on political communication (originating in the 1920s) that scholars largely ignored as the quantitative consensus took shape. Second, we reexamine some key examples of how researchers working within this tradition—including Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang but also, perhaps more surprisingly to present-day readers, Paul Lazarsfeld—used fieldwork in the 1940s and 1950s as an integral part of their empirical and theoretical work. Third, we outline a few ways, visible in

both the contributions to this special section of the *International Journal of Communication* and a number of recent studies in political communication, in which this older tradition of mixed-method research could guide a new era of qualitative research in political communication.

The Field as We Know It—And What Went Before

The basic institutional structure of political communication research as (a) spanning the disciplines of communication and political science, (b) a distinct field within each of these disciplines, (c) strongly anchored in U.S. academia, and (d) oriented toward a single shared flagship journal, *Political Communication*, originated with the International Communication Association's recognition of the Political Communication Division (PCD) in 1973. The division, first headed by Keith R. Sanders, started publishing the annual *Political Communication Review* in 1975, providing the first formal forum dedicated to academic research specifically on political communication. Since 1991, the PCD has published the journal *Political Communication* jointly with a similar division of the American Political Science Association (APSA).³

Since its institutionalization in its current form, the field has continuously presented itself as interdisciplinary and based on multiple methods (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981; Swanson & Nimmo, 1990). For example, *Political Communication* describes itself as interdisciplinary and open to all research methods, a commitment that was recently reiterated in a joint editorial by the outgoing editor Shanto Iyengar and the incoming editor Claes de Vreese (Iyengar & De Vreese, 2014).⁴ The ritual references to interdisciplinary work and methodological diversity, however, rest uneasily with the de facto dominance of quantitative methods. We have performed a content analysis of the 258 articles published by *Political Communication* over the last 12 years (from Volume 20, Issue 1, in 2003 to Volume 32, Issue 1, in 2015). We coded as qualitative those articles based primarily on interpretative, historical, critical, and rhetorical analyses as well as those premised on fieldwork (defined expansively as interviews or observation). Under this definition, only 43 out of 258 (16.7%) articles are qualitative. Only 21 articles (8.1% of the total) present at least some primary data produced through qualitative fieldwork.

One reason for this disjuncture between mixed-methods claims and monocultural practice lies in the particular disciplinary traditions and methodological orientations of the scholars who founded the field as we know it today. These traditions and orientations helped the field develop but have also narrowed its intellectual horizon, especially when compared with adjacent fields of research such as journalism studies or with the theoretical and methodological breadth of other social science disciplines such as sociology. In his history of political communication research in the United States, David Ryfe (2001) has demonstrated how the generation that established the PCD drew in particular on three academic disciplines—social psychology, political science, and mass communication research as practiced in the United States in the 1960s—much influenced in all three cases by broader behaviorist currents and by the more aggressively

³ The very coupling of the ICA and APSA illustrates the special role of U.S.-based research in the field.

⁴ See the "Aims & Scope" of the journal's website for its self-description at

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/aboutThisJournal?show=aimsScope&journalCode=upcp20>.

reformist behavioralist movement in U.S. political science in particular.⁵ From social psychology came a focus on the attitudes and opinions of individuals and an emphasis on experimental and survey methods. From political science came a focus on politics understood primarily as a question of elections and formal political processes, an orientation toward quantification, and skepticism toward qualitative research and broader sociologically inspired theories. From mass communication research came the language of "effects" and "influence," especially in the form of short-term observable behavioral change, a legacy interest in politicians' rhetoric, and the drive of academics in search of a safe and accepted institutional base for their work.⁶

A closer look at the academic biographies of some key individuals involved in the institutionalization of the field provides a sense of not only of what was present at creation but what was not. Of the people highlighted in the PCD's own history writing, Keith R. Sanders, the first president of the section, received his PhD in communications from the University of Pittsburgh, L. Erwin Atwood from Iowa in journalism, Dan Nimmo from Vanderbilt in political science, Doris Graber from Columbia in political science, Sidney Kraus from Iowa in theater, and Lynda Lee Kaid in speech communication from Southern Illinois University (where she worked with Sanders).⁷ Other figures deeply involved in shaping the field in the United States include, in no particular order, political scientists Shanto Iyengar, Thomas Patterson, and W. Lance Bennett, as well as David Swanson, Donald Shaw, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Maxwell McCombs, and Steven Chaffee, all of whom held degrees in rhetoric or communication.

Those involved in the PCD's early years were, in other words, all communication researchers or political scientists, and they generally embraced the precepts of behaviorism and its strong reliance on quantification as a methodological principle. To contemporary eyes, this is no surprise, because there

⁵ Political scientists often distinguish between *behaviorism* (the study of individuals' observable behavior rather than formal or informal institutions, with an emphasis on stimulus-response models), a broad current originating in psychology but influential across the social sciences, and *behavioralism* as a more specific, defined, and self-conscious intellectual movement. Behaviorism is the name a group of political scientists in the 1950s and 1960s gave to their attempt to replace an older tradition of institutionally oriented and often historical and qualitative political and social analysis with a research program that was (a) oriented toward aggregates of individuals' behavior, (b) based on quantitative methods and statistical techniques, and (c) explicitly casting itself as following in the footsteps of the natural sciences. This is what scholars refer to as the "behavioral revolution" in U.S. political science, the formation of a new paradigm that came to dominate the discipline. This revolution, in turn, provoked various attempts at antibehavioral counterrevolutions, including the rise of a new institutionalism contesting the methodological individualism of the behaviorists and the Perestroika movement arguing that the emphasis on quantification was leading to methods-driven research at the expense of problem-oriented work (see Farr et al., 1995).

⁶ See Peters and Simonson (2004) for a history of the institutionalization of media research in the United States during these years, a period in which psychology and political science both had safe institutional havens in the academy but communication research did not.

⁷ See <http://www.politicalcommunication.org/history.html>. Disciplinary affiliations via ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Database.

seems to be little interdisciplinary collaboration or dialogue between political communication researchers (based in either political science or communication departments) and scholars of other disciplines such as sociologists. Additionally, there appears to be little mixed-methods or qualitative work in the field. But this was not always the case. If we examine the individuals who shaped U.S. research at the intersection of communication and politics in the 50 years *before* the founding of the PCD in 1973, an older tradition of interdisciplinary work drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods emerges.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the publication of several important studies that are part of the heritage of political communication research and are still sometimes read and taught. To name a few highlights, consider (1) the journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922; (2) Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the Chicago school of sociology, published *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* the same year; and (3) the polymath political scientist Harold D. Lasswell's *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* came out in 1927. These men were not political communication researchers as we understand the term today, because their work largely predates the academic professionalization, disciplinary boundary drawing, and field-specific specialization to which we are accustomed. But all three published serious, analytical work about communication and politics in some of the most prestigious scholarly journals of the time and drew on the social theory of their day, including functional psychology, symbolic interactionism, and philosophical pragmatism. All three used a sometimes eclectic mix of qualitative and quantitative empirical research methods (and sometimes plenty of anecdotal evidence and assertion to boot).

Lippmann, Park, and Lasswell (and others like them) all influenced scholars working at the intersection of communication and politics in the 1940s and 1950s. This period saw a further professionalization of academic work on political communication as a new generation of researchers engaged in more systematic and rigorous research programs designed to explore a range of issues directly related to the big questions of the day, including the rise of fascism and communism, the coexistence of representative democracy and the printed press with new mass media like radio, and the transition from "traditional" to "modern" societies. Funded in part by the Rockefeller Foundation and U.S. government grants, an interdisciplinary group of social scientists intensified their attempts to understand the effects of increasingly prevalent mass media on society, studying processes of persuasion (Robert K. Merton), the impact of television on politics and society (the Langs), and the interplay between political communication, democratic processes, and mass media in the postwar "mass society" (C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, David Riesman).

The Forgotten Role of Qualitative Methods in the 1940s and 1950s

To take inspiration from the past, it is worth highlighting the role of qualitative and mixed methods in some of the strongest political communication research published in the United States during the period that predated the formation of the PCD. Paul Lazarsfeld's *The People's Choice* (1944/1968), written with Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, and Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang's (1968) collection of classic research articles reprinted in *Politics and Television* are seminal works that we will focus on here. Lazarsfeld and his collaborators set out to learn how voters make up their minds during political campaigns, and they used a combination of panel surveys and fieldwork in Erie County, Ohio, to develop a

model that combines social characteristics and the flow of campaign communications to account for political attitudes and behavior. The Langs did path-breaking work on the new world of televised politics, examining the 1951 MacArthur Day parade in Chicago honoring General MacArthur (whom President Truman had just relieved of his command in the Korean War) as well as the 1952 party conventions. They were among the first researchers to show that television did not simply "reflect" the events covered, but "refracted" them to create a whole new view of events quite different from what was experienced by those present at these scenes.

Although these studies are widely cited as part of the history of the field, with each having thousands of citations, their *methodological* approaches are often ignored. Scholars casually call *The People's Choice* a "brilliant study" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987/2010, p. 116) without any substantive engagement with the book's mixed-methods approach. Shoemaker and Reese refer to the MacArthur Day study as "compelling in its simplicity" (1996, p. 34), even though the Langs argued that one of their contributions was to go beyond extant approaches to communication research by combining an expansive content analysis with 31 participant observers on the ground during a significant political event.

These two works are instructive examples of methodological roads not taken during the subsequent development of the field. We discuss them here to detail what qualitative methods have accomplished and can accomplish in terms of theory building and empirical analysis. No doubt other examples of qualitative research exist, yet we draw on these works as important cases because they are ritually cited in the field of political communication and took place at a time much like our own, when basic categories of analysis were in flux given widespread social and technical change

Victors write their own history, which is apparent in the field's collective memory of Paul Lazarsfeld. Today remembered as the father of survey methodology, Lazarsfeld's writings on method and approach to research were far more varied than is conventionally recognized (see also Morrison, 1998). In fact, Lazarsfeld was well aware of the analytical power of qualitative research. Two of the central theoretical insights developed by Lazarsfeld and his various collaborators—the two-step flow and opinion leaders—emerged during fieldwork for *The People's Choice*. In his 1972 book *Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays*, Lazarsfeld writes that:

The People's Choice, a study of the role of mass media in the presidential campaign of 1940, made me feel that personal influence played a great role in the way people make up their minds how to vote. Not having anticipated this issue I had no data to pursue it quantitatively. I therefore attached to our book a chapter on "The Nature of Personal Influence" which was based only on a few qualitative observations. Some of the concepts I derived—the two-step flow of communication and the idea of horizontal opinion leaders—have since entered the sociological general literature. (p. xiii)

The passage is remarkable on a number of levels, in particular its illustration of how *The People's Choice* was as much a qualitative as a quantitative research project. Lazarsfeld was modest in characterizing the book as containing a "few qualitative observations." In actuality, *The People's Choice* was what contemporary scholars would call a mixed-methods panel study throughout the entire research

project. The authors surveyed a random sample of 3,000 people with a structured and standardized questionnaire, from which a research team interviewed a main sample of 600 individuals seven times from May through November 1940 (the other individuals were grouped into stratified samples to serve as controls). When an individual changed his or her vote intention, he or she was interviewed in an open-ended fashion as to why. As Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet write:

The repeated interviews made it possible to secure voluminous information about each respondent's personal characteristics, social philosophy, political history, personality traits, relationships with other people, opinions on issues related to the election—in short, information on anything which might contribute to our knowledge of the formation of his political preferences. (1968, p. 5)

Additionally, the authors provide narratives from open-ended question responses as evidence of their conclusions, and they conducted follow-up, open-ended “special interviews” with individuals who changed their vote (the “changers”) to explore their responses further (ibid., p. 126).

If anything, as the preface to the second edition and the notes to the text make clear, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet regretted that the study did not generate *more* qualitative data (no doubt this was precipitated by their failure to find the strong media effects they were anticipating). At various points, the authors regret not “studying the whole community” and conducting more interviews (ibid., p. xxxix); not developing a more “sophisticated case study approach” or generating “more descriptive material on a local campaign as a whole,” including the “way that local political committees spent money and behavior at public meetings” (ibid., p. 160); and the authors even regret not “showing people pictures and allowing them to free associate” (ibid., p. 162).

What is striking here is that Lazarsfeld and his collaborators both allowed themselves to be surprised by their findings *and* had observational qualitative fieldwork data that permitted inductive theory building. Unlike much contemporary political communication research, which reifies its object of analysis through deductive designs that proceed from assumed, stable categories of social life and is primarily concerned with testing and incrementally extending existing theories, *The People's Choice* gets close to the realities of political communication processes and the perceptions of those involved. In the process, these scholars were able to generate new categories of media influence and interpersonal dynamics that remain influential today.

Although their methodological orientations differ, the Langs also crafted research designs that allowed for inductive theory building. Like Lazarsfeld, the Langs were professional sociologists. They were trained as graduate students in the Chicago school of sociology, with its tradition of field research and mixed-method research designs. They worked on communication and politics in a remarkably interdisciplinary fashion, drawing on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches that allowed them to be surprised by their data. For example, in their classic MacArthur Day study, the Langs write that they originally set out to conduct a:

systematic study of crowd behavior and of the role of the media of mass communication, particularly television, in this kind of event. Our main goal was stymied. The air of curiosity and casualness exhibited by most members of the crowd was a surprise to every observer reporting from the scene. (Lang & Lang, 1968, p. 23)

The Langs, like Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, were also writing at a time of unsettled analytical categories. At the dawn of the television era, the MacArthur study was the first to directly compare in-person spectatorship with the mediated coverage of a political event as well as analyze the ways the latter shaped the understandings of participants witnessing the live event. To do so, their study was intentionally "open-ended in an effort to 'explore' rather than test specific propositions" (ibid., 1968, p. 39). This approach to research design ran throughout their body of work. For example, the Langs conducted field observations (including what scholars now call media ethnography) and qualitative interviews at important political events such as the 1952 conventions and analyzed cases such as Watergate in part through process tracing (Lang & Lang, 1968; see also Lang & Lang, 1983). If they had a methodological and analytical precept, it was a "concern with images of politics, of politicians, and of political moods" (Lang & Lang, 1968, p. 32) whose import could be analyzed and discovered inductively:

We naturally assume that every event has some kind of effect; our idea is to conduct the study of any event that, once it is over, we can depict and analyze in some detail *whatever* [emphasis in original] effects turn up. This often takes us in new and sometimes unanticipated directions. Insights obtained from these attempts to assess and understand the impact of the events in question then become the starting points for entirely new lines of inquiry. (p. 33)

This approach proved extraordinarily productive for the generation of theory and yielded a number of startling insights into political communication. In fact, the Langs prefigured 30 years of subsequent theoretical developments in the field. *Politics and Television* opens with a critique of the "limited effects" model, laying out many themes contained in Todd Gitlin's (1978) famous later critique of "the dominant paradigm." The introduction and collected chapters of *Politics and Television* also advance an account of political communication processes as interactions between media, political elites, and citizens that anticipates much of Timothy Cook's (1998) influential new institutional account published 30 years later.

Despite their differences, in these works Lazarsfeld and the Langs share a common approach to research design that is premised upon a "logic of discovery," not a "logic of verification" (Luker, 2008, p. 39), and analysis that proceeds through logical generalization. As Lazarsfeld makes clear in his 1972 volume, *The People's Choice* had built-in qualitative field research components that permitted researchers to discover new analytical categories, which were necessary given that survey research did not yield the results expected from existing theory. The inclusion of open-ended survey and interview data and field observation permitted the researchers to go beyond filling predefined holes in the literature and generate new analytical categories and frame new questions. It was the observation of "personal influence" in the field that led Lazarsfeld to investigate other disciplinary literatures that spoke to the phenomenon and return to the field to explore it empirically in *Personal Influence* with a new team of collaborators. In the

case of the Langs, the building of theory was the end, not the starting point, and they pursued open-ended empirical work to get there. The Langs' approach their studies in ways that were theoretically informed, yet clearly attuned to advancing the field through inductive theory building. In both cases, these scholars built their work on theoretical insights gleaned through a research design animated by a logic of discovery, a precept that to some contemporary eyes may seem methodologically loose but that nevertheless produced canonical work in the field.

These scholars seemingly did not question their ability to generate work with analytical and empirical purchase despite being limited to the in-depth exploration of a few carefully selected strategic or critical cases. Logical generalization is a key tenet of the work of these scholars. The goal of logical generalization is to discover conceptually related phenomena, not make distributional claims about a variable across a known population. Lazarsfeld thought about generalizing from qualitative case studies, an approach that he argues "entails generalizing across situations from different studies" or pulling "together a variety of indicators from a single case study" (Pasanella, 1994, p. 27). This should not be foreign to the laboratory experimentalists who came after and routinely use convenience samples of college students and generalize logically (not statistically) from them to the general population. Logical generalization also enabled the Langs to make broader statements about how media and political actors relate to one another, and their analysis has held up markedly well for over half a century.

Founding a Field (Without Fieldwork)

As we have shown, some of the most important researchers of the 1940s and 1950s produced interdisciplinary work that utilized a range of methods and integrated theoretical perspectives from sociology, political science, psychology, and the nascent field of mass communication. However, Lazarsfeld's work during this period as well as his increasingly survey-based research suggested that mass media were less powerful than those who feared the power of propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s had thought. This, of course, became known as the minimal effects tradition. It was these findings, as well as broader intellectual currents of behaviorism, that shaped the founding moments of the PCD.

A full history of the PCD's 1970s genesis lies beyond the scope of this article (for aspects of this history, see Karpf, Kreiss, & Nielsen, 2014, and Ryfe, 2001). We emphasize here that what became known as the dominant paradigm (Gitlin, 1978) primarily entailed (a) short-run studies of persuasion campaigns, (b) a methodologically individualist focus on individuals and aggregated public opinion as objects of analysis (rather than, for example, groups, communities, organizations, or institutions), and (3) analytical interest in "media events" as opposed to more long-run processes of socialization and the consequences of living with media (Katz, 2009; Pooley & Katz, 2008). This focus was shaped substantially by an intellectual orientation toward the broader behaviorist paradigm with its emphasis on stimulus-response models, a focus on individual behavior, and a reliance on quantitative methods such as public opinion polls, scaled questionnaires, and experiments (a tradition today exemplified by the work of, for example, John Zaller and Shanto Iyengar).

This was the context within which a generation of young U.S. scholars set out to create an institutional space for political communication research in the early 1970s. This context was characterized

by the displacement of an older generation of sociologically inspired and interdisciplinary researchers interested in communication and politics (Pooley & Katz, 2008); the rise of behaviorism, with its methodological individualism and emphasis on quantification, arguably then at its high point in U.S. political science and psychology (Farr, Dryzek, & Leonard, 1995); and the discipline-building ambitions of mass communication researchers such as Wilbur Schramm precisely at the moment sociologists (who had contributed so much in the preceding decades) were turning away from studying media (Peters & Simonson, 2004).

All these characteristics are on display in the *Handbook of Political Communication* published in 1981. Edited by Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders and written in the late 1970s mostly by scholars involved in the early years of the PCD, the *Handbook* is not simply a collection of then state-of-the-art chapters on communication and politics. It is a monument to a particular definition of what political communication research *is*. Nimmo and Sanders provide a mythological account of the genesis of the field, arguing that it has “piecemeal origins [that] date back several centuries” but “think it convenient to speak of the emergence of the cross-disciplinary field as beginning in the behavioral thrust of the 1950s” (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981, p. 12). Jumping directly from past centuries to 1950s behaviorism in political science and social psychology with no mention of Lippmann, Park, or Lasswell, the editors refer to a 1956 reader called *Political Behavior* as “one of the first attempts to designate something called ‘political communication’” (ibid., p. 12). In the process, Nimmo and Sanders collapse much of the work done from the 1920s to the early 1950s into the mists of prehistoric time, suggesting that it is about as relevant for the contemporary researcher as Plato and Aristotle.⁸ The *Handbook* thus represents a clear break with the past. During the 1970s, the field of political communication research was reborn, so much so that Thomas E. Patterson suggested “there wasn’t a lot out there” when he, as a young political scientist, “back[ed] in the field” of political communication.⁹ It seemed like there was not a lot out there because only very specific things were included in the then budding theoretical and methodological consensus that continues to shape the field.

⁸ The index of the 1981 *Handbook* makes for interesting reading. Lippmann gets 9 mentions, Lazarsfeld 39, Lasswell (confusingly renamed “Herbert” in the introduction) a respectable 29, the Langs just 13, Bernays none at all, and Park a single entry (with his last name misspelled). The founders of the PDC are more robustly represented: Sanders gets 21 mentions in the index, Atwood the same, Nimmo 35, Graber 49, Kraus 34, and Kaid 26. Karl Deutsch and Murray Edelman—who, in their *The Nerves of Government* (Deutsch, 1963) and *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman 1964), wrote two of the most widely cited books on political communication published in the 1960s—are discussed only in passing. Edelman is mentioned 13 times, Deutsch 7 times. The work of Jürgen Habermas, who published the German original version of his wildly influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, is discussed in a chapter on critical theory and in an appendix on European research.

⁹ Presentation at the roundtable discussion of “*The Future of Political Communication Research: Where We’ve Been, Where We’re Going*” at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC, September 1–4, 2005, recording available at http://www.politicalcommunication.org/04_tom_patterson.mp3.

The understanding of political communication research that we have inherited from the (re)founding generation of the 1970s is shaped by a specific set of disciplines, intellectual currents within these disciplines, and associated methods that have been privileged in a way that sets the contemporary field apart from the interdisciplinary and mixed-method tradition that preceded it. The shift is not a clean break. The Langs are still read, as are, at least for their historical importance, Lippmann and Lasswell. Scholars still do qualitative work, and a few combine qualitative and quantitative methods. But there is a clear shift that coincides with the institutionalization of the field. The post-1970s configuration has enabled major advances in our understanding of agenda setting, the dynamics of public opinion, and media effects, especially during campaigns and elections. It has also relegated questions concerning broader issues of organizational, social, institutional, and technological change, along with qualitative methods, to the margins of the study of political communication.

A New Era of Qualitative Research in Political Communication?

Contemporary work in political communication remains deeply indebted to the set of methodological approaches that came to define the center of the field after the founding of the PCD in 1973. These methods, however, are best suited to refining our understanding of established concepts in a relatively stable communications landscape, and less useful in generating new analytical categories to keep pace with changes in media and social structure. For all their contributions, the currently dominant methodological consensus has done little to advance our understanding of political actors and their work, the growing layer of organizations mediating between politicians, news organizations, and the public in new ways, and citizens' social and symbolic construction of their relationships to politics and the news, or how any of these have changed over time.

The challenges for researchers are not limited to the rapid rise of new digital and networked communication technologies and the social practices associated with them, but this particularly spectacular change in the substantive nature of political communication is useful for arguing a broader point about how current methodological approaches risk failing the field when used on their own. Inherited assumptions about political actors, news media organizations, and communication mediums are rapidly becoming obsolete. What is a political campaign at a time when outside actors such as the so-called super PACs sometimes spend more money than candidates and parties? What is an interest group at a time when Astroturf groups, Internet-assisted advocacy organizations with loose membership requirements, and Organizing for Action are all pushing the legal boundaries of not-for-profits? What is a media organization at a time characterized by the rise of search engine companies such as Google, social media companies like Facebook, and multiplatform media-political celebrities such as Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin that combine new tools with older mediums such as radio and television? What is the Internet as a medium when it is continually and rapidly evolving, from the AOL-dominated years of dial-up access and desktop computers to the increasingly ubiquitous and always-on mobile landscape of today? And what is journalism and how is the consumption of news changing in an era when prominent political reporters leave traditional news outlets for entrepreneurial social media start-ups such as BuzzFeed and Snapchat?

These few examples are just the tip of the iceberg. In the United States, political scientists, media scholars, sociologists, and economic historians are increasingly arguing that the last 40 years

represent a period of rapid and often profound change in the very nature of political parties, campaign organizations, interest groups, social movements, news media institutions, work, leisure, and family life as well as the basic dynamics of the economy (Castells, 2000; Giddens, 1990; Neuman, 1991). Few of these changes have registered with the mainstream of political communication research, which often seems to operate in a sort of ahistorical generalized present. For example, although the recently published *Sourcebook for Political Communication Research* (Bucy & Holbert, 2013) explicitly recognizes that the field needs to keep up with a changing political communications environment, the vast majority of the theories and methods discussed in the book derive from the same narrow tradition of social psychological, political science, and mass communication research honed during the mass communication era, and they remain premised on surveys, experiments, and content analysis that only permit narrow questions to be asked of political phenomena.

Normal scientific paradigms base their progress in part on the stabilization of certain analytical categories that are then taken for granted and used continually over time. And yet social scientists face the problem that the very nature of what they study changes over time, leaving basic categories potentially unsettled. Field research in particular, and many qualitative methods more generally, excel precisely where surveys and experiments are limited: in the inductive examination of how social phenomena actually work to generate new theory. As examples of how to do this, the presently submerged tradition of qualitative research (such as the Langs') and mixed-methods studies (like Lazarsfeld's) holds renewed relevance for the future.

The Path Ahead and the Articles for This Special Section

Following Lazarsfeld's thoughts on the role of methodologists, we do not see it as our task to tell scholars what they *should* do but, rather, to highlight what they *might* do (Lazarsfeld & Rosenberg, 1955, p. 4). Each of the articles assembled in this special section of the *International Journal of Communication*, which arise from a preconference held at the International Communication Association's annual meeting in 2014, points to—and connects with—new streams of research that have begun to emerge in the past several years. Taken together, they highlight some of the possible directions for future scholarship that brings qualitative tools to bear on the study of political communication, including:

- Research examining the inner workings of political campaigns and organizations, electoral and governance processes, and the relations between the different actors who collaborate formally or informally to get candidates elected or advance causes and policies (Howard, 2006; Kreiss, 2012; Nielsen, 2012; Rhodes, 2011; Walker, 2014). In this special section, **Serazio**—drawing on Chadwick's (2013) notion of "hybrid media systems"—interviews elite operatives (press secretaries, advertising consultants, etc.) to understand how campaign professionals manage the dizzying array of legacy and digital media platforms available to contemporary candidates. Moving beyond elections, **Klinger, Rösli, and Jarren** ask how governments communicate with citizens, and to what degree new online affordances are changing past practices.

- Research examining news production processes that details the interactions between and among reporters, sources, and a growing number of other actors and intermediaries (including various media-like organizations, groups, and companies) in ever-faster information cycles (Anderson, 2013; Boczkowski, 2011; Chadwick, 2013; Gershon, 2012; Herbst, 1998). **Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud** take readers behind the scenes of a Norwegian government agency's attempt to shape immigration news. With detailed fieldwork data, the authors show how the growing desire for positive publicity strains traditional bureaucratic values of impartiality, neutrality, and loyalty. On the other side of the Atlantic, **Graves and Konieczna** document the rise of a journalistic practice—news sharing—in the United States that they see as an effort on the part of journalists to reorient their profession toward public affairs reporting. In both articles, the authors grapple with the consequences of a news cycle that is highly chaotic, heavily managed, and strategically contested by a range of actors.
- Research on interest groups, social movements, and new types of sometimes loosely connected political groups appearing in changing political, economic, and technological contexts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Karpf, 2012; Medvetz, 2012; Powers, 2014). In this special section, **Schradie** asks whether political ideologies shape the disparate digital strategies of labor unions in North Carolina, and **Aronczyk** examines the powerful but obscure role played by the “transnational promotion class” in shaping public debates over oil exploration in the United States and Canada. Both studies point to the need for more research to understand the different ways that interest groups and social movements are—or are not—adapting to the contemporary information environment.
- Research on citizens' political practices and media habits with close examination of the everyday contexts of political action, socialization, and media use related to public affairs (Coleman, 2013; Eliasoph, 1998; Walsh, 2004). Here, **Kligler-Vilenchik** explores how fan discussion groups can provide a space for the political socialization of young people. **Atkinson** analyzes individuals who avoid products or services for ethical reasons. Both pieces point to the need for a broader understanding of political behavior and media use.
- Mediated field observations focused on the hidden objects that shape media production and dissemination but leave no obvious traces, including the proprietary algorithms that determine the visibility of content on Facebook and Google and the various forms of intranets and other backchannels that support semiformal elite communication (Gillespie, 2010; Hindman, 2013; Turow, 2011).

Parallel with such work we need to generate a body of methodological writings endemic to political communication research that addresses particular challenges to studying political objects of analysis and draws on work in other closely related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology as well as science studies and media and communications research more broadly. In this special section, **Dubois and Ford** point to—and suggest a solution for—one emergent issue for qualitative political communication

researchers: How to develop actor-centered approaches to interviewing when the activities of those actors are highly dispersed across media platforms and thus difficult to recall and evaluate? Further methodological writings can help researchers conceptualize the “fields” and “sites” of politics, address ethical debates over issues such as the use of pseudonyms in research, develop guidelines for training young scholars in conducting field research, and debate the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research.¹⁰ Such collaborations should also involve forging new interdisciplinary relationships with scholars in related fields such as information studies and crafting a new definition of methodological pluralism that includes not only surveys and experiments (Iyengar & Simon, 2000) but also fieldwork, new approaches to big data and computational social science, and field experiments, all methods that are now thriving outside the field of political communication research in its current state (Bimber, 2015).

Conclusion

In our view, a new era of qualitative research in political communication would contribute much to scholarly understandings of the processes of political communication by expanding the field of inquiry. At its best, it would help the field move past our current impasse and give rise to new theories and research tools adapted to studying political communication at a time of rapid changes in media, political, and social structures. It would draw inspiration from an older tradition of interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research that was submerged when the field of political communication research as we know it was institutionalized in the United States in the early 1970s around a narrower, more theoretically and methodologically monocultural, set of concerns. This culture has served us well in many respects, but it also seems to have run up against its limits in some ways. We believe the future of our discipline lies beyond this present consensus, and the challenge we face is to reassess our theories and expand of our methodological tool kits. We believe now is a particularly appropriate time to pursue more inductive, qualitative, and mixed-methods research akin to the pioneering efforts of Lazarsfeld and the Langs. Doing so requires that graduate students and younger scholars are as rigorously trained in qualitative methods as in quantitative methods so they can appreciate different kinds of work, take part in mixed-methods collaborations, and ask new, and different, questions to advance the field.

As made clear from the start, our call for a new era of qualitative political communication field research does not imply a rejection of traditional quantitative techniques, nor is it a claim that the field of political communication ever fully excluded qualitative methods. PCD awards have been given to several scholars who have never counted words, conducted an experiment, administered a survey, or run a regression analysis, and some qualitative work is widely respected. Our position is simply that to advance beyond the impasse identified by Bennett and Iyengar (2008), the field needs to reclaim its interdisciplinary heritage and become again, in practice, genuinely mixed methods (like neighboring fields such as journalism studies). Political communication researchers should not leave it to sociologists (let alone journalists!) to ask the hard, timely, and necessary questions about how processes of political

¹⁰ Here, the field can draw on the intense debates waged over the last decade over the role of qualitative research in political science, starting with the so-called Perestroika movement, calls for more problem-oriented and less methods-driven research, and debates over the design of mixed-methods social inquiry (see, e.g., Brady & Collier, 2010, and Shapiro, Smith, & Masoud, 2004).

communication actually operate today, how elites communicate among themselves, how political and media actors are changing, and how people relate to them. We think we need to supplement existing quantitative methods with both old and new qualitative tools and heed Robert E. Park's old call to go get our pants dirty doing field research.

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