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Studying the New Communication of Politics

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A research agenda set forth in the 1975 book Political Communication *is well suited for study in an era when conventional mass communication gives way to less centralized channels. Features of this approach include a focus on behavior and cognitions rather than inferred attitudes, close attention to measurement of media experience, conceptualization of curvilinear processes that occur over time, comparative theorizing that can be tested across different national systems, and reconceptualization of communication as a process defined more by its functions than whether it occurs via mass media or interpersonal channels.*

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Everyone in this symposium is wondering how new technologies will alter political communication and the ways we study it. Do we need to change our ways? In many respects, we already have. Content analysts no longer spend long hours scanning and then laboriously coding newspapers or TV news shows because most of this process can readily be done via on-line keyword searches. Hypothesis-testing surveys are being conducted on-line as well, and almost every recent study of media behaviors includes questions about people's use of the Web. These research innovations are mindful of those that greeted earlier technologies, such as television.

But beyond methods and sheer description, is anything fundamental in politics changing because of the new ease of communication? Some say yes, while others are not so sure. Bruce Bimber (2000), for example, points to a new kind of political organization, the virtual group that mobilizes temporarily via a Web site over a ballot proposition. Robert Putnam (2000), on the other hand, suggests that the Internet could turn out to be no more revolutionary for politics than was the telephone. He questions whether it amounts to more than an efficient way to do things people have been doing for a long time. For us, the key question about new communication technologies is not technological in focus, it is whether they will lead to new communication.

We have long assumed that the structure of communication shapes the structure of politics, both because so much of political activity consists of communication and

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because constraints on communication limit the exercise of power. Marshall McLuhan (1966) was not entirely hyperbolic in suggesting that the printing press was responsible for the rise of the nation-state. As we look toward transformations of politics due to innovations in communication, we might theorize more about the structure of both than the content of either.

During the history of research on media power in politics, the metaphor for "power" has come to be more akin to energy than to direction. In parallel with Clausewitz's view of war as diplomacy carried on by other means, we might think of communication as the alternative to the imposition of policy by force. It is difficult to conceive of democracy separately from free-flowing messages, and our new technologies are enabling messages to flow more freely than ever. To understand where we might be heading, let us look first at where the field has come from.

The Legacy of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, and Berelson

Organized study of political communication can be dated from Harold Lasswell's (1927) analysis of propaganda techniques used in World War I, and he may also have been the first to use the term "political communication" in a book title (Ahora & Lasswell, 1969). Although he published some four million words (Marvick, 1977, p. 10), Lasswell is best remembered today for two pithy aphorisms: the book title *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Lasswell, 1936) and the suggestion that an act of communication can be analyzed in terms of "who/ says what/ in which channel/ to whom/ with what effect" (Lasswell, 1948, p. 37). This unidirectional model grew out of his belief in the scary world of mass society—atomized individuals controlled by centralized forces via manipulation of symbols (Lasswell, Casey, & Smith, 1935).

The first empirical studies of individual decision making in an election campaign (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) radically restructured Lasswell's emphasis on content and its directional influence. Voters were pictured as largely impervious to mass communication, "molecularized" citizens embedded in close interpersonal networks where consensual opinions were shared. But in line with Lasswell's (1930) dark view of psychodynamic life, proponents of this "limited effects" or "minimal consequences" model of political communication also maintained that people heard what they wanted to hear, via processes of selective exposure and interpretation (Klapper, 1960). Berelson and Steiner (1964) codified this tale as a "theory of the middle range." Unfortunately, it attained upper-middle range status and led some people to presume that further research was unnecessary.

The Era of Media Effects

The coming of politics via television changed all that. Political pragmatists found untenable, or at best perilous, the thesis that mass communication didn't much matter. During the years of Vietnam, Black Revolution, and Watergate, the centralized media came to be seen as key to capturing control of the symbols that citizens—whether atomized or molecular—absorbed. As campaign manager Richard B. Cheney (1979) put it in describing how he plotted Gerald Ford's presidential run in 1976:

> We operated on the assumption that personal appearances were useful only to the extent that they received extensive favorable coverage on the evening news. Whatever strategy we adopted had to take into account that any activity

> which did not receive extensive television coverage was likely to be wasted activity. (p. 116)

In 1974, after Watergate had spawned a popular overestimate of the media's power to determine political outcomes, the Social Science Research Council appointed me to a committee on mass communications and political behavior chaired by a Lazarsfeld product, Eleanor Bernert Sheldon. One upshot of that committee was a book I edited called *Political Communication* (Chaffee, 1975). As F. Gerald Kline, my series editor, and I envisioned the study agenda at that time, it mainly concerned election campaigns, the messages they got out to people, and television as the means of getting them there. Television for most purposes meant the evening news programs of the three U.S. commercial broadcast networks. We did give some attention to a few elite newspapers, but TV with its huge audience was the channel under greatest scrutiny by the committee, and in the book. It still is, although I sense that we are already entering a new era.

The questions I want to consider here are how well the assumptions underlying that 1975 monograph have served the research field and how tenable they will be in the coming era of new political communication. We assumed then that media had powerful organizing effects but that directional persuasion was not the main issue, agenda-setting was (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). We assumed, too, that political communication would be studied within defined and bounded systems, such as national election campaigns, which had offered great theatre in the era of the anti-war and civil rights movements. Those assumptions are becoming more obsolete with each passing year.

More theoretically speaking, though, we assumed that most of the important research questions were causal in nature and that the best way to address them would be to test explicit hypotheses against empirical evidence. Much of the committee's discussion revolved around posited "effects" of mass communication, a term whose inescapable partner in theory is "cause." We also assumed that our primary purpose as researchers was to find out how well political communication was working; others would presumably decide what to do about things that were found to be going awry. Although each of us approached political communication practices with a critical eye, our main goal was to understand and explain existing institutions, not to reform them.

Political Communication provides one kind of starting point for thinking about the future of this field. Our scientific viability is tested each time an innovation in communication or politics occurs, and each time a political campaign—whether for a routine election or a newly urgent cause—occurs. It is not enough that on such occasions we go into the field and gather data to evaluate how our institutions are performing their functions. We need some working ideas of how we can improve the work we do and build theory rather than simply add to our knowledge.

New Directions for Research

Among the attributes of political communication research featured in the 1975 volume were a focus on behavior and cognition rather than on attitudes, the need for experimentation with different methods of measurement, an understanding of a campaign as unfolding in distinct phases over time, a homogenization of mass media and interpersonal communication as sources of information and influence, and the need for comparative cross-national scholarship. Most of these themes have since permeated the field, and I think many if not all of them will continue to serve us well as political communication goes on-line.

Behavior and Cognition

In 1975 we worked hard to get away from the organizing concept of political *attitude*, a conflation of cognition, affect, and behavior that lay at the center of the limited effects model. Today attitude is a relatively secondary concept in political communication scholarship, while behavior and cognition hold center stage. The lead chapter in the book—by Lee Becker, Max McCombs, and Jack McLeod (1975)—looked at political cognitions in the context of several busy lines of research, including agenda setting, political socialization, and the knowledge gap (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). All these themes have become ubiquitous in political communication study (e.g., Eveland & Schuefele, 2000; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000) and will, I believe, continue to be useful as new channels are created.

By contrast, the directional media-influence model that laid such great store by attitudes is almost surely doomed to become less useful for research as the number of independent Web sites on the Internet proliferates into the billions. The idea of a small handful of willful men attempting to bend the world to their ends by control of a few TV networks and other centralized media is already obsolete for organizing either research or criticism. Today's media are mostly commercial enterprises, and the behaviors of their managers are predictable.

The study of political cognition, on the other hand, has a bright future if political communication scholars pursue it in the nonjudgmental way that cognitive psychologists have in the past few decades. We need to know a lot more about why, without our necessarily trying, we come to have certain "pictures in our heads" but not others that are equally available to us. Iyengar's (1991) experiments on framing of television news provide more clues than do conspiracy theories of mass media ownership. Much more research attention will be given in the future to processes of attention and cognition, such as how—if at all—people think about the news and other political messages they receive (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994).

Measurement

Michael Rothschild's (1975) chapter in *Political Communication* demonstrated how multiple methods could be combined to create strong inferences from separate tests, even though each measure in itself might be relatively weak. Reversing conventional wisdom, he recommended exploring the viability of a hypothesis in controlled experiments to test the reliability of a causal inference before indulging in expensive (and causally ambiguous) field survey research. He also pointed out a number of frailties of survey measurement that led many of us to become more careful about the questions we expected respondents to be able to answer.

I'll take just one example of how these strictures played out in my own work. In the 1970s we were much concerned with opinion change as an effect, so we thought of self-report issues as being mainly about dependent variables. When questions about our questions arose, we comforted ourselves with a time-honored dictum: If you want to know what people think about a subject, why not just ask them?

That rhetorical question turns out to have some disconcerting answers. In a behavioral science, measurement of behaviors is—unless they can be manipulated experimentally—essential. Now self-report may be satisfactory to find out what a person *thinks*, but it is a much less reliable way of estimating how often the person *does* something. Use of various media, for instance, is not an activity that many people keep track of as

they do it, and yet we have built a considerable literature based on their guesses about how often they watch TV news, for instance. We have also trusted people not to grossly overestimate this behavior, although our questionnaires generally tip off respondents that we place a high value on news and politics.

I have found that the conversation that is a survey interview is more likely to elicit valid reports of television news exposure if we ask people about the "attention" they pay to political news (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; McLeod & McDonald, 1985). Unfortunately, this wording does not work satisfactorily for TV ads, perhaps because it is counternormative to admit to paying attention to them (Martinelli & Chaffee, 1995). Zaller (1996) has experimented quite successfully with measuring news reception via knowledge tests, but his approach uses up one of my favorite dependent variables (cognition), and while it is useful for evaluating overall effects of "media" it is not very practical for making comparisons between media, such as newspapers versus television, or between genres, such as news programs versus campaign advertisements. As we move into less specifiable media sources, indirect measures of our independent variables will become an increasingly greater challenge to research ingenuity.

Time of Decision

Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) pioneered in the use of panel designs, which fit quite naturally with their study topic, an election campaign. But that research team did not take much advantage of the over-time feature of their data set; they examined mostly static predictors of which way the person would vote, apparently because they could find very few respondents who changed their minds during the campaign year.

Time of final voting decision became a pivotal variable in Lazarsfeld's search for media influence, but either way one looked at it effects were bound to be limited. Most respondents in 1940 already knew which party they would vote for even before the candidates were named; they were in general highly partisan and more likely to become part of the campaign than to be affected by it (see also Berelson et al., 1954). In contrast, the remainder of voters ("late deciders") had little interest in the campaign, paid little attention to it, and were little influenced due to lack of exposure.

As voters' party identification declined, though, I began to think that Lazarsfeld's straight-line reasoning was inadequate. When we followed a panel of Wisconsin voters during the issue-oriented campaign of 1976 (Chaffee & Choe, 1980), there was a substantial intermediate group who were very interested but not very partisan. These "campaign deciders" chose between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford during the fall, when the campaign was at its height. It helped that the candidates revived the dormant tradition of televised debates, which proved quite informative to voters (Chaffee, 1978).

In 1992 I organized another panel study of voters, hoping to replicate the 1976 finding, but I had not reckoned with Ross Perot. His candidacy rivaled those of George Bush and Bill Clinton so successfully that a great many voters did not make their final choices until very late in the campaign (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996). This result contradicted Lazarsfeld's original analysis—and mine as well—in that this time it was the "last-minute deciders" who were most attentive to the campaign and debates. Time of decision may walk like a behavioral variable, but it does not talk like one.

Election campaign research, outlined nicely in *Political Communication* by O'Keefe (1975), is of course not going away. To the contrary, there are today election studies afoot in many countries that in 1975 had never experienced democracy. Hopefully this tradition will last and grow, even as communication moves more and more on-line.

Meanwhile, to study the processes involved in voter decision making we need to sharpen our intellectual tools. For example, the first step in concept explication (Chaffee, 1991) is to specify the unit of analysis. I should have realized earlier on that the unit of analysis for time of decision is the decision, not the person, and organized my theorizing accordingly.

Comparative Research

A theme sounded in *Political Communication* by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1975) was that comparative cross-national research was a grossly underexplored genre that deserved serious theoretical and empirical attention. How prescient they were! In the years since, they have been leaders among the growing cadre of scholars who are comparing political communication processes across national boundaries. Both political systems and media systems (even in relatively compact Western Europe) vary a lot across nations but very little within a given country. So to study whether structural conditions matter, cross-national research commends itself to us. So does historical study—which is to say comparative across time (Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992)—after a nation changes its political system or when technological innovation alters the structure of communication.

As the Internet connects countries that are greatly separated geographically as well as in terms of political and media arrangements, the possibility of testing theories of political communication cross culturally is fast becoming a reality (Bennett, 2000). In my own limited forays into comparative study I have found that general hypotheses about media effects on political behavior tend to hold up, although the levels of civic engagement can vary dramatically even when one is comparing industrialized democracies (Chaffee, Morduchowicz, & Galperin, 1998). Comparative research is uniquely suited to evaluating general propositions about structural factors, whereas many kinds of research can deal with individual or micro-social behaviors.

Merging of Mass and Interpersonal Communication

How to conceptualize the relationship between mass communication and interpersonal networks was a concern of several chapters in the 1975 book. Generally we did not consider the two sources as antagonistic but as complementary, because they served similar functions (Chaffee, 1982). This was a considerable departure from the wisdom that had prevailed since Lazarsfeld, for whom interpersonal influence counteracted that of mass media. Research since 1975 has gradually moved away from the competitive model of media versus personal influence, partly because of the growing interest in behavior and cognition, in agenda setting, and in studying political communication via so many different channels. I believe this will become a widespread pattern of study, as the new communication technologies are as much media of interpersonal communication (e.g., e-mail, chat groups) as they are of mass communication. As Reeves and Nass (1996) have shown, people respond to devices such as a television set or a computer in ways that parallel established principles of interpersonal interaction. I must admit that I no longer consider the term mass communication to be an accurate descriptor of what media scholars are studying, even today.

This is not to say that we have abandoned comparisons between mass media and interpersonal channels, nor are we likely to do so in the foreseeable future. But true comparisons are in fact exceedingly difficult, partly because no standard metric has

been devised for empirical comparisons (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988). Still, the comparison has been with us since Lazarsfeld, and the interplay between the two is inherently interesting, as illustrated by two decades of scholarly interest in the spiral-of-silence model (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

A Lasswell Query for Tomorrow

How should we conceive of the mission of this field as we contemplate its future? While questions of political content and direction will always be important, the directions in which the most inventive efforts are needed have to do more with the politics of communication than with the communication of politics. As Lasswell might phrase the issue: Who gets to say what to whom?

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