



The Method is the Message: The Current State of Political Communication Research

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Political communication has emerged as a focal point to scholars in political science, communications, and allied social sciences. While the field's prominence is attributable, in part, to well-documented changes in the American political process (see Kernell, 1993; Polsby, 1983), its newfound stature also stems from the gradual accumulation of evidence demonstrating that media management actually does yield significant rewards (for a review of the media effects literature, see Iyengar & Simon, 2000).

In charting the progression of political communication as a distinct field of research, one cannot help noticing the close overlap between developments in the field and the scholarly career of Steven Chaffee. Over the past thirty-plus years, Chaffee's work can be found in virtually every nook and cranny of the political communication literature. One of the persistent themes in his work is methodological, even though Chaffee himself is more of a methods gadfly than a practicing methodologist. He was among the first to recognize the limitations. He responded by developing more precise indicators of media exposure (Carter, Ruggels, & Chaffee, 1968; Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986) and by incorporating longitudinal designs into his effects studies (Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1970). These innovations served to push the field in new methodological directions. The ensuing methodological ferment has contributed significantly to the current renaissance in political communication research.

From Methodology to Technology: Unifying Survey and Experimental Design

The founders of the field of political communication were all trained in survey research. They accepted the logic of treating self-reported exposure to communication as equivalent to the "real thing." The reliance on the cross-sectional survey seriously undermined their efforts to uncover evidence of media influence (Hovland, 1959). For example, in the case of research on political campaigns, inherently imprecise indicators of exposure to the campaign and the fact that self-reported exposure was typically contingent on potential "effects" including candidate preference made it especially difficult to demonstrate the efficacy of campaigns. The result of these efforts was the doctrine of "minimal

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consequences,” which became the operative canon among scholars studying the effects of campaign communication.

Over the years, improvements in survey design, the development of more finely calibrated survey measures of media exposure, and greater fluency in data analysis began to make some inroads on the “minimal consequences” theorem (see Zaller, 1996). Increased scholarly access to the National Election Studies surveys led to the development and eventual inclusion of a large media use battery in the quadrennial NES election surveys (a project in which Chaffee played a significant role). Panel surveys and aggregate, time-series designs began to compete with the one-shot survey. These “before-after” approaches provided much greater traction over issues of causal inference (Bartels, 1997; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crete, 1992). Complex data-analytic models that allowed researchers to correct estimates for measurement error (Bartels, 1993), and which could treat indicators of media exposure as endogenous to the effect in question, began to compete with conventional (e.g., recursive) specifications (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Green & Gerber, 1999). All told, these advances made surveys more sensitive to evidence of media effects.

The most exciting (and recent) advance on the survey research front is the successful use of on-line technology to reach representative samples. Knowledge Networks, a research firm founded by political scientists Douglas Rivers and Norman Nie, provides a free WebTV subscription to a representative sample of U.S. households. In return, individuals are asked to complete surveys delivered to their television sets. This innovation has yielded a veritable smorgasbord of political communication studies. Over the course of the campaign, the Rivers/Nie research group ran candidate “trial heats” based on representative samples in every U.S. state (see Jackman & Rivers, 2000). For the first time ever, it was possible to analyze the presidential campaign as a local rather than a national event! Knowledge Networks also administered experiments designed to test the effects of exposure to particular political stimuli, including a novel form of campaign communication in which respondents were provided, some two weeks before the election, with a multimedia CD containing every speech and televised commercial from the Bush and Gore campaigns.

In addition to these advances in survey design, the gradual acceptance of experimentation in the repertoire of political communication research methods further strengthened the field’s intellectual standing. The complementarities of experiments and surveys are well known. Experiments are the method of choice in all scientific disciplines because they provide greater control over the causal stimulus. Exposure to some stimulus is manipulated prior to elicitation of the dependent measures, and the use of random assignment makes the effects of exposure exogenous. The downside of experimentation is limited generalizability. Most experiments are administered on “captive” populations—college students who must participate in order to gain course credit. Hovland’s (1959) warning that college sophomores are not comparable to “real people” is especially apt for the field of political communication, given the well-known gap in political participation between the young and the old. Moreover, experiments typically feature a somewhat sterile environment that bears little resemblance to the real world.

To their credit, political communication researchers have attempted to improve the validity of experimental studies by resorting to procedures and settings that more closely approximate the typical citizen’s media experiences, either by administering their experiments during ongoing campaigns or by using nonstudent samples (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). Unfortunately, these enhancements to laboratory experiments require large-scale sponsorship. Situating experimental facilities at public locations and enticing

a quasi-representative sample to participate is both cost- and labor-intensive. Typical costs include rental fees for space in a public area (such as a shopping mall) where it is possible to attract a wide range of participants, recruitment and compensation of subjects, and training and compensation of research staff to administer the experiments. As I suggest below, technology has made field experiments more accessible both by enlarging the pool of potential participants and by reducing the per-capita cost of administering subjects.

Today, traditional experimental methods can be rigorously and far more efficiently replicated using on-line strategies. Indeed, the long-term research significance of the Web lies in its potential to eliminate the trade-off between surveys and experiments. With the Internet as the experimental “site,” researchers have the ability to reach diverse populations without geographic limitations. The rapid development of multimedia-friendly Web browsers makes it possible to bring text or audiovisual presentations to the computer screen. Indeed, the technology is so accessible that subjects can easily “self-administer” experimental manipulations (examples of on-line experimental stimuli are available at <http://pcl.stanford.edu>). In comparison with conventional shopping mall studies, therefore, the costs are minimal. Moreover, with the ever-increasing use of the Internet, not only are the samples more diverse, but also the process by which participants encounter the manipulation (logging on and surfing the Web) is more realistic.

In current research at Stanford University, we have been examining the demographic profiles of experimental “samples” recruited on-line. Our data are limited to “drop-in” subjects—subjects who managed to navigate themselves to the Stanford Political Communication Lab Web site and then signed up to participate in a survey or experiment. The demographic composition of our participants (for details, see Iyengar, 2000) indicates only minor differences from typical Internet users. A comparison between our experimental subjects and a representative sample of Americans with home Internet access showed no differences on either race/ethnicity or education.¹ Whites and the college educated were equally predominant in both groups. Experimental participants and the on-line population were also similar with respect to party identification; in both groups, independents and nonpartisans were the most numerous, followed by Republicans and Democrats.

There were only two clear instances of selection bias in the participant sample. First, study participants were much younger (on average, by 10 years). Second, the percentage of males among our participants significantly exceeded the percentage in the on-line population. The age difference may be attributed to the fact that our studies are launched from an academic server that is more likely to be encountered by college students, and also to the greater “surfing” proclivities of younger users. The gender gap may reflect differences in political interest. The Political Communication Lab studies are explicitly political in focus, which may act as a disincentive to potential female subjects. In summary, if the population of interest consists of Americans with on-line access, participants in on-line experiments comprise a reasonably representative sample at least with respect to race, education, and party affiliation. The experiments deviate from the on-line population on the attributes of gender and age, drawing disproportionately male and younger participants.

The convergence between the experimental samples and the on-line population does not mean, of course, that the results from on-line studies can be generalized across the digital divide. They cannot (for evidence, see Moss & Mitra, 1998; Papadakis, 2000). The access threshold remains a strong liability for on-line research. In relation to the general adult population, our experimental participants were significantly younger, more educated, and more likely to be White males.

Although these data make it clear that people who participate in on-line experiments are not a microcosm of the general adult population, the fundamental advantage of on-line over conventional field experiments cannot be overlooked. Conventional experiments recruit subjects from particular locales, while on-line experiments draw subjects from across the world.

In short, the standard trade-off logic, which favors experiments on the grounds of precision and surveys on the grounds of greater generalizability, may not apply to on-line research because on-line experiments reach a participant pool that is more far-flung and diverse than the pool relied on by conventional experimentalists. If the experimentalist is well funded, she or he can now administer communications-related manipulations to a representative sample of Americans. In the case of nonfunded studies, the evidence summarized above suggests that on-line volunteers are not necessarily a distinct group. Of course, it is possible to reduce the dispositional biases of on-line study participants by altering the mix of incentives. Using cash vouchers as inducements for participation, for instance, is likely to boost the diversity of the participant pool. On-line techniques also permit a more precise “targeting” of recruitment procedures so as to enhance participant diversity. Banner ads publicizing the study and the financial incentives for study participants can be placed in portals or sites that are known to attract underrepresented groups. Female subjects or African Americans could be attracted by ads placed in sites catering to these groups. The most compelling argument in favor of on-line experiments, however, is the inexorable diffusion of information technology. As the market share of on-line communication sources grows, the external validity gap between experimental and survey methods can only close.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time for research in political communication. Prompted by the early warnings sounded by Chaffee and others, the field has moved from a one-dimensional reliance on survey research to the current flourishing of methodological diversity. Not only is the field armed with a powerful arsenal of research tools, but also the target of interest has grown in scope and significance. “Media politics” is pervasive, while institutions traditionally entrusted with organizing and aggregating public preferences (such as political parties and interest groups) have correspondingly declined in importance. It is no exaggeration to assert that the use—even the manipulation—of the mass media to promote political objectives is not only standard practice but in fact essential to political survival. Given the high stakes associated with political communication campaigns, it is reassuring that research into the consequences of these campaigns rests on a sound footing.

Note

1. The demographic data for Americans with Internet access were provided by Knowledge Networks and are based on their March 2000 participant profile.

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