

Back to Basics: Revisiting, Resolving, and Expanding Some of the Fundamental Issues of Political Communication Research

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Although the boundaries of political communication are ever expanding, the articles contained within this issue of *Political Communication* reflect a need to return to some of the enduring topics that are at the heart of the study of media and politics. Perhaps the central question for the discipline concerns how media aid citizens in becoming informed voters. Each of the articles contained in this issue deals squarely with the relationship between media use and some form of knowledge, but from unique perspectives. More important, the works are representative of the authors' desire to bring greater conceptual and analytical sophistication, rather than unnecessary complexity, to the empirical assessment of lingering political communication inquiries (Boster, 2002).

The study of political communication is interdisciplinary, and the four articles that make up this issue reflect how the field sits at the crossroads of communication and political science. These two disparate areas of social scientific research do not always view the relationship between media and politics in the same light. Communication scholars tend to be interested in *processes* of influence, while the empirical lens of political science is often set upon a series of outcomes. In short, communication often focuses on the means, while political science directs its attention on the ends. I see this basic distinction emerging in the present issue. The two communication-based pieces (Eveland et al. and Holbert) give primary focus to detailing and clarifying processes of media influence. Eveland et al. are comparing a series of process models in an attempt to bring closure to the sticky causal question surrounding the relationship between news media exposure and political knowledge. Holbert is detailing the need to study a decomposition of effects (i.e., direct, indirect, and total) that stem from relationships that emerge among various forms of media use across time. Both of these studies serve to clarify the exact nature of media influence on political knowledge. The two political science works (Druckman and Craig et al.) focus on the relative direct predictive value of various forms of media consumption on a variety of knowledge-based outcome variables. The

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predictive values of the various forms of media use are assessed alongside several other independent variables, but there is little discussion of how the predictor variables function relative to one another.

The respective means versus ends perspectives taken by the authors produce distinct conclusions about the role of media in political knowledge acquisition. The Eveland et al. article points toward a definitive conclusion that communication leads to knowledge. In addition, the Holbert piece reveals an expanded range of media effects that produces substantially larger overall mass communication-based influences. The Druckman and Craig et al. pieces both point toward various media outlets having little or no influence on knowledge acquisition, with the only positive media influence being a marginally significant predictive value for newspaper reading in the Druckman piece. It is interesting to note that Craig et al. find newspaper exposure to be a significant *negative* predictor of their Wave 2 knowledge measures, which is contrary to the Druckman finding. Craig et al. also find that perceived Bush negativity serves as a positive predictor of knowledge, but this variable is not reflective of a media use measure. In short, there is a clear divide between the communication and political science scholars in terms of their conclusions about the role of media in creating an informed citizenry.

Another key distinction that comes from grouping the four articles by discipline is how the relationships among various forms of media use are conceptualized by the respective authors. The primary argument put forward by myself in this issue is that there is little reason to continue to view various forms of media use as being in competition with one another. A competitive framework creates artificial constraints on the range of media effects that can be analyzed by political communication scholars, and these constraints lead to a systematic underrepresentation of media influence in politics. The treatment of various forms of media use as functioning in coordination with one another is reflected in the Eveland et al. operationalization of news media use, which combines various measures of television and newspaper exposure into a single index. Conversely, the Druckman and Craig et al. works clearly establish a competitive framework for their respective political communication research efforts. Druckman focuses on the “differences” that exist among various media forms, with his opening arguments detailing the relative strengths and weaknesses of one medium versus another. Similarly, Craig et al. frame their discussion from a “newspapers versus television news versus campaign ads” perspective. It is my belief that most voters do not view television news, newspapers, or any other media forms as being in competition with one another. As a result, I am not certain that continuing to approach the study of media in politics from a competitive framework best reflects the role of mass communication in basic democratic processes.

Although communication scholars and political scientists may differ in their approaches to media, the various works in this issue do share a desire to advance the study of political communication. Many of the advances made in the four works can be traced back to methodological design, rather than the application of a specific advanced analytical tool. Three of the four works employ panel data (Eveland et al. and Craig et al. having a hand in primary data collection, while Holbert performs a purely secondary analysis) to address their respective research questions and hypotheses. Simply stated, the fundamental questions raised in the Eveland et al., Craig et al., and Holbert pieces could not have been properly addressed through the use of cross-sectional data. Druckman’s work also represents a sophisticated design. The only means by which Druckman could address some of his core concerns is to combine content analysis with survey research. From this standpoint, Druckman’s study is representative of several points raised by

Simon and Iyengar (1996) in their discussion of the relationship between content analysis and survey research in building stronger political communication theory.

One surprising detail that emerges from the four works is the lack of consistency in the creation of media use measures. Although Druckman writes about a combined exposure and attention measure, his operationalization only taps exposure. Similarly, Eveland et al. employ only news media exposure measures in their study. By contrast, Holbert and Craig et al. use both media exposure and attention measures. However, Holbert combines the respective exposure and attention items to create the latent constructs of newspaper use and television news viewing, while Craig et al. treat the respective exposure and attention measures as distinct items. Although all four studies are looking at the relationship between news media use and political knowledge, there needs to be recognition of the fact that the ability to draw broader conclusions from across the various works as a whole is hampered by the use of four distinct operationalizations of media use. I am in favor of retaining some degree of flexibility in the creation of media use measures to suit the objectives of a given study, but there also needs to be greater consistency within political communication as a field. I wish to argue for an explication of any form of media use as a single latent construct consisting of two dimensions, exposure and attention. I believe a variable of this kind best reflects the core conclusions put forward by Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) and embraces the basic notion that all true variables are latent variables (Duncan, 1975).

While dealing with matters of measurement, I wish to raise issue with Craig et al.'s characterization of general political knowledge being an indirect measure of "habitual news reception." General political knowledge is *not* a measure of any single communicative act, even in the most indirect sense. Eveland et al. raise a similar concern by noting the inappropriate use of various communication measures as part of larger indices that reflect the latent constructs of "political involvement, sophistication, or expertise." It would serve the discipline well to allow observed communication measures to represent only actual communicative acts and noncommunication variables to reflect noncommunication constructs. If we cannot clearly differentiate communication from noncommunication variables across the field, then I am not sure what type of knowledge we will be producing in the near future.

The study of political communication is about to become part of a revolution brought on by the rise of digital media. The studies included in this issue deal in large part with what can best be defined as traditional forms of media consumption (e.g., newspaper use, television news viewing). This is not to say that the empirical insights offered in these works are soon to be deemed obsolete. Quite the contrary, I would argue that many of the conceptual points raised in these works are directly applicable to the study of new media. There will remain central causal questions surrounding digital media use and a host of potential outcome variables, just as there have been with our more traditional forms of media consumption. Digital media will function alongside other media forms, and it is important that intramedia relationships continue to be analyzed in coordination with the outcome variables of interest to the discipline. The Internet and World Wide Web offer innovative means by which to distribute new kinds of information about politics, and empirical research needs to forge new methods by which to determine in valid and reliable ways the nature of the political messages being distributed in various digital forms. It will then be the work of political communication scholars to link this content-based research to effects-based analyses.

Instead of quietly fading away into obsolescence, the four works that are the focus of this synopsis can serve as a blueprint for future studies devoted to new media re-

search. It is my hope that political communication research will recognize the value of these works beyond any one specific piece of empirical evidence pertaining to a single relationship. Several conceptual points raised by the authors speak far beyond the bounds of the relationships directly being tested, and this is the mark of long-lasting contributions to the field.

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