

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Core Theories of Political Communication: Foundational and Freshly Minted

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*This article presents and evaluates the essential tenets of a selection of core theories of political communication that leading scholars produced before and after the advent of media abundance, digital communication, and the Internet. From the earlier Foundational Legacy period, a number of theories of media effects, conceptualizations of the politics-media axis, and typologies for comparative analysis of political communication systems are discussed. From the digital era, a number of more freshly minted theories of voice, actors' roles, and holistic and normative perspectives are then considered. In conclusion, the article paints a largely positive picture of the state of political communication theory but also specifies certain needs for further theory development in this highly productive area of communication scholarship.*

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## The nature of the beast—The political communication process

The political communication process is indubitably complex, manifesting five distinct yet conjoined features. It is, first, multilevel—comprising social systems, political and media organizations, political and journalistic communicators, varyingly involved citizens, and surrounding political cultures. Second, it continually evolves—including not only changes in all the above respects but also sometimes major changes in the technologies that undergird the process, accompanied by societally relevant extramedia developments. Third, it is virtually society-spanning—reaching into the numerous spheres of organization and activity, which politics affects. Fourth, it pivots on a structured yet volatile politics-media axis—involving the interdependence of and many interactions between institutions shaped by different purposes and different logics. Finally, its patterns and practices are intimately normative—i.e., consequential for the realization or otherwise of effective citizenship in a meaningful democracy, however, those goals might be conceived.

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In 1991, this process was on the cusp of radical, technologically driven change from one systemic order to a quite different one (still side-by-side, however). One involved mass exposure (some deliberate, some inadvertent) to relatively uniform content in a small number of media outlets; in the other, viewing and listening choices were massively expanded amidst an abundance of providers, channels, news platforms, messages, and equipment in people's homes and eventually on their persons. One was pyramidally hierarchical, the other laterally networked. In one, citizens were limited to receiving observing, absorbing, considering, or ignoring politics; in the other, they had many more opportunities to address each other, politicians, and mediating journalists. One was more centripetal, the other more centrifugal in thrust.

Theorists, before and after 1991, have dealt richly with all the above-mentioned features of political communication, including linkages between them. Thus, the table of contents of the *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (Kenski & Jamieson, 2015) lists 65 chapters, at least 22 of which present identifiably different theories of political communication. The earlier dominance of limited-channel television stimulated a wealth of what may be termed Foundational Legacy theories, many of them still relevant in some form today. With the onset of abundance digital communication and the Internet, scholars have sought to apply, adapt, and revise some of the inherited theories to the new conditions and to freshly mint new ones.

In what follows, I shall attempt to assess the achievements, limitations, and needs for further development of a selection of core theories of political communication that originated in the earlier and later periods, respectively, bearing in mind, however, that the boundary involved is rather porous.<sup>1</sup>

## Stock-taking: Foundational theories

### Theories of media effects

Throughout the postwar period, scholars have engaged in debate over the likely magnitude of political communication effects in general. Whereas in earlier years a "limited effects" model tended to prevail, notions of more "powerful effects" subsequently gained ground, largely in response to the dependence of political actors and audiences on news media's (especially TV's) portrayals of politics. More recently, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) have maintained that a new era of minimal effects might be emerging from present day conditions of communication abundance. Such argumentation about the overall strength of impact no longer makes much sense, however, when multiple message sources are now so diverse and fragmented.

Although there has been no shortage of more specific theories of political communication effects, many authorities tend to single out three cognitive ones as most important. *Agenda-setting theory* postulates a relationship between the most often covered issues in the media and what the audience will consider important. *Priming theory* (which is really an adjunct of agenda setting) holds that when an issue tops media agendas, voters will be encouraged to evaluate competing parties and politicians in terms of their past performance records or present positions on the issues

concerned. And *framing theory* (more elaborate and potent than the others) maintains that news interpretations of issues—why and how they have arisen, why they are important, and appropriate ways of dealing with them—are capable of influencing audience members' understandings of political reality (affecting not just what to think about but what to think *about* it).

Regarded strictly as ideas about message impacts on message receivers, these theories may be reaching their sell-by dates. Correlations between media agendas and audience agendas, although often statistically significant, have usually been slight to modest in extent, as well as having been filtered by moderating conditions. And the academic mind boggles at the daunting task of trying definitively to establish the occurrence of such effects amidst an ever-expanding galaxy of offline and online communication sources. Nevertheless, the spotlight that these theories have shone on certain characteristic and persistent ways in which journalism has organized, interpreted, and shaped portrayals of politics (“constructed” them, in the jargon) remains supremely important. The resultant depictions set boundaries to public discourse, possibly being most influential in what they exclude from consideration. The news may direct attention either to short- or to long-term problems, to substantive or strategic understandings of political controversy, to thematic or episodic versions of current issues. It may present alternative ways of perceiving and dealing with the issues of the time or a predominantly monolithic one. And that is why the evolution of these approaches into theories of agenda *building* and frame *building* is welcome. These aim to analyze the main sources of prevailing depictions, including how politicians and other opinion advocates strive to influence them as well as journalists' readings of public opinion climates. All this goes to the heart of communication roles in power conflicts and of journalism's contribution to democracy. As Weaver (2015, p. 94) has said, “unless journalists and the mainstream news media report about certain problems and issues, they will not receive much attention or resources from the public or policy makers.”

Another product of the Foundational Legacy period may be even more relevant today, when public alienation from politicians and political institutions, mistrust, and skepticism about what political campaigning can offer and elections can achieve are said to be rife—namely that of *media malaise*. In early formulations, this maintained that frequent criticisms of politicians in the media and frequent portrayals of crisis, conflict, and failure tend to breed mistrust in government and alienation from politics, particularly among less educated voters. Two more recently enunciated lines of theory highlight a need for scholars to think afresh about the forces that may be widening the elite-popular gap in politics. One concerns news media roles in “the growth of neopopulism in contemporary democracies” (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003, p. 1). The other appears in Keane's (2013) theory of “monitorial democracy.” According to the latter, a “new muck-raking” is flourishing in new-media conditions, whereby power-holders in all institutional spheres are being bombarded on all sides by critics from all quarters for alleged abuses and shortcomings of all sorts. The numerous processes and consequences involved in

all this—including treatment of alienation as a variable that media framing may be amplifying—urgently need theorization and examination.

### Theories about the politics-media axis

This relationship has been abundantly theorized both synchronically and longitudinally. A strong spur was innovative transformations throughout the democratic world in political parties' campaigning techniques, involving determined, high-profiled, well-resourced, and strategically directed efforts to project their agendas to voters through the mass media. Varyingly termed a "professionalized advocacy" model (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995), a "strategic communication" model (Bennett & Manheim, 2001) and a "going public" model (Kernell, 1997) of political communication, numerous consequences of this development have been postulated, such as: impoverished information provision; narrowed political discourse; elevation of perceptions of political reality over objective ones; increased negativity and reliance on attack campaigning; pervasive cynicism; and heightened politician-journalist conflict. Zaller (2001) has addressed the latter in a so-called theory of product substitution, which posits a fight-back by journalists to defend their professional autonomy against news management tactics by fashioning more stories under their own control, i.e., about opinion poll findings; spin-doctoring and politicians' other tactical maneuvers; and their gaffes, policy failures, and involvement in scandal.

But which "partner" is able to take the lead in this tango? Two theories with opposite points of departure have attempted answers to this question. Bennett's (1990) *theory of press-state relations* maintains that the news "indexes" the range of views that dominate elites' public communications, such that open elite debate over an issue will result in diverse media coverage, while in the more common case of elite consensus, the press will offer a narrow digest of that unified perspective. Since the formulation of this theory, however, communication elites appear to have become less bipolar and have been increasingly challenged by a host of cause and campaigning groups, bolstered by the availability of newer-found online communication channels to put across their political concerns. Indexing theory stands in need of reconsideration in light of these developments.

*Mediatization of politics theory's* take on this relationship is quite different (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). This refers to a long-term change process in which the media's distinctive ways of regarding the world are said to be becoming increasingly influential in politics. As the media become the most important source of information about politics and society; as they become independent from political and social institutions; as their coverage of politics is increasingly guided by a media rather than a political logic; and as political institutions and actors themselves are guided by a media rather than a political logic—then the logic of media institutions will increasingly shape politicians' publicity efforts and colonize political institutions as policy-making sources.

This theory offers a useful guide to empirical political communication research, designed to specify what kinds of materials politicians will tend to make available

for public consumption when tailoring their publicity to journalistic news values, workways, and cultures. But its media centrality unduly discounts the incentives and resources that may stiffen politicians' resistance to the mediatization tide. Schulz (2014) contends that there is no such thing as a universal media logic; that new media enable politicians to bypass the mainstream gate-keepers and now compete with conventional media in defining the relevance of political issues and actors; and that audiences are no longer so dependent on mainstream journalistic provision as previously. Moreover, the formidable challenge of theorizing how the media presence may affect policy-making across the range of areas that government deals with, as well as across the range of dimensions along which policy ideas may be processed, has barely been faced. Overall, mediatization theory has to take on board the fact that the traffic between media and politics does not run along a one-way street but comprises instead a multiplicity of reciprocal interactions with varying consequences.

### **Comparative analysis of political communication systems**

Despite a late start, theory development of this kind has latterly burgeoned impressively. Pfetsch and Esser (2012) have outlined a "heuristic model" of the main features of a political communication system that are amenable to comparative analysis. Hallin and Mancini (2004) have devised a typology of three models of media and politics, based on four dimensions along which media institutions may be articulated to politics, and they have assigned 18 Western countries to them. Utilizing many aggregated datasets for the countries concerned, Brüggemann, Engesser, Buchel, Humprecht, and Castro (2014) have modified Hallin and Mancini's scheme (an extra type, one less dimension, and a few countries differently classified) but confirmed the rest. International similarities and differences in political communication features have been conceived and mapped—e.g., for journalism cultures and for political communication cultures.

Three notes of reservation about this productive development are in order. First, amidst the welter of the many "things" that can be compared, there is a danger that sight may be lost of the unique contribution that comparative scholarship can make to political communication analysis, i.e., to show how designated structural and cultural characteristics of politics, economy, and the media may shape political communication phenomena at other levels. The temptation to throw as many countries into the enquiry pot from which willing collaborators can be found has not always been resisted. Second, almost all comparative enquiries so far have dealt with advanced Western democracies. It is true that Hallin and Mancini (2012) have sought to project their typology "beyond the Western world," but even such an effort is open to a charge of cultural imperialism. In the end, calls to *de-Westernize* media studies can be answered only by *non-Westernizers*. Third, the role of the nation as the most commonly adopted unit of analysis in comparative research is challenged by latter-day theories about the globalization and transnationalization of political communication.

### Stock-taking: Freshly minted theories in the digital era

Four main developments in the last quarter-century may be distinguished according to their prime theoretical foci: theories of voice, theories of actors' roles, holistic perspectives, and normative perspectives.

#### Theories of voice

Heuristically and empirically productive theories have been formulated about the impact of new-media affordances on developments in two aspects of "voice." One concerns the voices that stand a better chance of being expressed and heard than before, especially enabling previously marginalized causes and spokespeople to plug their ideas and issue priorities and to challenge elite domination of communication access. The other concerns the implications for democratic life of the outpouring of vernacular discourse that the online communication facilities and characteristics have enabled and inspired.

Four outstanding theories about the former have been propounded. Turow and Tsui's (2008) theory of *The Hyperlinked Society* is technologically based. The authors postulate that hyperlinks within web-mediated technology facilitate communication and social networking among young people and organizations representative of formerly marginalized groups, as well as presenting and opening up to users information on, and a deeper cognitive engagement with, topics and issues of personal interest.

A more sociological foundation underpins Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) analysis of the logic of connective action. This takes account of (a) the proliferation of single-issue cause groups; (b) individuals' tendencies to make involvement choices according to their personal identities, circumstances, and life-styles; and (c) new-media affordances for political mobilization. The theory assumes that motives for collective political association intensify as personally expressive content is able to be shared with and recognized by others who, in turn, are able to repeat these networking activities via the Internet. The political consequences resemble traditional collective action but without the need for centralized leadership or formal organization. The resulting networks thus have a potential to transcend barriers to political coordination and afford opportunities for "connective action" by movements that can attract the previously unvoiced instead of the traditional participators.

These theories say more about the communication processes involved than about likely determinants of their outcomes. That issue is addressed in Pfetsch, Adam, and Bennett's (2013) theory of *spill-over effects*. Drawing on theories of agenda building, hyperlinked network analysis, and the logic of connective action, they have developed a framework for investigating the conditions under which challengers' online communication agendas may spill over into traditional mass media agendas, with corresponding chances of influencing public opinion and politicians' policy agendas.

Chadwick's (2013) concept of *The Hybrid Media System* is the most integrative of these theories. He argues that we must move beyond dichotomous thinking about old and new media, since political communication today involves an intermixing and



blending on all its levels—its structure, modes of actor involvement, media logics, news production processes, message content, and citizens' consumption diets. The theorized effects of such hybridization include: replacement of the news cycle by a political information cycle; changed power relations between elites and nonelites; a partnering of “old” and “new” journalistic voices; and multiform attention to political communications by audiences. Whether hybridization is so all-embracing as Chadwick makes out is open to question, however.

Theorizing about the counterpoising of elites' cultivated rhetoric by unbuttoned everyday speech online has traveled along opposite directions. On one view, anonymity and the lack of any personal consequences for violating norms of discursive decorum may encourage incivility (sometimes extreme) of political expression. Diverse consequences have been postulated: on a microlevel fueling either political mistrust or political engagement; on a macrolevel fostering a system of “contentious politics” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2008).

In contrast, other scholars have discerned potentials to enrich democratic dialogue via online communications, including advances toward “deliberative democracy.” Katz, Ali, and Kim (2014), for instance, have produced a fourfold typology of conversation modes and their functions for democracy. However, Fishkin (1997) has argued that realizing deliberation will depend on how it is organized, and Coleman and Blumler (2009) have maintained that to be effective, deliberative channels must be articulated to the state's policy-making institutions. But in more skeptical mood, Katz suspects that in the absence of such articulation, deliberation will in the end have “Nowhere to Go” (Katz, 2015). This cornucopia of theorizing has stimulated a cornucopia of empirical research.

### Theories of actors' roles

Theorizing about the responses of politicians and political organizations to the new environment appears straightforwardly serviceable and plausible without being all that innovative. Many scholars accept a typology of premodern, modern, and postmodern political campaigns, which regards the current phase as mainly being shaped by the fragmentation of news and other communication sources and the creation of opportunities to forge new forms of party-voter interaction. But whether politicians' approaches to the new media amount to anything qualitatively different from the modern period's “professionalized advocacy” model is open to question. Gibson and Rommele (2001) take that model as a point of departure for their “party centred theory of professionalized campaigning.” This specifies a set of variables (e.g., resources, incentives, and ideology) that may determine the degree to which individual parties may prioritize online campaigning and innovate in their uses of it.

*Journalists'* roles were extensively conceptualized and researched in the Foundational period. The impact of the new-media environment on them has been investigated in numerous pieces of empirical research, many of them essentially descriptive, however—not theory-driven. That said, three important theoretical perspectives on

journalists' roles have emerged in recent times. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) have outlined a comprehensive theory of journalism's gatekeeping function and Hanitzsch (2007) has proposed an elaborate theoretical foundation for the conduct of comparative research into journalism cultures. An increasing number of scholars have been theorizing about the consequences, usually deemed deleterious, of the increasing commercialization of the media, both old and new, in the digital era (McChesney, 2014; McManus, 1994).

In their study of the Watergate affair as a communication event, Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang (1983) referred to the public as "bystanders," who most of the time did little more than observe what was going on. They might or might not form opinions, but unlike those who made decisions and formulated policies, whatever opinion they formed could not be implemented. Since then, the *citizens'* part in political communication has undoubtedly changed and is still evolving, thanks chiefly to the onset of media abundance and the advent of the Internet. In response, scholarly conceptualization has abounded, including numerous typologies of citizen roles in political communication and democracy. Livingstone (2013) discerns a shift from a mass communication paradigm to a participation paradigm, which has paved the way for theorizing about how people engage with, accede to, and navigate the new opportunities for activity (and interconnections with each other) through and around media.

A weakness of the literature in this area is a tendency for scholars, after proclaiming a need to start theorizing from the perspective of the audience (and to research the everyday practices of readers, listeners, and viewers), to veer off into extensive discussion of the audience as a discursive construct rather than as an empirical entity. Coleman and Moss (2014), however, have developed and applied an innovative and promising way of overcoming this discrepancy. Instead of theorizing from a "top-down" slant on how the media may or may not cater for people's information needs, they propose a "bottom-up" focus on the kinds of entitlements that citizens would like political communication provision to help them to realize. And from focus group explorations, they have specified five such entitlements: to be respected as a rational decision-maker; to be able to evaluate political claims; to feel part of a societal debate; to communicate with and be recognized by one's representatives; and to be able to make a difference.

Over the span of actors' roles, however, a glaring theoretical vacuum has not yet been filled. In Blumler and Coleman's (2013) words, "the present day political communication process is more complex than was its predecessor, more riddled with cross currents and facing many of its actors with more choice and uncertainty." In consequence, a certain amount of *ambivalence* may inhere in democratic political communication systems—among politicians, journalists, and even citizens. As van Broekhoeven (2014) has noted, politicians' approaches to the media and the public may not always be single-mindedly calculative and manipulative. They may also regard the pursuit of politics as a vocation in Weber's (1919) sense, involving qualities of passion, proportionality, and responsibility. Journalists may be similarly pulled between pursuit of their civic informational role and of their ratings- and



circulation-chasing one. Members of the public too may feel simultaneously impelled to follow and to ignore the communication of sundry political claims and arguments in the media. A core theory of political communication about the impact on diverse actors of such ambivalence is needed here.

### Holistic perspectives

The holistic approach that has probably been espoused and adopted (albeit with numerous modifications) more often than any other is Habermas' (1989) notion of "the public sphere" allied to his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984/1987). The former depicts a space between the state and the market where discourse about politics may take place; the latter enunciates a set of ideal speech conditions essential for such discourse to arrive at a shared understanding of reasonable goals (e.g., universal entitlements to speak, freedom to present and test validity claims of evidence and argumentation, lack of coercion, and restraint from organized authorities). This edifice has enriched the thought of "deliberative democrats" and provided useful criteria for assessing attempts to organize and realize deliberation in a host of venues and exercises as well as in the public opinion process more generally. At the same time, its concept of a sphere, in which rationality undistorted by interested parties prevails, may be regarded as a form of "sophisticated utopianism," which ignores the root truth that any attempt to realize a political or communication ideal *always* involves a struggle against powerful entrenched forces of so-called realism—hierarchical, manipulative, and institutionally inertial.

A perspective that has been impressively derived from analyses of changing "real-life" conditions of political communication and citizenship is Bennett, Freedon, Hussain, and Wells's (2013) theory of *Digital Media and Youth Engagement*. The authors consider that as established political and media institutions lose authority in postmodern, postbureaucratic societies; as the foundations of old-style civic engagement crumble; and as opportunities for civic communication over digitally mediated networks expand—young people's increasing uses of those opportunities are leading the way to a new political communication order, involving the "rise of a participatory digital media culture ... as fundamental as ... earlier transformation[s] of civic engagement" (p. 134). This theory opens avenues for new lines of longitudinal, intergenerationally focused, research into the bases of institutional authority, citizenship norms, communication uses and practices, and the modes and targets of civic discourse. But it may also be questioned for its tendencies to (a) reify young people's communication orientations, (b) underestimate the staying power of mainstream institutions, and (c) indulge in wishful thinking about the participatory future ahead.

### Normative perspectives

In a long, varied, and rich tradition, significant veins of normative analysis have graced the writings of political communication and journalism scholars, including all-around appraisals of political communication systems and processes. Noteworthy

among the latter have been Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's (1956) seminal *Four Theories of the Press* and Denis McQuail's career-long specification and discussion of sets of norms to assess political communication in public interest terms (as in *Media Performance*, 1992).

Much of the foundational literature revolved round a relatively bounded group of values deemed inherent in liberal democracy, whether achieved or flouted: freedom of expression, diversity, and especially informed citizenship. In contrast, the onset of the new media has precipitated a veritable explosion of fresh normative theorizing. New normative concepts have come to the fore, such as authenticity, transparency, civility, deliberation, inclusiveness, and communication-sensitive notions of democracy. "Participation" is less marginal in normative discourse than it was in the past. In some cases, the merits and demerits of a proposed norm are being contested (cf. Stromer-Galley, 2015 vs. Katz, 2015 on "deliberation" in Kenski & Jamieson, 2015). And some quite rounded, philosophically grounded theories, embracing a multiplicity of normative perspectives, have been produced, such as Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White (2009) and Althaus (2012). It would be difficult to claim, however, that many practitioners are familiar with these ideas or that their work has been much influenced by them. Although media organizations have occasionally commissioned academic reviews of their output, the focus has usually been some specific concern of the moment related to some specific norm (mostly impartiality). There is a need for diverse normatively minded scholars, who appreciate that values are ever at stake in how political communication is organized, practiced, and received, to confer over prospects and means for bridging this obdurate research-practice gap.

## Conclusion

The above review paints a largely positive picture of the state of political communication theory. Its scholarship has imaginatively covered all the facets of the political communication process outlined in the Introduction. Most of the mentioned theories have been productively tested for empirical support, leading to their revision and elaboration when required. They have all dealt with significant phenomena that can affect how citizens perceive and relate to the political world and how they receive and send communications about it. And it is reasonable to expect an onrush soon of many more theories about political communication in digital conditions to fill the "freshly minted" cupboard.

All that said, a few pointers for future notice have emerged from this overview. One is a need for more, and more widely cast, theory development in journalism studies. Another is a need to avoid indiscriminate ad hocery in the design of comparative research, the purposes, the sites, the units of analysis, and the expected or hypothesized outcomes of which should all be fully considered and explicated in advance of any implementation. A third would be to try to focus theory directly on the cross currents and ambivalences of the far-flung, multifaceted political communication

processes that lubricate the public sphere nowadays. A fourth is to prioritize attempts to engage with practitioners. Finally, the evident discreteness of the plentiful stock of political communication theories, cross references among which are strikingly lacking, awaits attention. There is a need for greater integration of the bodies of extant political communication theories and evidence.

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## Note

- 1 For the purpose of this review, a treatment of political communication becomes a theory when it provides an analytical explanation of a wide range of phenomena for which supportive evidence is or can be supplied. No definitive exhaustiveness is claimed for the choice of theories discussed in this essay. They necessarily reflect the author's personal familiarity with the literature.

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