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A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication

W. Lance Bennett[1] & Shanto Iyengar[2]

1 Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195
2 Department of Communication, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2050

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The great thinkers who influenced the contemporary field of political communication were preoccupied with understanding the political, social, psychological, and economic transformations in modern industrial society. But societies have changed so dramatically since the time of these landmark contributions that one must question the continuing relevance of paradigms drawn from them. To cite but a few examples, people have become increasingly detached from overarching institutions such as public schools, political parties, and civic groups, which at one time provided a shared context for receiving and interpreting messages. What are the implications of this detachment on how people respond to media messages? Information channels have proliferated and simultaneously become more individualized. Is it still relevant to conceive of "mass media" or has that concept been made obsolete by audience fragmentation and isolation from the public sphere? Does this new environment foreshadow a return to a time of minimal effects? If we are looking at a new minimal effects era, how can we distinguish it from the last such period?

Retracing some of the intellectual origins of the field may help us identify the fundamental changes in society and communication technologies that are affecting the composition of audiences, the delivery of information, and the experience of politics itself. In particular, we are concerned with the growing disjuncture between the prevailing research strategies and the sociotechnological context of political communication, which may give rise to unproductive battles over findings (Donsbach, 2006). To the extent that research paradigms fail to reflect prevailing social and technological patterns, the validity of results will be in serious question.

Consider just one case in point: the famous earlier era of "minimal effects" that emerged from studies done in the 1940s and early 1950s (Klapper, 1960). The underlying context for this scholarship consisted of a premass communication media system and relatively dense memberships in a group-based society networked through political parties, churches, unions, and service organizations (Putnam, 2000). At this time, scholars concluded that media messages were filtered through social reference processes as described in the two-step flow model proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955; Bennett & Manheim, 2006). Although the classic study by Lang

Corresponding author: W. Lance Bennett; e-mail: lbennett@u.washington.edu

and Lang (1953) suggested the importance of television, it did not shake the rising paradigm. As Gitlin (1978) pointed out, the data in the classic Columbia studies of Lazarsfeld, Katz, and others only partially supported the minimal effects, two-step flow interpretation. The chance to incorporate changing social structures and technologies in a more comprehensive model was lost in the scholarly embrace of the new paradigm. Later communication researchers began to find more substantial evidence of direct effects and ways to incorporate social cueing with mass communication models (Zaller, 1992). This long-standing debate illustrates the decreasing relevance over time of Tarde's turn-of-the-century social model. The upshot of such undertheorizing was a protracted and unproductive controversy about direct versus socially cued media effects that lasted several decades.

Interestingly, the transition from the minimal effects to strong effects era was marked by remarkably little awareness of or effort to track underlying social changes such as the rapid disconnection of individuals from group-based civil society or the rise of greater message saturation through common mass media channels or to identify them as plausible contingencies for media influence in the 1980s and 1990s. In any event, a new consensus seemed to emerge that the news does tell people both what to think about (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and also how to think about it (e.g., Iyengar, 1991).

Looking ahead, we see another time of unsettled findings accompanied by the risk of undertheorized sociotechnological conditions. Indeed, with the continued detachment of individuals from the group-based society, and the increased capacity of consumers to choose from a multitude of media channels (many of which enable user-produced content), the effects picture may be changing again. As receivers exercise greater choice over both the content of messages and media sources, effects become increasingly difficult to produce or measure in the aggregate while creating new challenges for theory and research.

One of the few scholarly efforts to alert the field to this coming possibility was an article by Chaffee and Metzger (2001), in which the authors offered this startling prediction about a core research area in the field: "The key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about." (p. 375). It is interesting to note that this article received some modest attention (14 citations according to a Google Scholar search in early 2008). Two scholars who cited it in support of similar arguments also received some attention: Schulz (2004) received 22 citations and Tewksbury (2003) received 30 citations. However, the citation trails—measured by articles that cited these articles being cited, in turn—quickly died out within a single search page. By contrast, the ever-popular agenda-setting subfield produced 567,000 topical hits on Google Scholar, led, not surprisingly, by the classic McCombs and Shaw (1972) article that began this scholarly wave.

Let us compare the agenda-setting juggernaut with the still faint but emerging discussion about the need to rethink both theory and method underlying agenda setting as a viable concept. We begin by noting that the original McCombs and Shaw article, alone, had a Google Scholar citation count of 997, recorded at the same time

we checked the above references. More importantly, one had to go 10 pages deep (more than 100 articles) in the McCombs–Shaw citation trail to find articles that received less than 20 follow-on citations themselves. The comparable follow-on citation trail ended after two articles in the Chaffee–Metzger "end of mass media" lineage. Finally, it was fully 51 pages into Google Scholar before follow-on citations from articles citing the original McCombs–Shaw article finally dropped to zero, contrasted with citation trails that both ended in less than one page following from the two most cited end-of-mass-media articles.

One does not have to do the math to realize how easily agenda setting tops the half-million mark in scholarly approval. The point here is not that might makes right. Indeed, most scholars understand that conditions in the media—society firmament, are changing. Rather, using citation counts as indicators of the correspondence of theory and research to empirical conditions, it may make more sense in this case to suggest that scholarly importance bears little resemblance to reality. Just as the minimal effects paradigm may have strained against the realities of its own time, and surely lasted many years beyond the shift in communication realities, so, too, the agenda-setting paradigm reflects the capacity of ideas to motor on, unimpeded by inconvenient realities to the contrary. The question is: What will it take to realign this research tradition with current social and media conditions?

In short, transformations of society and technology need to be included more explicitly in communication models in order to avoid a repetition of earlier unproductive debates over "minimal effects," "agenda-setting," and other findings-driven controversies in political communication. Even if we may be heading into another era of minimal effects, it will not look like the earlier one in terms of the nature of communication processes or the implications for democracy. We urge greater attention to the underlying social and technological context in models of communication processes and their effects so that research findings become more interpretable, cumulative, and socially significant.

Intellectual origins of political communication

There are few interdisciplinary fields sustained by as wide a range of intellectual traditions as political communication. Indeed, unlike political sociology, which can trace much of its conceptual framework and subject matter to the grand sociological tradition of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tarde, Simmel, and, later, to the Chicago and Columbia schools, political communication owes relatively little to early political science. It is more accurate to say that the pioneers of the field such as Harold Lasswell, and later, Murray Edelman adapted perspectives from thinkers in sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, journalism, public relations, and economics.

Consider the early research in voting choice and opinion formation. The landmark political science work *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, &

Stokes, 1960) represented a synthesis of the sociological tradition of voting according to group identity (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee,1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) and the psychological tradition of "who said what" (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953).

The classic voting studies in sociology can also be traced to earlier interdisciplinary influences. For example, Tarde's (1903) theories of diffusion, imitation, and interpersonal influence clearly shaped the work of Lazarsfeld et al. These pioneers promoted the notion that ordinary citizens had little capacity to reason or decide independently about politics (or other matters, such as fashion). Instead, their views were shaped by their group memberships and experiences and were thus less susceptible to direct influence from the media. Media influence was understood as contingent on social filters and interpersonal cues, as exemplified by the aforementioned "two-step flow" model of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and the accompanying minimal effects school of media sociology (Klapper, 1960).

Further evidence of the origins of political communication in diverse modernist schools of social science is revealed in the symbolic politics tradition. For example, political scientist Edelman (1964) derived a good deal of his early thinking from language theory and semiotics, including the writings of Sapir, Whorf, and Wittgenstein. It is intriguing that as Edelman (1988) later began to see public life less as elitist institutional politics in popular disguise and more as an institutionally regulated communication spectacle, he incorporated postmodernists such as Foucault, Baudrillard, and Derrida into his thinking.

Edelman's early ideas of categorization and category errors (definitions of issues that produce systematic misunderstandings of problems and dysfunctional policy results) resonated with an emerging interest in framing, which was also heavily influenced by earlier sociologists. Among the main figures at the headwaters of framing analysis were symbolic interactionists such as Blumer (1969) and Mead (1934), whose name appeared on Edelman's endowed chair at Wisconsin. The later contributions of sociologist Goffman (1959, 1974) helped bridge those sociological traditions to the work of more recent scholars such as Lakoff (1987), Entman (1993), Iyengar (1991), and many others.

A related intellectual line of political communication research drew on early modernist theory in psychology to study identifications between leaders and followers that set the stage for much of the field's focus on persuasion and propaganda. Freud's (1921) discussion of the pathological aspects of personality influenced early political communication scholars such as Lasswell (1927, 1930) and spawned a large literature on leadership, personality, and national character (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Erikson, 1958; Fromm, 1941; George & George, 1956). The Freudian perspective on the stresses that modern institutional life presented for healthy ego formation, as delineated in the 1930 classic *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1989), influenced subsequent thinking about mass movements, religion and political zealotry, and the emotional foundations of consumer society as explored by the Frankfurt school. This critical

tradition (Horkheimer, 1937) incorporated theoretical elements of Marx and Freud and runs more recently through the work of Habermas (1989), whose theories of the public sphere have influenced more critical wings of political communication and media studies. Another important strand of this subfield runs through the British critical cultural studies tradition of Williams (1974) and Hall (1977).

The clinical approach to the psychology of political communication has long since been supplanted by information processing and cognitive perspectives (McGuire, 1993). Yet, assumptions about emotional dispositions and how they are engaged by stimuli in social context are fixtures in the entire lineage of attitude change theories from Festinger (1957), Hovland et al. (1953), and Zajonc (2001) to Petty and Cacioppo (1982), and on through information processing and learning theorists such as Zaller (1992), Graber (1988), and Neuman, Crigler, and Just (1992), among many others.

Affective components of information processing continue to be important in thinking about how people respond to communication (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Marcus, Neuman, MacKuen, & Crigler, 2007) and how communication content shapes and aggregates political outcomes (Westin, 2007). As we suggest later, however, the lack of attention to how emotions are engaged in increasingly isolated individuals who are reached through fragmented media channels (to which they may contribute important aspects of the cueing process) may limit the correspondence between experimental findings and actual communication conditions.

A very different set of ideas derived from the sociology of news and public relations (e.g., Bernays, 1923, 1928; Lippmann, 1922) led to the development of a more macro-oriented or institutional approach to communication. Scholars working in this tradition treat the media as part of the political governing process (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1998). Variations in the structure, organization, and regulation of the media are thought to be significant influences on the ability of citizens to cast informed votes or, conversely, the ability of elites to shape public opinion through the news (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Moring Inka Salovaara, in press; Zaller, 1992).

Others in the broad subfield of press–politics have documented the increasing intervention of the media in modern electoral processes (Bartels, 1988; Patterson, 1993), and the ways in which news coverage shapes public concerns and voting choices (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Another important strain of work involves the way in which democratic policy processes affect programming content (e.g., McChesney, 2000). These foundations have made it possible to begin important cross-national work on comparative analysis of the interface between media regimes and political systems (Curran et al., in press; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

In press–politics, as with many other subfields of political communication, changes in social structure and media delivery channels raise the need to rethink what kinds of effects we want to measure and how we might go about measuring them. Consider, for example, the possibility that the increasingly managed

communication routines that define contemporary elections and governance processes (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) are producing high levels of cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) and diminishing confidence in the press. Rather than continue to tease out marginal, short-term attitude or behavior shifts associated with strategic communication campaigns, we might instead want to bring currently exogenous factors into our models. Such factors might include: growing distrust of official communication, declining confidence in the political leaders who rely on managed public performances, and the widening disconnect between citizens and government. Because such factors are more cumulative than campaign-specific in nature, they require thinking differently about process and measurement.

Yet another school of thought—derived from social choice theory (Arrow, 1951; Cyert & March, 1963; Olson, 1971; Simon, 1955)—helped develop a signaling approach to political communication (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991). Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* has more recently been challenged as new technologies have changed both the costs and the processes of political organization (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Such rethinking of the theoretical underpinnings of communication processes (in this case, the logic of collective action in an era of new social technology and organization) is precisely what we need more of if we are to develop research that is in touch with changing patterns of content distribution on converging platforms, new audience consumption habits, and the exploding technology that shapes consumption, distribution, and content production.

In light of these developments, it is not surprising that media economics has emerged as one of the hottest subfields in economics, with important spillover into political communication. We note here the growing literatures on bias (Baron, 2006), market segmentation based on consumers' political preferences (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005), the fashioning of news content to targeted consumer segments (Hamilton, 2004), the impact of media competition on policy outcomes (Stromberg, 2004), and the idea that the long tail and open networks of the Internet may change the basis of exchange relationships toward open source and creative copyright (Benkler, 2006). Although a few pioneers in political communication such as Pool (1983) signaled the coming of these trends, the uptake in the core of the field has been slow.

A brief look at the state of the field

Other clusters of interdisciplinary thought could be added to our account, but these brief historical tracings are sufficient to illustrate several general points.

First, political communication is rather less about political science and more about how sociology, psychology, and economics have helped illuminate the role of communication in shaping the conduct of politics.

Second, and related to this point, the grand theoretical foundations of the field arose at the dawn of modern society when broadly shared social structures and mass

communication technologies were glimmers in the eyes of visionary theorists. As the postindustrial democracies are now well into what might be called a late modern twilight, changing social, psychological, technological, and economic conditions require new theoretical perspectives to guide and reformulate a good deal of our research.

Third, with some notable exceptions mentioned above, contemporary work typically gives only passing thought to necessary theoretical, conceptual, and methodological adjustments. The general focus remains on adding new findings to established categories of study such as the ever-popular sub-subfields of framing, priming, agenda setting, and so on. The inevitable result is that the field is adrift theoretically, seldom looking back to see where foundational modern theory needs to be adapted and, in some cases, overthrown, in order to keep pace with the orientations of late modern audiences, and new modes of content production and information delivery. It is noteworthy in this regard that Rogers' (1997) magisterial history of communication study has received a mere 163 citations according to Google Scholar at the time of our writing compared to a stunning 13,769 subsequent citations for his classic work *Diffusion of Innovations*. Moreover, the citation trails flowing from these references to Rogers' history of communication die out within the first few dozen citations. By contrast, a sturdy scholarly tree continues to grow (or diffuse) from the diffusion book. The point here is not to make sweeping generalizations about the degree of theoretical innovation in the diffusion field. Indeed, given the intersection of so many different disciplines and practitioners, we suspect that it is less insular than most fields. The point, rather, is to note the many orders of magnitude less attention that have been paid to an important effort to trace the theoretical origins of the modern field of communication by the same prominent scholar.

This general slowness to address, justify, and revise many of the underlying historical foundations of research may mean that much contemporary work is guided by the echoes of a fading modernist tradition that may not account for a good deal of contemporary political experience. One result of this disjuncture among theory, social change, and research is that we are beset with new puzzles and paradoxes in communication processes that seem to elude explanation and often remain outside of scholarly discussions entirely. Consider just a few problems and paradoxes for which there appears to be no solid theoretical or empirical grip.

At a time when many scholars have come to regard the media as in integral institution of governance (Cook, 1998; Ryfe, 2006)), public confidence in media, journalism, and information is alarmingly low. Even worse, younger generations in many nations are breaking away from consuming news (Hamilton, 2004) and knowing much about government and public affairs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997). Some scholars (e.g., Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) have suggested that we look to the negative effects on citizens of increasingly professionalized public communication characterized by managed messages, targeted audiences, proliferating delivery channels, and new message construction technologies. Others have noted the ways in which mass media news has exposed the contrived and staged aspects of politics (Moy &

Pfau, 2000). Yet relatively few efforts have been made to incorporate such perspectives into comprehensive theories or research agendas that may reconcile the paradox between the growing centrality of media in governance processes and its shrinking credibility and attention focus in the lives of citizens, particularly given the waning of mass media influence in the lives of most citizens.

Turning the focus to another central area of the field, volumes of research on electoral communication in recent years have produced precious little evidence of large effects. Cases can be made that marginal effects can make a difference in the outcomes of close elections (Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004). Yet the small effects that can be teased out of massive electoral communication campaigns are not so large as to persuade many conventional political scientists that advertising accomplishes little beyond catching up inattentive citizens on otherwise available information (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Stimson, 2004). Although similar debates are repeated each election cycle, few scholars seem interested in asking whether the bombardment of elusive audiences with mind numbing messages may have far different and more sizeable effects than the ones currently being measured. Such undertheorized effects might include: mistrust of politicians in general; a sense that the electoral process is overly manipulated by consultants and handlers leading to feelings of being manipulated rather than empowered; the sense of being left out of the democratic process altogether among demographics excluded from targeted communications; and the resulting political ennui among younger generations. Indeed, we suspect that the remarkable success of the Obama campaign in 2008—especially with previously disengaged voters such as youth—can be attributed in part to years of pent-up revulsion with conventional strategies of campaign communication such as negative advertising and "gotcha" journalism. Here again, some scholars have attended to some of these issues in broader theoretical terms (Coleman & Blumler, in press; Entman, 1989), but there seems little sign of a paradigm shift to better reconcile the categories of normal political communication research with these important aspects of lived political experience.

Another paradox of political communication in need of refreshed attention is that the costs of producing even minimal media effects in elections have soared astronomically (at least in the United States), again raising questions about the effects of conventionally conceived persuasion campaigns. Although advertisers and corporations have already shifted to new models of branding and consumer relationships (Jenkins, 2006), both practitioners and scholars of political communication seem behind the curve of social and technological change that has already swept popular culture. It is not clear that democracy can prosper by becoming even more corrupted by principles of commercial branding and marketing. Indeed, where new communication technologies are emerging, they seem less than democratically desirable (Howard, 2006). Addressing both the problem of diminishing effects and spiraling costs of producing them might lead to fuller discussion of the distortions of democratic values in that communication bargain. Yet, the spiraling costs of communication (and how that bends the representation process) seem to be generally

regarded as exogenous factors in effects studies, rather than as clues about the need for more comprehensive models of growing turbulence in public communication.

These and other paradoxes that continue to escape theoretical and methodological integration lead us to the following brief sketch of the elements of a new agenda for studying political communication in changing social and technological contexts.

Toward an agenda for studying political communication in late modern societies

To return to the grand thinkers who inspired the origins of political communication, one interesting thread runs through all of them. Every one was grappling with social forces associated with the rise of modern society—the transition from traditional to modern, public institution-based, legal rational orders. Emerging modern social structures led Tarde to understand the flow of influence through groups and status systems that cued how people learn from others what ideas and fashions to adopt. Freud struggled in *Civilization and Its Discontents* with the problem of how the conformist pull of external roles and distant symbols of allegiance in modern society inhibited the formation of independent egos, creating the modern pandemic of neurosis, and the propensity toward mass movements. Following Freud's prescient mass diagnosis, a generation of scholars later discovered the perils of conformity (*The Organization Man*, *The Lonely Crowd*) that were the foundation for the mass society in which mass communication processes later flourished for several decades. Lippmann, who flirted with socialism under the mentoring of the great muckraking journalists, soon came to a very different understanding of the relations among press, publics, and government that landed him in the inner circle of Woodrow Wilson (and many of the succeeding presidents through Kennedy), with the perspective that popular opinion and consent had to be engineered in order to govern effectively. This perspective has been documented in the later work of Jacobs, Shapiro, and others (Jacobs, Druckman, & Ostermeier, 2004; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000).

These and other early thinkers all helped position the field of political communication to address the rise of mass society and to grapple with the related understanding of mass media communication processes and effects. In this context, the minimal effects and two-step flow models can be explained in retrospect as the result of studies conducted before the conditions defining mass media and mass society were fully in place. It does not seem particularly surprising that research dating from the 1940s—a time of high social cohesion, before television swept the land, or advertising and polling had become sophisticated—would have produced mixed results about direct attitude change through media messages. Even so, evidence for relatively strong direct effects of political messages in those studies might have warranted more probing analysis (Gitlin, 1978). The ensuing confusions about media effects persisted for decades, until the scales were tipped by a large volume of countervailing findings, along with several perspective building efforts to better theorize the conditions

underlying direct, mass-mediated, "impersonal" influence processes (Mutz, 1998; Zaller, 1992).

The stage is again set for confusion about findings, given that the social and technological contexts of contemporary political communication are changing as rapidly as they did in that earlier era between the 1960s and 1990s in which strong media effects can be traced to conditions of declining group memberships and the rise of broadcast technologies that made vast audiences accessible via relatively few channels. To foreshadow our coming discussion, we note the following comparison between the mass media era and the current period: "In the 1960s, an advertiser could reach 80% of U.S. women with a prime-time spot on the three networks. Today, it has been estimated that the same spot would have to run on 100 TV channels to reach the same number of viewers" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 66).

In addition to the proliferation of channels and fragmentation of the audience, it also makes sense to address in our new political communication models the decline of socially conformist identity processes that formerly defined individuals as message receptors in the group membership society that some observers lament losing (Putnam, 2000), along with the decline of the mass audience of "impersonal" social cue takers that defined the mass media social structure (Mutz, 1998; Zaller, 1992). What we find today, particularly among younger audience demographics, are shifting and far more flexible identity formations that require considerable self-reflexivity and identity management, as described in the work of Giddens (1991), Inglehart (1997), and Bennett (1998), among others. The kind of communication that reaches such personalized audiences tends to travel through multiple channels and may require interactive shaping in order to be credible and authentic. Witness the rise in the United States of branded fan community reality programs such as *American Idol* and *The Apprentice* that shape perceptions and emotional commitment through content consumption and production on multiple media platforms beyond television: texting, interactive fan Web sites, entertainment news sites, friend network sites, and games (Jenkins, 2006).

In short, it is clear we are entering another important turning point not just in communication technologies but in social structure and identity formation that affect the behaviors of audiences. Several scholars have alerted us to the transition of our present moment. Bimber (2003) has described the role of changing information technologies for message delivery and social organization that affect the balance of power in society. Schudson (1998) has examined the broad interactions of political processes, communication systems, and emerging citizen styles that affect consumption and response to communication. More theoretical work at this level is needed, and it should include broader democratic perspectives in which to understand the larger "effect of effects." Otherwise, we are headed for a renewed era of confusing debates over findings similar to those in past eras. In the following section, we suggest some considerations for rethinking the nature of audiences, messages, and delivery technologies in political communication processes.

The impact of audience structure and communication technology

The principal impact of the revolution in technology has been to exponentially increase the supply of information. Today, citizens interested in the presidential election have access to thousands of online sources ranging from well-established news organizations to the candidates themselves and from the political parties to unknown individual bloggers. Given the imminent prospects of information overload, just how do consumers sort through this array of news sources? This is particularly challenging in light of the conflation of information consumption with the identity preferences that lead many (particularly younger) demographics to seek coproduction of information so that they become part of the mediated experience itself (Graber, 2001). Indeed, many of the most important segments of younger audience demographics are no longer found in conventional communication channels (e.g., television) at all, as they are absorbed in gaming environments that become ever more like movies once were for their parents—with the exception that the audiences are now in the movie.

The fragmented audience in an era of selective exposure

Fifty years ago, U.S. voters depended primarily on the evening newscasts broadcast by ABC, CBS, and NBC to keep abreast of the world of public affairs. The norms of journalism meant that no matter which network voters tuned in to, they encountered the same set of news reports, according balanced attention to parties, candidates, or points of view. In the era of "old media," accordingly, it made little difference where voters got their news. The offerings of all news organizations were sufficiently homogeneous and standardized to represent an "information commons." Americans of all walks of life and political inclination were exposed to the same information.

The development of cable television and the explosion of media outlets on the Internet have created a more fragmented information environment in which cable news, talk radio, and 24-hour news outlets compete for attention. Consumers can access—with minimal effort—newspapers, radio, and television stations the world over. The rapid diffusion of new media has transformed the supply of information. There is a much wider range of media choices on offer, providing much greater variability in the content of available information. This means that something approaching information "stratamentation" (stratification and fragmentation at the same time) is going on. The mainstream media continue to matter for governing and a semblance of legitimation and news-driven polling (Bennett et al., 2007; Moore, 2008) even as more people drift away. And more people are drifting away. People uninterested in politics can avoid news programming altogether by tuning into ESPN or the Food Network. And for political junkies, the sheer multiplicity of news sources demands they exercise discretionary or selective exposure to political information.

The demise of the inadvertent audience

Political theorists and mass communication researchers agree that some minimal level of information facilitates the exercise of citizenship. The acquisition of

information depends not only on availability or supply but also on attentiveness or demand. It is the demand side of the information function that is most affected by changes in the media landscape.

During the heyday of network news, when the combined audience for the three evening newscasts exceeded 70 million, many Americans were exposed to the news as a simple byproduct of their loyalty to the sitcom or other entertainment program that immediately followed the news (Prior, 2007; Robinson, 1976). These viewers may have been watching television rather than television news. Although precise estimates are not available, it is likely that this "inadvertent" audience may have accounted for half the total audience for network news.

At the same time, the rise of more self-reflexive audience identities suggests that the inadvertent audience today is further diminished by large numbers of active content producers who surf their way through media consumption and seldom make appointments with particular programs even when they can access them according to personal schedules. The exceptions here prove the new audience rule: Social networking juggernauts such as *American Idol* are popular in part because they enable active coproduction of content and empowerment through the meaningful selection of plot outcomes (Jenkins, 2006). For the most part, flat one-way content is out, and the demographics scale strongly by age. The news represents the sort of content least interesting to the digital generation who may be practicing citizenship by other means, but generally steer clear of the decidedly flat, one-way conventional news information nexus with government and elections (with a few notable exceptions that promise more interactive involvement).

In the high modern period of mass-mediated politics, the combination of identification patterns based on audience social structure and the reach of technology itself resulted in the massive audience for broadcast news in the 1960s and 1970s. This meant that television had a leveling effect on the distribution of information. The news reached not only those motivated to tune in but also people with generally low levels of political interest, thus allowing the latter group to "catch up" with their more attentive counterparts. But once the networks' hold on the national audience was loosened, first by the advent of cable, then by the profusion of local news programming, and eventually by the Internet, exposure to news was no longer a given for the great majority of Americans. This wider range of choice, combined with the absence of news features that offer the appeal of reality television, games, and other interactive content communities meant that younger audiences quickly found better things to do with their television time than watch the news. Between 1968 and 2003, the total audience for network news fell by more than 30 million viewers. As exposure to news programming became more closely correlated with the demand for political information, the knowledge gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" expanded. Paradoxically, just as technology has made possible a flow of information hitherto unimaginable, the size of the total audience for news has shrunk substantially.

The knowledge gap is mainly a reflection of differing levels of demand for information. Demand for information, in turn, is contingent on basic cultural norms such as a sense of community identity and civic pride or duty. As noted above, these norms have weakened, so too have the psychological incentives for acquiring political information. The principal implication is that under conditions of enhanced consumer choice, the knowledge gap between more and less motivated citizens widens.

Interestingly, the increased knowledge gap does not appear to be a universal phenomenon (see Curran et al., in press); education, for instance, although a strong predictor of political knowledge in the United States, makes little difference in Finland or Denmark. In Scandinavia, where "public service" requirements are still imposed even on commercial broadcasters, the flow of news programming occurs at multiple points during the programming day, making it more likely that relatively apolitical viewers manage to encounter public affairs information on at least a sporadic basis. Thus, it is the interaction of technology, the media system, and cultural norms that drives exposure to news. However, even in strong public service systems such as Germany, growing commercial news competition has split the audience demographically so that younger demographics tend to consume commercial news that resembles the mix of sports, fashion, weather, and mayhem in U.S. local television (German market research data as yet unpublished by Bennett).

Partisan selective exposure among information seekers

Ever since the development of consistency theories of persuasion and attitude change in the 1950s, communications researchers have hypothesized that a person's exposure to political information will reflect individual partisan leanings. In other words, people will avoid information that they expect will be discrepant or disagreeable and seek out information that is expected to be congruent with their preexisting attitudes (Mutz, 2006).

In the days of old media, selecting conventional news sources on the basis of partisan preference was relatively difficult given the demise of the partisan press in the 19th century. But during campaigns, voters could still gravitate to their preferred candidate, and several studies documented the tendency of partisans to report greater exposure to appeals from the candidate or party they preferred (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Schramm & Carter, 1959; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Early voting researchers deemed this preference for in-party exposure antithetical to the democratic ideal of reasoned choice. As Lazarsfeld et al. put it,

> In recent years there has been a good deal of talk by men of good will about the desirability and necessity of guaranteeing the free exchange of ideas in the market place of public opinion. Such talk has centered upon the problem of keeping free the channels of expression and communication. Now we find that the consumers of ideas, if they have made a decision on the issue, themselves erect high tariff walls against alien notions. (p. 89)

Research on selective exposure to information in the era of network mass media news domination generally yielded equivocal results. In several instances, what seemed to be motivated or deliberate selective exposure turned out to occur on a *de facto* or byproduct basis instead: For instance, people were more likely to encounter attitude congruent information as a result of their social milieu rather than any active choices to avoid incongruent information (see Sears & Freedman, 1967).

Technology and the new partisan selectivity

It is not a coincidence that the increased availability of news sources has been accompanied by increasing political polarization. Over time, polarization appears to have spread to the level of mass public opinion (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Jacobson, 2006; for a dissenting view, see Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2005). For instance, in U.S. politics, Democrats' and Republicans' negative evaluations of a president of the other party have steadily intensified (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Jacobson, 2006). The presidential approval data reveal a widening chasm between Republicans and Democrats; the percentage of partisans who respond at the extremes ("strong approval" or "strong disapproval") has increased significantly over time. In fact, polarized assessments of U.S. presidential performance are higher today than at any other time in recent history, including the months preceding the resignation of President Nixon.

Given the intensification of partisan animus, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations. People who feel strongly about the correctness of their cause or policy preferences are more likely to seek out information they believe is consistent with their preferences. But while as recently as 25 years ago, these partisans would have been hard pressed to find overtly partisan sources of information, today the task is relatively simple. In the case of Republicans, all they need to do is tune in to Fox News or the *O'Reilly Factor*.

The new, more diversified information environment makes it not only more feasible for consumers to seek out news they might find agreeable but also provides a strong economic incentive for news organizations to cater to their viewers' political preferences (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). The emergence of Fox News as the leading cable news provider is testimony to the viability of this "niche news" paradigm. Between 2000 and 2004, while Fox News increased the size of its regular audience by some 50%, the other cable providers showed no growth (Pew Research Center for the People and Press, 2004).

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that politically polarized consumers are motivated to exercise greater selectivity in their news choices. In the first place, in keeping with the well-known "hostile media" phenomenon (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), partisans of either side have become more likely to impute bias to mainstream news sources (Smith, Lichter, & Harris, 1997). Cynical assessments of the media have surged most dramatically among conservatives; according to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey, Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to rate major news

outlets (such as the three network newscasts, the weekly news magazines, NPR, and PBS) as biased (Pew Research Center for the People and Press, 2004). In the aftermath of the *New York Times*' front-page story on Senator McCain's alleged affair with a lobbyist (Rutenberg, Thompson, & Kirkpatrick, 2008), the McCain campaign was able to use this "liberal attack" as a significant fund-raising appeal (Bumiller, 2008). Given their perceptions of hostile bias in the mainstream media environment, partisans of both sides have begun to explore alternative sources of news. During the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, Republicans were more frequent users of talk radio, whereas Democrats avoided talk radio and tuned in to late-night entertainment television (Pfau, Houston, & Semmler, 2007, pp. 36–38).

Experimental studies of news consumption further confirm the tendency of partisans to self-select into distinct audiences. In one online study administered on a national sample, the researchers manipulated the source of news stories in five different subject matter areas ranging from national politics and the Iraq War to vacation destinations and sports (Iyengar & Hahn, 2007). Depending on the condition to which participants were assigned, the very same news headline was attributed either to Fox News, National Public Radio, CNN, or BBC. Participants were asked which of the four different headlines they would prefer to read, if any. The results were unequivocal: Republicans and conservatives were much more likely to select news stories from Fox, whereas Democrats and liberals avoided Fox in favor of NPR and CNN. What was especially striking about the pattern of results was that the selection applied not only to hard news (i.e., national politics, the war in Iraq, healthcare) but also to soft news stories about travel and sports. The polarization of the news audience extends even to nonpolitical subject matter. The partisan homogenization of the Fox audience is also confirmed in a Pew national survey reported in Bennett and Manheim (2006, p. 224).

Some implications of these trends are important to consider (although space limits our ability to give them adequate attention). First, the partisan polarization among some (but not all) segments of the public offers audiences greater choice over what information, whether true or false, to use to ornament their opinions. This raises questions about the value of information in this information age. In the case of information about Iraq following the invasion in 2003, Fox audiences acquired a far greater level of factually incorrect information than, for example, PBS audiences, with other television and radio sources arrayed in between (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 120).

In addition, selective exposure enables the popular lifestyle choice of political avoidance, meaning that staggering numbers (perhaps half or more depending on the issue) essentially eliminate the political world from personal reality. Witness the large numbers who do not possess any information (correct or incorrect) about most issues. The appearance of a more engaged public than actually exists is maintained by news-driven polling that pushes people with no basis for having opinions into opinion expression to avoid the appearance that the largest proportion of democratic public is otherwise engaged (which is not news, but makes for bad news stories that might raise doubts about the existence of a credible public).

Moore (2008) has made this case on the basis of Gallup data gathered during his time as editor at the polling firm. He demonstrates convincingly that for almost any issue one might imagine, the largest plurality of opinion does not care one way or another if their preferences actually happen. Thus, for example, on the eve of the Iraq war, 29% of Americans were for it and would have been upset if it did not happen, 30% were against it and would have been upset if it happened, and 41% would not have been upset whether the war happened or not. Yet, the poll results reported to the public through the press were based on polling operatives instructed to push respondents to have an opinion. As a result, the plurality that did not really care was inclined to lean more toward the war. Their underlying lack of real opinion was not reported in the news (the Gallup data from Moore were the uncommon result of an in-house experiment). Thus, the political-media spin made the war appear to be strongly supported by the people: ABC/*Washington Post* reported 71% favoring war, NBC/*Wall Street Journal* had it at 65%, *Newsweek* reported 70%, and so on (Moore, 2008). Thus the selective exposure phenomenon is multisided. Strongly partisan minorities continue to roil national politics, but the largest segment of the public seems to have selected itself out of the game. Meanwhile, conventional media and polling techniques (and a good deal of social science survey research) continue to paint them back into the picture as though they were there.

The future is now

There is reason to think that the interaction between increasingly individualized reality construction and proliferating personal media platforms has accelerated in just the past few years. For example, the news selection study reported earlier revealed strong evidence of partisan polarization in news selection, yet 7 years earlier, in a similar study of exposure to campaign rhetoric, the researchers could detect only modest traces of partisan selectivity (see Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008). In this study, the investigators compiled a large selection of campaign speeches by the two major presidential candidates (Al Gore and George W. Bush) along with a full set of the candidates' television advertisements. This material was assembled on an interactive, multimedia CD and distributed to a representative sample of registered voters with Internet access a few weeks before the election. Participants were informed that they were free to use the CD as they saw fit and that their usage would be recorded on their computer. Following the election, they were provided instructions for downloading and transmitting the data to the market research firm from which they received the CD.

The CD tracking data in this study showed only modest traces of a preference for information from the in-party candidate. Republicans and conservatives were significantly more likely to seek out information from the Bush campaign, but liberals and Democrats showed no preference for Gore over Bush speeches or advertisements. These findings suggest either that the intensity of partisan identity is higher among Republicans or that selective exposure has become habitual among Republicans because they were provided earlier opportunities than Democrats (with the

launch of the Fox Network in 1986) to engage in biased information seeking. The news selection study, conducted in 2007, suggests that Democrats are now keeping pace; in 2000, very few Democrats in the CD study showed an aversion to speeches from Governor Bush, but by 2007 hardly any Democrats selected Fox News as a preferred news source.

In summary, a media environment featuring an abundance of consumer choice implies first that we will witness increasing inequality in the acquisition of political information. The "haves" will find it easier to keep abreast of political events and the "have-nots" will find it easier to ignore political discussion altogether. Second, the increased availability of information implies an important degree of selective exposure to political information. Among the relatively attentive stratum, partisans will gravitate to information from favored sources, while ignoring sources or arguments from the opposing side. Meanwhile, the large ranks of inadvertent citizens will continue to elude those who attempt to communicate with them, fueling the costs of political communication, while diminishing the effects.

Conclusions

As with the earlier era of transition to a mass society, the transition to the personally mediated society requires us to spot where the old and new formations come into play in different political communication processes. The goal is to avoid battles among those who see one sociotechnological picture (e.g., the remnants of mass media) and those who see another (the interactive production of personalized information). In the current U.S. picture, for example, some groups and demographic segments (e.g., senior citizens) may more resemble the group membership mass audiences of an earlier era, and they also reflect the media consumption habits of that earlier era (e.g., they are the core audience for network television news viewing). Yet, for the growing majority of citizens, the news is less a habit than an afterthought. Most staged political performances are less credible for many younger citizens than reality television (Coleman, 2007). The audiences who find them compelling seem to be the partisans and the press. In this transitional era, information processing and perspective building often involves turning to late-night comedy (Young & Tisinger, 2006). As these communication processes continue to change, the very effects of communication are in play.

Broader implications: Biased news as a recipe for market success?

As part of the American audience polarizes over matters of politics and public policy, it is possible that rational media owners stand to gain market share by injecting more rather than less political bias into the news (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). The emergence of Fox News as the cable ratings leader suggests that in a competitive market, politically slanted news programming allows a new organization to create a niche for itself. Recent theoretical work in economics shows that under competition and diversity of opinion, newspapers will provide content that is more biased:

"Competition forces newspapers to cater to the prejudices of their readers, and greater competition typically results in more aggressive catering to such prejudices as competitors strive to divide the market" (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005, p. 18). The recent efforts of MSNBC to emulate Fox are revealing. The network's most popular evening program—"Countdown with Keith Olbermann"—conveys an unabashedly anti-Bush Administration perspective. The network now plans to "to showcase its nighttime lineup as a welcome haven for viewers of a similar mind" (Steinberg, 2007). When the audience is polarized, "news with an edge" makes for market success. Meanwhile, far greater numbers watch *American Idol*, and many of those avoid news altogether.

More generally, the evidence on partisan bias in news consumption is consistent with the argument that technology will narrow rather than widen users' political horizons. Over time, avoidance of disagreeable information may become habitual so that users turn to their preferred sources automatically no matter what the subject matter. By relying on biased but favored providers, consumers will be able to "wall themselves off from topics and opinions that they would prefer to avoid" (Sunstein, 2001, pp. 201–202). The end result will be a less informed and more polarized electorate, with the political communication game aimed at those who have largely tuned out.

Implications for media effects

The increasingly self-selected composition of audiences has important consequences for those who study media effects. Survey researchers, who rely on self-reported measures of news exposure, will find it increasingly difficult to treat exposure as a potential cause of political beliefs or attitudes. Those who say they read a particular newspaper or watch a network newscast are likely to differ systematically in their political attitudes, and it will be imperative that survey-based analyses disentangle the reciprocal effects of media exposure and political attitudes or behaviors.

Self-selection also has consequences for experimental research. Actual exposure to political messages in the real world is no longer analogous to random assignment. As we have noted, news and public affairs information can easily be avoided by choice, meaning that exposure is limited to the politically engaged strata. Thus, as Hovland (1959) pointed out, manipulational control actually weakens the ability to generalize to the real world where exposure to politics is typically voluntary. Accordingly, it is important that experimental researchers use designs that combine manipulation with self-selection of exposure.

In substantive terms, we anticipate that the fragmentation of the national audience reduces the likelihood of attitude change in response to particular patterns of news. The persuasion and framing paradigms require some observable level of attitude change in response to a media stimulus. As media audiences devolve into smaller, like-minded subsets of the electorate, it becomes less likely that media messages will do anything other than reinforce prior predispositions. Most media users will rarely find themselves in the path of attitude-discrepant information.

An exception to this pattern may occur for relatively inattentive and politically nonpartisan citizens exposed to big stories that are repeatedly in the news, receive prominent placement, and echo throughout the multiple media channels from television, to radio talk shows, to blogs and email forwarding. Less saturated news topics may have little effect on opinion (even for attentive partisans) than strategically targeted messages by interest groups and online organizations such as moveon. At the same time, the news may continue to serve a governance and positioning function in terms of keeping officials, lobbyists, and other interest organizations apprised of where their issues stand, but that entails a different way of thinking about media effects.

Levels of political polarization among the public further bring into question findings of significant media effects. Findings suggesting that audiences have been persuaded by a message will be suspect because discrete media audiences will tend to self-select for preference congruence. Further, media users will be more attuned to resisting any messages that prove discrepant; thus, we would expect to observe reinforcement effects *even when voters encounter one-sided news at odds with their partisan priors*. For example, after the revelations in the news media that the Bush Administration's prewar intelligence claims were ill founded, the percentage of Republicans giving an affirmative response when asked whether the United States had found WMD in Iraq remained essentially unchanged, while at the same time the percentage of Democrats giving a "no WMD" response increased by about 30 percentage points (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis, 2003). In short, the Republicans remained unaffected by a tidal wave of discrepant information.

The increasing level of selective exposure based on partisan preference thus presages a new era of minimal consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects are concerned. But other forms of media influence, such as indexing, agenda setting, or priming may continue to be important. Put differently, selective exposure is more likely to erode the influence of the tone or valence of news messages (vis-à-vis elected officials) but may have little impact on the sheer volume of news.

What this suggests is the need for theory building. In some areas, this is happily underway, as noted in the above discussions of new work in the area of collective action and digital technology, and the economy of social networks and digital media content production. Many other areas may benefit from interrupting the pursuit of normal science and thinking about larger democratic implications of a fragmented media environment populated with vastly different audience segments. How do we think about the growing numbers who elude the best efforts to bring them into political debates that do not interest them as much as reality television, yet who remain critical to election outcomes or legitimation of wars? How shall we think about the solid blocs of 30 or so percent on each end of the spectrum who are actively engaged yet prove unresponsive to most efforts to impart new information, to stimulate deliberative activities, or to deepen concerns about others in society (e.g., the lack of popular engagement with issues such as inequality)? In addition, how can we add ideas about how to involve younger citizens in the interactive life of

democracy in ways that enable them to become producers of information rather than just passive consumers of noncredible advertising? Perhaps greater attention in the field to more normative discussion and a policy agenda is in order.

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