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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

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In this chapter, we survey various areas of political communication research ranging from micro-psychological effects to broader systemic effects. Relative to our chapter in Bryant and Zillmann's (2002) last volume on media effects (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002), this chapter is focused on specific types of political communication effects, omitting sections on the social and political contexts for effects, media content, and normative concerns about democratic functioning. We start by defining the boundaries of political communication research and then discuss: (1) individual-level effects, (2) conditional models of effects, and (3) systemic effects of political communication. We contextualize most of the major topics in political communication research, several of which are covered in greater detail in other chapters in this volume including agenda-setting, framing, and civic participation. Cites are provided as examples and are not exhaustive.

THE BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Defining the boundaries of political communication has become a difficult task as the contributions from a variety of disciplines and research traditions—including political science, psychology, sociology, linguistics, rhetoric, and mass communication—have broadened the focus of research. Whereas the study of political communication once was confined to the relationship between print media use and voting choices, it has been expanded to other political aspects of communication as researchers have acknowledged that all facets of social behavior could be conceived of as political. For practical purposes, in this chapter, we have narrowed the boundaries of political communication to focus on the exchange of messages between political actors, the general public, and the news media.

Political communication effects are the consequences of political communication that can be attributed to either a personal or institutional source (e.g., a political leader, advertising, or news). Effects can be manifested at the micro level of individual behavior, the intermediary level of political groups, or at the macro level of the system itself. Defining effects more narrowly than our past chapter, this review emphasizes the most prominent forms of political communication effects on media audiences.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

The political communication literature continues to be dominated by individual-level effects research. We distinguish four major classes of individual effects: (1) opinion formation and change, (2) cognitive, (3) perceptual, and (4) behavioral.

Opinion Formation and Change

A substantial body of research has investigated the media's impact on the formation, change, and stabilization of opinions on political issues and candidates. Research conceptualizing media effects as a form of persuasion has waxed and waned in terms of the extent to which it supports the notion of powerful media effects. In retrospect, it is clear that persuasion models fit better in the contexts of campaign effects studies (O'Keefe et al., 1996; Rice & Atkin, 2000) and political advertising (Shah et al., 2007) than they do in the less intentionally persuasive content of news (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996). Examples of opinion change associated with media use are more frequently documented than are instances of its opposite, stabilization. However, debates and other forms of campaign information have been shown to affect voting intentions and increase the consistency of partisan attitudes (Hillygus & Jackman, 2003; Sears & Chaffee, 1979).

Cognitive Effects

The five examples of cognitive effects that we identify here have received considerable attention: agenda setting, priming, framing, knowledge gain, and cognitive complexity.

Agenda Setting

Agenda-setting research is based on two related propositions: (a) the media control the public agenda by selecting certain broad issue topics for prominent coverage, and (b) prominence subsequently determines which issues are judged as important (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting has inspired a vast literature over the past four decades, providing substantial evidence supporting the proposition that public judgments of issue importance follow prominence on the media agenda. Early evidence took three distinct forms: time-series comparisons of the national news agenda with aggregated issue ratings from opinion polls (MacKuen, 1981; McCombs & Shaw, 1972); panel studies examining the sequencing of changes in the media agenda with corresponding changes in the issue saliences of individual respondents (McCombs, 1977; Tipton, Haney, & Basehart, 1975); and cross-sectional surveys comparing media agendas to audience salience judgments (McLeod, Becker, &

Byrnes, 1974). Experiments manipulating the agenda of televised newscasts (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) not only strengthened the evidence, but also tied agenda-setting research to cognitive theories. Researchers have begun investigating "attribute agenda-setting," claiming that agenda-setting is a robust theoretical structure that encompasses not only issue salience, but the influence of specific attributes (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 2004). Agenda-setting effects on audiences should not be taken as indicative of powerful media as such effects are not necessarily powerful, consequential, and universal. The news media certainly serve at least as carriers of an agenda to the public and in some cases may have an independent influence on the agenda, but the literature is not always clear on the differences. Real-world events (such as wars and economic trends) and news sources are more likely to command the agenda than are fluctuations in media coverage (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and the effects of these forces are not often enough controlled.

Priming

First applied to media effects in the 1980s (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990), priming occurs when a given message activates a mental concept, which for a period of time increases the probability that the concept, and thoughts and memories connected with it, will come to mind again (Berkowitz & Rogers, 1986). Priming experiments have examined the effects of television news in shaping the standards by which presidential performance is judged (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). When primed by stories focusing on national defense, for example, respondents gave disproportionate weight to judgments of how well they thought the president had done on that issue in judging his overall performance. This held across six issues, for presidents from each party and for good news as well as for bad. Additional experiments showed priming influences may extend to vote choices and presidential evaluations (McGraw & Ling, 2003). Other research reveals that media coverage of the Gulf War and the economy primed evaluations of President George H.W. Bush (Pan & Kosicki, 1997).

Framing

As media effects, agenda-setting, priming, and framing have quite a bit in common. Several attempts have been made to locate them within a cognitive processing model and have helped to illuminate their similarities and key distinctions (Entman, 2007; Hwang et al., 2007; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing effects concern how the nature of news reports alters patterns of knowledge activation (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). That is, framing suggests that news messages help determine what aspects of a problem the audiences focus on through both applicability and accessibility effects. Applicability involves effects of considerations activated at the time of message processing. Once activated, these ideas retain some potential for further use, making them likely to be drawn upon in making subsequent evaluations, a process called accessibility effects (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). In other words, framing effects involve an interaction between message patterns and audience schema that guide the understanding of new information. News stories use standard forms such as the summary lead and the inverted pyramid style, but audience members assemble new information into a causal narrative or story that reflects their point of view (Kinder & Mebane, 1983).

Framing effects processes involve the use of cognitive shortcuts to satisfy whatever

level of understanding a person considers "good enough" (Popkin, 1991). Typical information processing approaches can be categorized into three types of heuristic biases: categorization, selection, and integration of information about an issue or candidate. To analyze such biases, political communication research has borrowed heavily from cognitive psychology, using concepts such as availability (Krosnick, 1989), default values (Lau & Sears, 1986), schema (Graber, 1988), and causal attribution (Iyengar, 1991).

Just as differences in news frames can induce different interpretations of events and issues, audience understanding of a given news story may be characterized as polysemic—that is, a variety of different meanings and interpretations can be derived depending on an individual's predispositions and situational circumstances. Audience reactions to news stories are influenced by a variety of factors including news media "packages" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), a person's structural location, personal values (Shen & Edwards, 2005), political involvement (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), political schema (Shen, 2004), knowledge (Zaller, 1992), and the norms of social groups. Audience interpretations may be consonant, oppositional or even independent of the news frame. As such, framing effects are not uniform. Most research in framing is taking place in laboratories, where it can be shown that framing has immediate effects, particularly when the message stimuli are perfectly balanced and equivalent (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). More attention needs to be paid to framing effects with naturally occurring news and information in everyday life, which differs substantially from laboratory conditions (Kinder, 2007). Future research in framing effects must seek to further identify the factors that shape media frames as well as to more precisely isolate framing effects and the factors that moderate them.

Knowledge Gain

Learning from news media has long been a subject of political communication research. Special forms of political communication, debates, and conventions, along with standard news coverage, convey discernible if modest amounts of information to their audiences (Eveland et al., 2005; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006; McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Neuman, 1986; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Yet, despite the growth in access to media providing content about politics, citizens remain remarkably uninformed about public affairs as measured by population surveys. Despite a threefold increase in the proportion of Americans who have attended college, factual knowledge of politics has increased only marginally since the 1960s and has actually declined when education is controlled (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Yet, many voters feel the information they have is enough to make vote decisions by the time of the election (Dautrich & Hartley, 1999). In fact, there is some reason for optimism as Sotirovic and McLeod (2008) found that both media use and learning from media increased from past years during the 2004 campaign. Moreover, Popkin (1991) argued that although increments of learning from news are small, they may be sufficient for the purpose of separating candidates on the issues.

Many reasons have been offered for the relatively weak increments of political knowledge conveyed by news media. Most prominent is the charge that the "horse-race" coverage of political campaigns, focusing on who is winning and the political strategies employed by the campaigns rather than on issues, deters learning (Patterson, 1980). The selection of news stories for their entertainment and attention-getting value rather than for their political importance may block more complex issues from reaching the public. Television's shorter sound bites and presentation of "nuggetized factoids" devoid of

historical and political context may lead to processing information episodically rather than reflectively and thematically. Though these charges emanate from critical observation of content alone, researchers have connected news content to learning (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Drew & Weaver, 2006; Ferejohn & Kuklinski, 1990; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2004).

Substantial research has examined questions about differential rates of knowledge acquisition across different social strata and groups, as articulated by Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien's (1970) "Knowledge Gap Hypothesis." For instance, research has fairly consistently identified difference in knowledge between high and low SES groups (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996). The emergence of new information technologies and differences in the access and use patterns across SES groups (Roberts, 2000; Shah et al., 2000, November) has furthered concern about the "digital divide" and knowledge gaps (Jung et al., 2001; Loges & Jung, 2001). Studies have shown that knowledge gaps result from such factors as differences in cognitive complexity or processing abilities, disparities in media access and exposure, or differences in the perceived utility of being informed (McLeod & Perse, 1994; Ettema & Kline, 1977). For instance, higher levels of education facilitate knowledge acquisition; income provides greater access to information; social situations socialize people into different patterns of media use; and social circumstances reward different types of knowledge. Other research has shown that large-scale media events and intense media attention to issues can reduce knowledge gaps (Holbrook, 2002; McCann & Lawson, 2006; Viswanath et al., 2006), and that factors such as need for cognition, media choices, and interest moderate the size of the knowledge gap (Liu & Eveland, 2005). Work extending the knowledge gap research into the Internet age has focused on the "digital divide" highlighting access and use issues with new technology (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Shane, 2004).

Cognitive Complexity

Traditional measures of factual knowledge may be too limited to capture the full range of what audience members take away from political communication. To evaluate learning from the media, researchers have gone beyond the recognition or recall of specific factual knowledge to examine audience understanding more broadly. By using open-ended questions and recording of group discussion, researchers have assessed the structure and complexity of audience thinking (Shah et al., 2004; Sotirovic, 2001b). *Cognitive complexity* can be measured reliably by counting such features of open-ended responses as the number of arguments, time frames, causes and implications brought into the discussion (Sotirovic, 2001a). Cognitive complexity so measured is moderately correlated with factual knowledge from closed-ended questions, but the two criteria have distinct sets of structural and media use antecedents.

Perceptual Effects

Self-interest and Systemic Perceptions

Making connections between the individual-cognitive and social systems levels is a problem common to all areas of social science (Price, Ritchie, & Eulau, 1991). The problem is particularly acute for political communication, however. Most political action and power relationships operate at the societal or other systemic levels, whereas the bulk of empirical theory and research concentrates on the behavior of the individual

citizen. Although we think of voting as a private act based on narrow self-interest, this highly individualized account may be illusory. Citizens may have difficulty recognizing their own self-interest, and their perception of it may not be entirely selfish in that such judgments include concern for the welfare of others (Popkin, 1991). Further, although the strength of the evidence is disputed (Kramer, 1983), voting decisions seem to be made less on the basis of perceived "pocketbook" self-interest than on "sociotropic" estimates of how well the country is doing economically (Fiorina, 1981; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1983). People clearly distinguish between their own economic situation and that of the nation. At levels between the nation and the individual lie a host of other entities and groups potentially consequential to individual voting and participation. The implications of sociotropic conceptions for media effects are quite clear. Given that systemic perceptions are based largely on media inputs, the news media have responsibilities for presenting an accurate and comprehensive picture of government operations. Many critics have expressed doubt as to how well the media play this role. Although the public is exposed to the moves of the president and prominent members of Congress, little emphasis is placed on how government actually works in terms of processes, compromises, and so on (Popkin, 1991).

Causal Attribution

Jones and Nisbett (1972) suggested that actors attribute causality or responsibility for their own behavior to situational factors, whereas observers attribute the actor's behavior to stable dispositions of the actor. Applied to political judgments, this can be seen in the tendency to ascribe weaknesses of public officials to their personal faults and in blaming the poor and the homeless for their condition. Iyengar (1989) showed that failure to link social problems with societal responsibility extends to poverty, racism, and crime. Media coverage may accentuate the attribution of personal causation. Television often portrays politics as conflict between individuals rather than as struggles between institutions and principles (Rubin, 1976; Weaver, 1972). Sotirovic (2003) found that television use, relative to newspaper reading, increased the tendency to make individual attributions for the causes of crime, which in turn were linked to support for the death penalty and opposition to welfare programs.

Iyengar (1991) provided experimental evidence that television influences attribution of responsibility for both the creation of problems (causal) and their resolution (treatment) by distinguishing between episodic framing (i.e., event-oriented news reports) and thematic framing (i.e., stories that focus on a more general issue context). Episodic stories, which made up nearly 80% of a sample of CBS news stories, decreased system-level responsibility relative to thematic stories. The consequences of episodic versus thematic framing have substantial implications for subsequent political behavior. Iyengar found that people who attribute the cause of a problem to systemic forces are more likely to bring that problem into their political judgments than are people citing dispositional causes.

Climate of Opinion

A crucial assumption in Noelle-Neumann's (1984) *Spiral of Silence* is that people make "quasi-statistical" judgments about which side is in the majority or gaining support on controversial issues. According to her theory, this diminishes opinion expression by the losing side, starting a spiral of silence, and ultimately changing opinions and political

behaviors. Noelle-Neumann claimed that German television news affected electoral outcomes because the climate of opinion was portrayed as being unfavorable to the Christian Democratic party. More recent investigations of the spiral of silence have explored its fear of isolation mechanism in comparison to communication apprehension variables as antecedents to willingness to speak out (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007).

Other System Perceptions

Other systemic perceptions could be explored as outcomes of media effects. There is evidence that the horserace coverage of politics contributes to a "spiral of cynicism" that lowers interest in politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Moy and Pfau (2000) found that news coverage varies in cynicism across years and across political institutions. Use of network news, entertainment talk shows and political talk radio is associated with lower levels of confidence in institutions, while newspaper use is associated with positive evaluations. De Vreese (2005) tempers concern about media-induced cynicism, noting that it is correlated with political sophistication and is not antithetical to participation. Similarly, Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr (2001) showed that negative effects of media-induced cynicism on participation and involvement are attenuated by sophistication and involvement.

Media portrayals are also linked to public attitudes toward racially charged attitudes such as views on welfare policy. Gilens (1999) demonstrated that news organizations have racialized discussions of poverty over decades and that these racialized discussions are systematically related to public support for welfare policies. Gilliam et al. (1996) have used creative experiments manipulating the race of perpetrators in local news coverage and found that the presence of racial cues activated stereotypic beliefs about African-Americans as antecedents of opinions about crime.

Behavioral Effects

Media effects on voting preferences have long dominated the political communication agenda. Voting decisions remain the ultimate criterion in much of the research reviewed here; however, recent work no longer looks for direct media effects and instead sees voting as a complex behavior influenced indirectly through the various cognitive influences. Another change is that interpersonal communication has become part of the participation process rather than simply an antecedent of voting.

Voter Turnout

Turnout was once thought to be a rather uninteresting phenomenon simply explained and highly stable, but it seems less predictable and more interesting in recent years. Turnout continues to be predicted by education, partisanship, age, church attendance, community involvement, and marital status (Strate, Parrish, Elder, & Ford, 1989; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), but abstention from voting continued to rise until the highly polarized and heavily advertised 2004 campaign produced a sharp increase in turnout particularly in battleground states.

In a panel study of the unusually high abstention rate in the 1970 British general election, media influences were found to be complex (Blumler & McLeod, 1974). Those most likely to abstain as a result of disenchantment with the televised image of the person's

party leader, surprisingly, tended to be the more educated and better informed voters. Turnout studies in the United States suggest that exposure and attention to hard news in the print media are associated with turnout and with other forms of participation as well (Bybee, McLeod, Leutscher, & Garramone, 1981; McLeod & McDonald, 1985). Teixeira (1992) goes well beyond structural factors such as poverty and mobility to examine a range of motivational variables that are shown to affect turnout positively and negatively and suggests a number of campaign and media reforms designed to increase turnout. Negative campaigns and negative political advertising are forms of political communication that seem to stimulate voter turnout (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Jackson & Carsey, 2007; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; for arguments and evidence that negative advertising demobilizes and alienates voters see Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999). Overton (2006) provides structural arguments for voter suppression based on examination of macro factors such as gerrymandering of voting districts, voter identification requirements and other so-called "anti-fraud" rules that make voting more difficult.

Interpersonal Communication

The Columbia voting studies treated interpersonal communication as an alternative to mass media influence, noting that on an average day, 10% more discussed the election than read or heard about it through the media (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Other observers have come to see this as a "synthetic competition" (Chaffee, 1982), arguing that media and interpersonal channels may have convergent, complementary, or other relationships as well. There is substantial evidence that both customary patterns of exposure and attention to newspaper public affairs content, and exposure to the media during the campaign, stimulate interpersonal discussion. Although not very efficient in conveying information about issues, the media do seem to stimulate interpersonal discussion and interest in the campaign (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979). Interpersonal discussion helps people decide how to vote and may stimulate turnout except where the others in the conversational network are of the opposite party. Even discussion with strangers may affect voting. Noelle-Neumann (1984) reported that willingness to express a particular side of an issue in conversations with strangers ultimately led to change in opinion toward that side.

Rising interest in deliberative democracy has led to increased attention to political talk of all kinds, including deliberation (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Although not without its critics (e.g. Sanders, 1997), deliberation is an increasing focus of many active research programs (e.g. Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Gastil & Levine, 2005; Mutz, 2006 and Price & Cappella, 2002). It is also noteworthy that organizations such as AmericaSpeaks.org, National Issues Forum Institute, and Public Agenda, among others, have become quite active in recent years in promoting discussion forums around the country as well as online. The cumulative impact of these activities may be substantial in that they are reaching many thousands of people with their activities on an ongoing basis. People report a high level of satisfaction with these experiences, and often they are organized for the purpose of deciding local issues (e.g., Lukensmeyer, Goldman, & Brigham, 2005) at the invitation of local officials.

Media and Citizen Engagement

Discrepancies between the high normative standards of democratic theory and empirical evidence of low levels of citizen engagement have been noted repeatedly since the

early Columbia voting studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). Narrow concern with falling voting turnout rates turned to near panic with the popular acceptance of Robert Putnam's (1995) "bowling alone" thesis and evidence for a 30-year decline in a wide range of other political and civic participation indicators. Twelve political and communal activities declined an average of 27% from 1973–74 to 1993–94, for example (Putnam, 2000, p. 45). Trust in other people, a key indicator in Putnam's concept of social capital, slipped from 55% to 35% from 1960 to 1999 (Putnam, 2000, p. 140). It appears many forms of participation have declined over the past 30 years, some forms are stable, and some may be increasing. One point of agreement is that participation rates have not kept up with the rising levels of education over recent decades. This same generalization holds for political knowledge as well (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Levels of knowledge have, overall, remained rather stable despite increased levels of educational attainment.

What is most striking is the failure of Putnam and others involved in the debate over declining civic engagement to deal with news media use in any meaningful way. Putnam's concern is confined to the alleged effects of time spent with television displacing participation. The evidence for displacement is weak and reverse causation is likely—those who stay home rather than going out to participate may well turn to television for diversion. More surprising is that researchers ignore decades of mass communication research showing positive effects of news media use (when adequately measured) on political knowledge and participation (e.g., Blumler & McLeod, 1974; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; McLeod & McDonald, 1985; McLeod et al., 1996a; Smith, 1986; Wattenberg, 1984). Declining patterns of regular newspaper reading, along with lower levels of availability of a local daily paper in many local areas, have not been investigated as sources of stagnation in civic life.

Civic Participation

The civic turn has markedly broadened the criteria for communication effects through the examination of local issues and nontraditional forms of participation (McLeod et al, 1996b; McLeod et al., 1999a) and interpersonal trust as a mediator (Shah, 1998; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). It has redirected the study of participation toward the question of how civic engagement is stimulated conjointly by local media use, local issue discussion, and community ties (Kang & Kwak, 2003; McLeod et al., 1996b; McLeod et al., 1999a; Stamm, Emig, & Hesse, 1997). Recently, the knowledge gap concept has been extended to media effects on participation gaps (Cho & McLeod, 2007).

The ascendancy of the Internet as a central communication medium has inspired considerable research on its role as an antecedent to participation (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003; Shah et al., 2002). For example, Shah et al. (2005) found that both online and traditional media use encourage political discussion and civic messaging, which in turn motivate civic participation. Xenos and Moy (2007) found that the effect of Internet use on participation was contingent on political interest.

Civic Socialization

Half a century of political behavior research has shown that citizen involvement increases with age. Research from the past decade indicates that a cohort phenomenon may be at work along with the maturational effect. For example, in the three presidential elections

(1988 to 1996), voter turnout in the 18–24 age group averaged 37%, 21% lower than among all citizens (Casper & Bass, 1998). This compares unfavorably with three previous elections (1972 to 1980) when the 18–24 years group averaged 44% turnout, 17% below that of all citizens. Recent cohorts have contributed most to the decline in other aspects of electoral participation (Miller & Shanks, 1996) and in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). Also fueling concern are findings of cohort effects in the decline of newspaper reading in recent decades (Peiser, 2000). News use is a strong factor in stimulating youth participation (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1973; Chaffee, Pan, & McLeod, 1995). The implication of the cohort effects findings is that the current pattern of low participation among the young is apt to translate into even lower rates of overall participation as they move through the life cycle. In recent elections, there is some cause for optimism as youth vote went up in 2004, but not in 2006. Early signs point to the fact that youth turnout is surging again during the 2008 campaign. However, it is too early to tell whether these signs of youth involvement represent any reversal of the general pattern of decline in participation.

Concern with declining youth participation has precipitated a reexamination of the political socialization research that was popular in the 1960s (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; Niemi, 1999). Political socialization work virtually disappeared after the 1970s, in large part because it was based on a flawed developmental transmission model. The developing adolescent was seen as a passive recipient in the learning process. As socialization has returned to the research agenda, researchers have proposed looking at the traditional models of socialization in new ways. For example, McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) inverted the top-down model of socialization to focus on the role that the developing adolescent serves as an impetus for change in the family dynamic relative to public affairs. The new civic socialization research conceives of youth as potential participants actively engaged in the world around them, often trying out roles in anticipation of adulthood. Civic knowledge, interpersonal trust, and efficacious attitudes remain as criteria for socialization effects, but so are news media use, issue discussion, thoughtful processing of information, listening and turn-taking in discussions, and working out compromises (McLeod, 2000).

Effects on Children

In the 1990s, concern with low levels of participation among the young led to the development of dozens of school-based intervention programs using media as sources of learning or media production by youth as a learning device (Sirianni & Friedland, 2001). The strong interest of adolescents in new media beyond television (e.g., computers and cell phones) provides the basis for such programs (Roberts, 2000). The low level of news media use among adolescents is partly compensated for by their use of new technologies. Young adults not only are more likely than older adults to use the Internet for information, but the strength of the effect of such use on civic engagement is also greater (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Though various media-based programs have been successful, the complex processes by which they achieve their goals are seldom evaluated. A Kids Voting USA project was successful in stimulating adolescent civic engagement by strategically combining the strengths of teachers, parents, and local media (Chaffee et al., 1995; McDevitt & Chaffee, 1998; McLeod, Eveland, & Horowitz, 1998). Local media provided publicity for the program and content for classroom assignments. The program also reduced knowledge and participation gaps by gender (McLeod et al., 1998a) and social class (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000).

What lessons can be learned from the evaluation of these reform programs involving media? First, programs involving active and reflective learning have more lasting impact than do those confined to the passive learning of facts. Civics courses involving expressive activities were more effective in conveying knowledge (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Service learning in activities provides knowledge and skills lasting into adulthood (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997), particularly where the subject matter is tied to the field experience and where there is adequate reflection and evaluation (Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). Second, inducing change through media use is more likely to be effective when combined with the development of networks to discuss issues and support participation and sustain change. Media use patterns and networks developed around one issue are apt to carry over and provide the social capital for citizen action on other issues (Friedland, 2001). Finally, fundamental improvement in the quantity and quality of civic life requires not only change in individual citizens, but also the involvement of local associations and institutions in the community.

CONDITIONAL MODELS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Recent political communication effects research provides ample evidence that media impact is likely to be conditional rather than universal. Effects depend on orientations of audiences as well on exposure to media content stimuli. They take the form of O-S-O-R models (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). The first O represents the set of structural, cultural, cognitive, and motivational characteristics the audience brings to the reception situation that affect the impact of messages (S). They are often referred to as individual differences, although they are likely to be socially determined. They represent the person's *subjective* reactions to the *objective* conditions of the community and world in which he or she lives. These subjective orientations may alter effects either by directing the extent of use (dosage) of the messages or though interactions with message content magnifying or diminishing the strength (potency) of effect. In the former case, media use may *mediate* the effects of the orientations on some dependent variable. In the latter case, the orientation is said to act as a *moderator* of media effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The second O denotes various ways audiences may deal with media messages and indicates which is likely to happen between the reception of messages and the subsequent response (R) or outcome. Activity is the label given to various intervening orientations (Hawkins & Pingree, 1986). As is true for the first O, activities may be conceptualized at various levels ranging from a short-term physiological response to a complex set of interactions after the reception. New methodological work popularizing mediation and moderation is promoting interest in these approaches (Bucy & Tao, 2007; Holbert, 2005).

Prereception Orientations

Political Sophistication and Involvement

Educational and other status factors have produced large differences in how much citizens know and care about politics. Since the UN campaign study more than a half-century ago (Star & Hughes, 1950), evidence has consistently shown that those already informed are more likely to learn new information. Such sophistication also provides

more complex schema for interpretation of ambiguous political campaign events (Graber, 1988). While enhancing learning, sophistication and involvement may moderate other campaign effects such as agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McLeod et al., 1974; Weaver et al, 1981) and framing (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001).

Partisanship

Political partisanship serves as a heuristic device for political decision-making and as a key moderator of media effects through the selectivity processes of exposure, perception, and interpretation (Katz, 1987). Partisanship may minimize agenda-setting effects (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McLeod et al., 1974) and also priming effects when the primed news story is inconsistent with audience predispositions (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Partisanship led to different patterns of effects for exposure to late-night comedies (Young, 2004) and to different perceptions of media bias (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Worldviews and Values

Worldviews, personal beliefs or lay theories about how the world *is* (empirical) and normative theories of the world as it *ought* to be, can be powerful moderators of media effects (McLeod, Sotirovic, & Holbert, 1998b). Values that people hold as goals for their society and community have strong implications for media use and political participation (Inglehart, 1990). Holding strong *postmaterial* values (freedom to express ideas, helping each other, etc.) is strongly related to higher levels of public affairs media use and discussion of issues, and to reflection on how the content of news and discussion fits into their lives (McLeod et al., 1998b; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Strong *material* values (order, control by defense and fighting crime, etc.) tend to have a dampening effect on citizen action through more soft entertainment media use and less frequent discussions that deter political engagement. Communication thus mediates the effects of worldviews and values on informed participation. Values may also act as moderators interacting with messages. Strength of values held by audience members interact with the value framing of content to affect decision-making outcomes (Shah, 2001).

News Media Orientations

"Common-sense" theories about the news media, both empirical and normative, affect learning from the news (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990). For example, people who see the news as having underlying patterns tend to learn more. Citizens who strongly value the normative roles of the media as a watchdog, a forum for ideas, and as a catalyst for participation, pay more attention to the news, and thus are indirectly more knowledgeable and participatory (McLeod et al., 1998b). In contrast, those more strongly advocating *consensual* functions were less knowledgeable and active due to their higher levels of attention to soft news and entertainment television.

Gratifications Sought from News

Research from the uses-and-gratifications approach has shown that motives for using media can be an important effects moderator. For example, strength of motivation acted as a moderator in enhancing information gain from party broadcasts (Blumler &

McQuail, 1969; McLeod & Becker, 1974). Gratifications sought may weaken as well as strengthen media effects. Readers with the strongest motivation to gain information failed to shift their salience ratings of issues in accordance with the agenda of the newspaper they read (McLeod et al., 1974). Studies of Internet use show that use motivations affect the nature of search behavior (Yang, 2004) and user satisfaction (Liang, Lai, & Ku, 2006), which ultimately shape exposure effects.

Reception Activity Orientations

Effects are also conditioned by orientations during exposure to news. These orientations can be measured physiologically below the level of the person's awareness (Reeves, Thorson, & Schleuder, 1986), or by using self-report measures that suffer the weaknesses of other self-report measures, but do reveal substantial variance between persons.

Attention

Attention is the conscious focusing of increased mental effort. As applied to news, it can be measured from closed-ended questions regarding various types of news content, and separately or combined across media. Attention is particularly important for television, where exposure takes place under very different levels of attention. In contrast, use of a newspaper or Internet information site demands more attention. Learning from news is enhanced at higher levels of attention (Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986), though effects vary according to type of news media used (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). Exposure and attention may have more than additive effects. Exposure to hard news interacted with attention to increase both knowledge about the economy and community participation (McLeod & McDonald, 1985).

Information-processing Strategies

Audience activity includes strategies people employ to cope with the "flood of information" (Graber, 1988). Surveys using a set of self-report items found three dimensions of audience news information-processing strategies (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990): *selective scanning; active processing*, going beyond the story to reinterpret it according to the person's needs; and *reflective integration*, replaying the story in the person's mind and using it as a topic of discussion. The extent of political learning, political interest, and participation were restricted by selective scanning and enhanced by reflective integration. Active processing had a little effect on learning, but does stimulate interest and participation. Processing research has focused on *reflection* or *elaboration* (Eveland, 2005), particularly as it mediates news effects on political knowledge (Fredin & Kosicki, 1989; Kosicki, Becker, & Fredin, 1994; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999a; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), traditional participation (McLeod et al., 1999a; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), participation in public forums (McLeod et al., 1999b), and voting intentions (Hwang et al., 2007).

SYSTEMIC POLITICAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Two very different processes are implied by systemic effects. The first are media effects on individuals that have consequences for societal and community systems. The second

involves the influence of the collective features of institutions on individual behavior. The two are examples of micro-to-macro and macro-to-micro processes (McLeod, Pan, & Rucinski, 1995; Pan & McLeod, 1991).

Aggregated Individual Effects

Connecting micro individual-level effects and macro institutional-level consequences poses several difficult problems. First, systemic consequences are manifested through institutional policies, practices, and laws and other outcomes that transcend individual judgments. Second, systemic consequences are not reducible to the simple aggregation of individual-level effects. The distribution of effects, for example, can be of great theoretical significance, as in knowledge gap issues (Tichenor et al., 1970). Quite different concepts and theories are appropriate to various micro and macro levels (McLeod & Blumler, 1987). Finally, democratic practices involve collective forms of action such as social movements whose fate involves the connection of groups to information and power.

In lieu of formal attempts at cross-level theorizing, we can take current problems with the political system and work backward to possible ways in which the media might be responsible. The problems of the American political system are well documented. Despite substantial increases in educational attainment over several decades, there has been no corresponding increase in knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and a substantial decline in voter turnout and certain other indicators of participation have been noted with alarm (Putnam, 1995). Unfortunately, the search for causes of political system stagnation has been confined largely to the potential displacement effects of spending time with television.

Structural Effects

More substantial progress over the past decade has been made in research on macro-systemic to micro-individual effects. The structure of the person's discussion network influences participation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; McLeod et al., 1996a; Scheufele et al., 2006), though this relationship may be moderated by discussion frequency (Kwak et al., 2005). Beyond the effects of micro-social discussion networks, the contexts of the larger neighborhood and community may have consequences for individual media use and participation. The level of community stability, the contextual aggregation of residential stability (low likelihood and desire to move) across all individuals sampled in a community, was associated with higher levels of trust and participation after all individual level variables had been introduced (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Further, contextual community stability interacted with exchanging information on the Internet to bolster participation. Newspaper hard news reading interacted with two contextual variables, institutional confidence and connectedness, to bolster participation. Media impact depends on where we live collectively as well as how we live individually.

Evidence of political stratification depicts a political world sharply divided into a small group of sophisticated, involved citizens and a much larger group of uninterested and relatively uninformed citizens (Neuman, 1986). This stratified model of the political system may need qualification. Popkin (1991) has argued that increases in education have not deepened but nonetheless have broadened the number of issues seen as relevant to citizens' lives. It is likely that television news deserves some credit for this (Blumler & McLeod, 1974). Broadening may have led to an increase in the number of

issue publics, that is, relatively small groups with intense interest in a particular issue, but with much less interest in most other issues. Issue specialization poses problems for political party mobilization and for coverage by news media increasingly constrained in resources.

Increasing attention to structural changes in the media environment are called for in light of the dramatic changes brought on by the disrupting technological effects of the Internet. Television content is increasingly delivered to consumers via DVD or through direct online downloading. Newspaper and magazine content is increasingly available online through the publication's own web sites, but also via a variety of content aggregators (e.g., Google News, Yahoo! News) enabled by search engine technology. It might be tempting from the standpoint of the user to say this makes no discernible difference in audience effects. But to the extent that aggregators are attracting advertising dollars for content they don't own, this is weakening the newsgathering operations of the large television networks, newspapers and magazines through loss of revenue. For example, revenue for Google Inc., a leading search engine and news aggregator founded in 1998, will likely exceed $16 billion in 2008. That is approximately the equivalent of the combined revenues of the four leading television networks in the United States.

While many individuals in the United States are accessing news online, the traditional mass media continue to serve large audiences (Ahlers, 2006). As the pace of innovation increases it is likely that traditional media will adapt by incorporating more of the characteristics of online environments. The implications of these trends for the future of media and democracy are discussed by Harrison & Falvey (2001). Sunstein (2006) discusses the collaborative possibilities of online environments, and Benkler (2006) focuses on the political economy of social production and the implications for the future of media and information availability and use in society.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Political communication effects research has continued to develop in ways that reflect: (a) the increased complexity of effects models; (b) augmented conceptions of media messages; and (c) an expanded emphasis on diverse types of effects. This development has included several promising trends. First, there has been some progress in connecting audience effects with other parts of the communication process: news sources, media organizations, and content. Second, investigation at the macro-social level of analysis has been revitalized to complement the already extensive research at the individual level. Coinciding with the resurgence of macrolevel concern, research making comparisons between communities, nations, and historical periods has also emerged (Bennett, 2000; Blumler, 1983; Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). A fourth trend is a renewed interest in language—not only the language of media content, but language as it relates to the production and interpretation of mediated information. Fifth, there has been an increase in the number of studies that combine methodologies and/or use multiple sources of data to provide more complete answers to research questions. Sixth, there has been a rebirth of interest in issues of civic socialization and community. Seventh, in assessing media effects, researchers are beginning to recognize the differences between the level of usage (dosage) and the strength of the effect (potency). Finally, researchers have developed more complex models of political communication processes. Each of the trends has been stimulated

by the increasing complexity of the political environment and has facilitated the growth of knowledge in the field.

We have presented various ways in which the boundaries of political communication effects research have expanded in recent years. Movement has been "horizontal," connecting individual effects with other parts of the mass communication process as well as with their consequences for the political system. Broadening of effects also necessitates "vertical" linkages of individual behavior with political system institutions and interpersonal processes. Expansion is also seen in the diversity of media effects considered and in alternative conceptualizations of media messages. Political effects are now more likely to be seen as having varying impact contingent on characteristics of particular segments of the audience and as operating in an indirect and delayed fashion. Finally, we have shown how very different methodological strategies have informed the body of political communication knowledge.

In conclusion, we point out that the news media are by no means the sole cause nor even a major cause of current problems in the political system. Responsibility must be shared with other social institutions: the family, schools, political parties, and political leaders who have "joint custody" of democracy. However, this makes systematic study of the media's political effects no less necessary.

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