Chapter 1

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Political communication: an overview

It is not a trivial challenge to answer the question – what is political communication? – and this overview is an attempt to provide a number of perspectives on the answer. At its most obvious level, it refers to the role of communication in the political process, especially during the periodic enactment of the central ritual of all modern democracies – the election of new governments. It includes the speeches of politicians, televised debates between candidates, the reporting by political correspondents of candidates' behaviour, especially their public utterances, the use of billboards and posters on lamp posts to show off party emblems and slogans, and new uses of the internet to find and motivate voters. We might call this 'Type A' political communication.

But consider the following news story taken from the middle of 2012, a far less obvious but much more complex example of our subject that illustrates what we might call 'Type B' political communication.

It is a mid-summer weekend in Dublin, the electronic dance music trio 'Swedish House Mafia' is giving a final-tour concert, and 45,000 teenage fans are converging on the Phoenix Park for what should be a day of fun. But soon, the event is descending into chaos under the weight of under-age binge drinking, drug-taking and violence. YouTube footage captures images of bare-chested bellicose youths kicking and punching each

other in a bath of mud, while on-lookers join in on a whim. When the mayhem is over, the toll is two drug deaths, nine stabbings, 33 arrests and 70 charges brought by police. Now the media take note. Before the day is done, it has become a major mediated event, dominating news bulletins and projected across the country through a wide range of media channels.

Then it starts to become political. It initiates a maelstrom of political communication involving a wide range of actors and activating a range of public institutions. The police announce a comprehensive review of the violence, to make recommendations to the minister for justice. Other public bodies spring into action promising their own reviews: the city council that issues licenses for public events, the managers of the Phoenix Park, the director of public prosecutions. The media hold the event at the top of their agenda for the next 72 hours and start teasing out issues relevant to public health, the education of teenagers, and the nation's drink habits. The range of participants now includes radio producers, print journalists, leader writers, TV researchers, celebrity presenters, photo editors, current affairs teams, on-air academic pundits. Online social networks are buzzing. Letters to the editor and vox pop street interviews on radio stations provide their own approximation of the voice of the public, before the pollsters can start measuring opinion in a more systematic way.

At this stage, pressure begins to mount at another level, in the domain of politics proper. The minister of state for health, a member of the Labour Party in the coalition government, repeats her argument that government must finally decide on a range of

alcohol marketing reforms in order to deal with a growing 'drink problem' in Ireland.

These include minimum unit pricing, restrictions on advertising and sports sponsorship,

and a 'responsibility levy' on alcohol sales to fund media campaigns about the dangers of

alcohol aimed at young people. This in turn mobilises business lobby groups to challenge

the idea of state intervention: the drinks industry, supermarket chains, the Irish Business

and Employers' Confederation (IBEC). Trade unions are ambivalent, since jobs could be

lost. There is talk among backbenchers of increased strain between the coalition

government partners, as another minister, thought to be heavily targeted by lobbyists,

queries the Labour minister's proposals. Resistance to reform of alcohol marketing

features in the resignation of the Labour minister a few months later in response to a

different crisis.

So over the course of a single bank-holiday weekend, in a process not planned by any

human agency, the visit of 'Swedish House Mafia' has been transformed from a musical

event into what could be described as a convulsion of political communication, just when

the Dublin-based political system seemed ready to pack its bags for the summer recess

and journalists prepared for the seasonal drop in 'Type A' political communication.

How do we begin to analyse the multifaceted nature and sometimes unanticipated range

of political communication in contemporary society? The aim of this chapter is to present

an overview of what is undoubtedly the most important of the many forms public

discourse can take and to offer some insights into the distinctive field of knowledge about

political communication that has developed over many years of academic analysis.

Motivating this scholarly work has been the aim of developing a deeper understanding of how political power is distributed in society. Here we will try to map the major concepts that structure this interdisciplinary field and to focus on pertinent issues that have piqued researchers' curiosity about power and public communication.

Matters of definition

In a very loose sense, political communication developed over many centuries as both scholars and practitioners observed how people communicate about politics, speculated on the consequences of this and analysed how certain outcomes could be produced or avoided. Its early origins can be found in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero in the classical world, but also in Machiavelli and other commentators in the Renaissance period, and in Enlightenment political philosophers, including Locke, Kant and Hume.

It began to develop in a more disciplined way at the turn of the twentieth century, emerging as a sub-field of political science. Concepts were more carefully defined, the importance of the historical and socio-economic context of politics became evident and systematic methods of analysis were developed. The mainstream of the field crystallised around study of the strategic uses of communication by political actors and their impact on the attitudes and behaviour of the public. Communication scholars began to focus on the various processes through which political institutions, media organisations and citizens interact with each other when there is deliberate action to mobilise and transmit political influence.

In the contemporary era, media institutions and the technologies they deploy have become central to understanding the interaction that occurs between media and political systems at several levels: locally, nationally and internationally. The focal points for scholarly analysis outlined by Franklin (1995) are a useful starting point for understanding the range of themes to be considered. He argues that we need to study at least the following, in order to make sense of the totality of political communication:

(a) the political context of media content (news and current affairs, coverage of elections and referenda, reporting of parliament, political cartoons);

(b) the actors and agencies – both political and media – involved in the production of media content (government ministers and press secretaries, press officers in political parties and pressure groups, journalists and editors, media owners and broadcasters) as well as the nature of the relationship between journalists and politicians, whether that relationship is conflictual, consensual or collusive;

(c) the impact of media content on various audiences (both the general public and more narrowly defined business and political elites) as well as the impact of the media on policy making and the role of the media in framing significant issues in public opinion;

(d) the impact of the political system on the media system (government media policy, party media policy, systems of regulation and censorship, attempts at news management and agenda-building by political actors, lobbyists, media owners and other significant individuals);

(e) the impact of the media system on the political system (structures of ownership of the press and broadcast media, locally, nationally and globally, the effect of media

partisanship on political outcomes, fourth estate functions of critique and accountability).

This useful five-fold division of the field of political communication was formulated in the mid-1990s, when the Web was in its infancy and social media had not yet appeared, so it needs considerable updating to deal with issues that arise, for instance, in the use of new media in election campaigns. But first we go back a little in time to provide historical perspective, to see how some important ideas emerged over the course of the last century and how they were used as conceptual tools to analyse political systems.

Communication as persuasion

Political communication as a formally organised academic discipline began to take shape early in the last century with the analysis of propaganda in the aftermath of the First World War. Harold Lasswell's seminal text *Propaganda Techniques in the World War*, published in the US in 1927, established the mainstream framework for later research, using quantitative content analysis to understand how governments use persuasive messages to influence public opinion. Lasswell regarded 'content' as a set of 'messages' aimed at 'recipients' (Who said What to Whom with what Effect) rather than as 'texts' to be interpreted by 'readers' (a notion that would not fully emerge until the arrival of semiotics in the 1970s). This early propaganda model argued that media generally produce powerful, direct, uniform effects on people. It assumed a so-called 'magic bullet' impact on readers and audiences.

For most of the inter-war years, the prevailing approach in American universities

emphasised the power of media effects on people, pointing to impressive examples like the role of the Hearst newspapers in shaping a pro-war public opinion and leading the US into the Spanish-American war in 1898 (an event viewed by later historians as the defining moment in the launch of American global ambitions). Another example of media power was seen in the mass panic that followed the CBS broadcast of Orson Welles' radio play 'War of the Worlds' at Halloween 1938, presented in the realist manner of a series of news bulletins suggesting to many listeners that an actual alien invasion was under way.

In sketching the early history of how political communication has been studied, mainly in the US, it must be remembered that unlike many European countries, political marketing based on theories of persuasion became embedded early on in the American electoral system. Paid television commercials today are a major force in American elections, especially at the presidential level where they are used to shape the contours of each candidate's political campaign. Novice politicians with little name recognition must first establish their fund-raising credentials to pay for access to television. Early American academic interest in the psychological mechanisms governing how persuasive campaigns influence voters feed directly in to the contemporary fascination with marketing principles now routinely applied in Irish (and other European) elections in the twentieth-first century. These include the role of market research in party branding and the creation of specific imagery around a candidate, strategies for market segmentation and candidate positioning in the overall political landscape, the search for consultants with the best track records and experienced commercial managers who can run a successful political

marketing campaign.

By the 1940s, serious academic efforts were being focused on studying the effects of radio and print media on voters' choice of candidates. Both qualitative and quantitative methods – in-depth interviews, participant observation, content analysis and panel studies – were being refined by Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian émigré working at Columbia University. Carl Hovland and Kurt Lewin at Yale were making a credible case for using the experimental paradigm in a social scientific context, borrowed from the natural sciences where the experimental method had flourished for a long time. Their focus was on attitude change resulting from exposure to media stimuli, using careful measurement techniques, data gathering and statistical analysis to study voter habits. They also studied less obvious aspects of political communication, such as wartime government use of domestic radio propaganda to urge Americans to buy war bonds, collect scrap metal and plant 'victory gardens' to survive food shortages.

Only later in the 1940s came the realisation that what had been called the 'magic bullet' approach to media influence needed to be tempered by the realisation that people selectively avoid (or seek out) particular media content, then selectively perceive particular meanings in the content. Working out what a concept like 'selective exposure' or 'selective perception' means empirically – and operationalizing it in the design of research projects – indicates a new emphasis on the psychology of personality variables and a sociological emphasis on demographics (which evolved much later in the century into the marketing terminology of 'psychographics'). Media influence could no longer be

presumed to be either direct or uniformly powerful or involving always a passive audience. A more nuanced approach to communication theory, involving a search for a subtler understanding of how human beings persuade each other, was needed if theory was to guide more fruitful empirical research on media and politics.

One of the most comprehensive war-time studies of voting behaviour – how the 1940 presidential election campaign played out in Erie County, Ohio – produced the almost accidental insight that when people make decisions about political issues, interpersonal communication plays an important, complementary role, along with exposure to media content. Thus, a new emphasis was placed on the role of opinion leaders, that is, people with more than average exposure to media content, more involved in debating public issues and more centrally placed within interpersonal networks in their community. Opinion leadership became the focus of a long series of studies using a new approach, the so-called 'Two-step flow' model of communication. The media primarily influenced opinion leaders, who then had an effect on networks of people linked to them through interpersonal contact.

This model was also applied in a Cold War context to study how innovations could be diffused by American development agencies eager to influence emerging Third World countries looking to either the US or the USSR for help. American innovations being diffused to counter Soviet influence in the process of decolonisation included not only new methods of farming but also Western models for how media and politics should be organised. The emphasis on interpersonal networks in the 'diffusion' paradigm would

emerge yet again in more recent studies, as we will see, with scholars going beyond an interest in 'old' mass media channels to focus on study of blogposts, Twitter messages and other online social networks that serve as new platforms for political expression.

Public discourse

There is another significant tradition in the study of political communication that has developed alongside the American social scientific paradigm, one that is quite different from it in its concerns, its theoretical background and its methodologies. It is strongly rooted in a humanities perspective and emphasises the concepts of rhetoric and discourse. Rhetorical analysis is built on qualitative approaches to research, similar to those found in English departments in the early twentieth century. The text is central.

Early precedents for reflecting on rhetoric and the role of public discourse in society can be found in the insights of Plato and Aristotle as they engaged with early forms of political communication in the fledgling Athenian democracy of their time. There is an emphasis on speakers' motives and oratorical style, the historical context of political events and the rhetorical structure of significant speeches. This approach survives today in many American universities in the form of focusing critical attention on presidential speeches or on swathes of media content using conceptual approaches not too far removed from literary studies. These include dramatistic analysis, the exploration of 'fantasy themes', the analysis of narrative, myth and ideology in political discourse, and Lakoff's (1996) influential work on the role of metaphor.

Rhetorical analysis has been very successfully applied to media coverage of political events including election campaigns, where the primary emphasis is on qualitative approaches to content or 'text'. The turn towards rhetorical analysis of political communication was enriched by the emergence of semiotics in the 1970s as a major new approach to analysing the workings of signification, the complex process that creates meanings in public discourse. Semiotics helped to underpin a critical view of how political meaning is created in publicly circulated texts such as news reports. Inspired by the emergence of the New Left and Cultural Studies movements in Britain, it was enriched by the neo-Marxian emphasis on understanding questions of power in contemporary culture by analysing and deconstructing ideology.

Ideology in this sense refers not to clearly articulated doctrine that might be promoted by a political party, but to something far more subtle flowing through society, erasing its roots as it moves, tacitly creating a 'common sense' that can frequently assume a hegemonic position in discussion of public issues. Stuart Hall defines ideology as 'the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' (Hall, 1996, 25–46). Ideology often serves to protect the real material interests of a small section of society, justifying its activities and attitudes and promoting its interests, by creating a coherence of meaning and generating a widely held 'common sense' that gains traction far beyond its core group.

One of the most spectacular examples of ideology at work in recent times has been the influence brought to bear on the shaping of news discourse across the US by right-wing, ideological think-tanks, many of them endowed by very wealthy patrons like the Koch brothers. These include Americans for Prosperity, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and many others. These well-funded think-tanks devote substantial resources and skilled effort to promoting the ideas of wealthy industrialists and owners of capital. While keeping their political programme relatively invisible, they achieve high visibility for their solutions to national and global political issues by gaining favoured access to prominent mainstream news media and directly lobbying different arms of government. Their major achievement leading up to 2012 was the significant impact they made on presidential politics using conservative grass-roots movements like the Tea Party. Think-tanks shaped both mass opinion and elite attitudes (including senior journalists and editors and Congressional staff) towards a range of major political issues: healthcare reform, anthropogenic global warming, the (de)regulation of the banking, oil, gas, coal, nuclear and chemical industries, the right of workers to collectively bargain with employers, the size of the military budget and the need for national involvement in foreign wars.

Whether we call the publicly circulated words and visual images that influence public opinion 'rhetoric' or 'discourse' does not really matter, if we have a sound method for analysing how power is exercised in democracies through public communication – both in electoral campaigns and in the long gaps between elections. The critical tradition in Western Marxism, represented by Gramsci, Althusser, and the Frankfurt School, is an

important backdrop to what is one of the most fertile of contemporary approaches to analysing political discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), seen at its best in the work of Van Dijk (2001), Fairclough (2003) or Wodak and Chilton (2005), involves a search for aspects or dimensions of reality that are obscured by an apparently natural and transparent use of language. Its use in political communication often centres on the role of journalism, considered as a discursive re-construction of reality. Rarely do journalists get to know reality in an unmediated way, without heavy reliance on sources of information. The role of political sources has been widely investigated in the study of both popular and elite media. These include think tanks, public relations agencies, lobbyists, whistle blowers, government leakers and spin doctors.

As professional story-tellers, journalists have effectively always naturalised the political and economic practices of their era by circulating the myths, ideologies, memories and symbols from which people construct their political identities and justify their political actions. So a focus that becomes important for the academic analyst interested in news sources is the question of whose perspective seems to dominate in news reports and editorial comment (Louw, 2005). How does public discussion become structured by particular social actors who have the power to put a 'primary definition' on a problem? Who has 'framing power?' How is the overall meaning of a defined block of media discourse successfully shaped in one particular way rather than another, by the imposition of a particular frame on the texts that make up that block? Framing power is the capacity of one actor – a politician, an institution, a spin doctor, a moral crusader – to convey his/her views through the media by having those positions represented either in the form

of quotes or paraphrase or in the actual selection and arrangement of the elements of a text.

Framing is inherent in the construction of all political communication. A frame is a structure in a text – which might be a particular type of newspaper content or television broadcast – that organises and creates a meaningful and coherent picture of an unfolding series of events (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). Frames are used in the production of media output to define problems, suggest diagnoses, make moral judgments and prescribe solutions (Entman, 1993). Teenage binge drinking in Dublin in 2012 was eventually framed as a deficiency in the regulation of the drinks industry. Alternative frames were either not used or withered away in the early stages of the media discussion. Some frames can have very deep historical roots. Rojecki (2008), for instance, uses frame analysis to study media elites' understanding of American post-9/11 foreign policy and George Bush's war on terror. He argues that Bush gained the support and moral cover of media elite opinion, especially in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by successfully framing his foreign policy in terms of the moral component of American political culture. His team constructed arguments and justifications in terms of 'American exceptionalism', the strong mythic commitment, rooted in the history of the United States, to an exemplary moral vision that many Americans are convinced is unique to the United States. Historians trace the ideological roots of this pervasive myth to moral and religious views embedded in early nineteenth century Puritanism and its focus on the 'manifest destiny' of the United States.

Analysis of media discourse is often carried out by concentrating on what CDA analysts call 'critical discourse moments', where discursive positions that exist for some time start becoming more and more recurrent. These moments are usually centred on specific socially relevant events that challenge well established attitudes. The death of Savita Halappanavar from complications of pregnancy in a Galway hospital in 2012 is a case in point. Future studies of the politics of abortion in Ireland will undoubtedly investigate the 'discursive moment' that was triggered by her death and its initial reporting in the *Irish Times*. In this moment, an old debate about abortion emerges once more from social amnesia and marginalisation, and long sedimented positions are scrutinised afresh, despite the obvious reluctance of many politicians to allow abortion back onto the political agenda.

Agenda-setting

Just as we can ask which frames are privileged in a range of politically relevant news texts, or which frames are totally excluded, so we should ask what alternative issues, arguments and proposals are included or excluded from public agendas and why this is so. Agenda-setting research is centred on the question of whether (and how) the media can affect political agendas, and how institutional forces such as political parties or business interest groups can influence media agendas. A parallel concern is how either the media or the political system, and the agendas they adopt at any particular time, can shape public opinion by creating a hierarchy of issues that influences what people think about. This shaping of public opinion can sometimes be captured in a series of opinion surveys. A conclusion of the earliest research in agenda-setting in the 1960s is that the

media may not tell us what to think, but they can certainly tell us what to think about. Quite apart from research findings, surveys of politicians and journalists frequently indicate a strong belief among both groups that the media are indeed important agenda-setters in politics and in public opinion.

A key question for political scientists is the extent to which a political leader – a president, prime minister or Taoiseach – can successfully use one of the key weapons in their rhetorical arsenal in order to set the national agenda: the nationally televised speech. At the onset of the banking crisis in Ireland late in 2008, for instance, then Taoiseach Brian Cowan was heavily criticised for not attempting to use the power of television to set his imprint on the intense national discussion that was about to follow the collapse of banking in Ireland. Would it have made a difference? American research (Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008) on the effectiveness of presidential addresses in increasing news coverage of White House priorities and agendas, suggests that media attention can increase in the short-term following a major speech, but it tends to drop off quickly and is affected by such factors as previous media coverage, the level of public concern about an issue and the current presidential approval rating.

One of the strengths of agenda-setting as a conceptual tool in research on political communication is that it goes beyond the simple stimulus-response model that underpins earlier attempts to understand the impact of the media on public opinion (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). It enables an institutional study of newspaper and broadcast media on the one hand, and government and political parties on the other, to see how they function in

relation to making selected issues more salient in the public sphere.

In some cases, the public is totally excluded from the circular process of political influence, though it will of course have to live with the outcomes of policy-making. Aeron Davis studied the use of media by members of parliament in Westminster and concluded that intense media attention focused on particular issues can shift political agendas and create an impact on British government policy without involving public opinion at all. The elite political sphere based in London produces and consumes information within closed communication networks, in which a very small number of media play a crucial part, where 'the mass of consumer-citizens can be no more than ill-informed spectators' (Davis, 2007, 60). Elite journalism can play a significant social role by enabling politicians to negotiate different agendas and policy options within their small elite sphere, across government and opposition parties. Corcoran and Fahy (2009) conclude from their analysis of the role of the *Financial Times* in Brussels that a distinction must be made between a broadly based European public sphere and a more enclosed European elite sphere, composed of senior business people, national and EU politicians, lobbyists, public relations executives, diplomats, regulators, senior civil servants and journalists assigned to Brussels. In European politics, media institutions like the *Financial Times* seem to perform a role in accordance with the classical model of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) except that public opinion actually plays little or no role and the sphere in question is an elite micro-culture. The decisions and ideologies of this special sphere have, of course, a significant, extended material impact on society in general in all member states, hence the complaint from some quarters about a 'democratic

deficit' in EU politics. Likewise, Entman (2004) argues convincingly that a foreign policy elite in Washington first debates and reaches a consensus on the direction American foreign policy should take and only then seeks to shape the news in mainstream media to create public acquiescence to the agenda already worked out by the policy elite.

The internet and political engagement

So far, we have been considering the role of traditional media in political communication. But what of the internet, which, since the emergence of the Web in the mid-1990s, has become a major force in contemporary culture? One of the first concerns that arose in the field of political communication, driven partly by the widespread influence of Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), was whether the internet has a positive or negative effect on civic and political engagement. The question is not a simple one, not least because of difficulties in defining the terms of the debate and then in deciding on what researchers call the direction of causality.

Putnam believed the internet will have a detrimental effect on citizen engagement with politics because it is used primarily for entertainment. People will have less time to devote to joining civic groups and engaging in other social activities (including bowling). However, the internet can also be seen as facilitating increased access to political information and more intense political discussion, especially on topics marginalised by the mainstream media. If social networks develop in the direction of creating a genuinely alternative space for political expression, this would invigorate rather than destroy civic

life. What has research to say about this?

Boulianne (2008) undertook a meta-analysis of 38 studies published in recent years, all investigating people's use of the internet and their political behaviour or expression: voting, donating money to a campaign or political group, working for a campaign, attending meetings or rallies, writing a letter to an editor, talking politics, wearing a political button, etc. Her findings suggest that internet use and political engagement are positively related. Online political discussion, for instance, has a significant positive effect on offline political participation. But which can be said to cause the other? Could pre-existing interest in politics be a third variable influencing people both in their internet use and in their civic engagement, making the causal link between the internet and politics difficult to establish? Most of the studies analysed by Boulianne are silent on this. They assumed there was a causal direction of effects and did not attempt to test the possibility of reciprocal effects. Could those who are already more politically engaged use the internet more than the average citizen? Bourianne concludes from her meta-analysis that the effects of internet use on civic engagement are positive but not substantial. If internet use is measured mostly in terms of accessing online news, this tends to increase the likelihood of finding a positive and larger effect of internet use on civic engagement.

This body of research suggests that better access to a large, diverse range of political information may help to invigorate civic life by reducing the cost of participation in the public sphere in terms of time and effort. But more needs to be known about this

increasingly important aspect of political communication and how it impinges not just on individual voters but also on pressure groups and social movements. Online social networking features strongly in contemporary political protest movements, as can be seen in the role of the internet in the so-called Arab Spring revolts of recent years. A great deal of political protest in the digital age manifests itself in rapid and dense network behaviour that crosses the boundary between issues and organisations much more easily than the often fractious coalition brokerage that characterised mobilising people against the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

The internet now plays a unique role in transforming the scope and scale of interpersonal political relationships. The mobilisation of protest is made easier, not least because online communication facilitates the emergence of horizontal, digitally distributed networks that operate beyond the reach of formal organisations, like the global social justice movement that emerged out of transnational demonstrations against the Iraq War in 2003 (Bennett et al, 2008). The internet enables sustainable, interpersonal network organising on a large scale, capable of acting upon conventional organisations such as churches, trade unions, political parties and peace groups. Some global protest movements, such as the Zapatista Solidarity movement in Mexico, or the Ogoni in Nigeria, have been more successful than other social movements in finding their voice in the arena of global civil society, where dozens of civil society groups seek to challenge power structures in their own countries and compete for active support from elsewhere in the world.

E-campaigning

Mainstream interest in political communication will continue to be centred on the influence of the media on electoral politics, or in the case of the internet, the impact of the Web in online election campaigns. We already know that Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign set a new standard for e-campaigning (Kenski et al, 2010). Like Howard Dean four years previously, Obama was highly successful in both fund-raising and building an online community of strongly motivated supporters. This inspired a scramble among politicians in many other countries who attempted to copy his success, believing the Web is revolutionising modern election campaigns as television did in the 1960s, with similar far reaching consequences. A new slogan began to appear in political marketing circles: 'Politics is no longer local, it's viral'.

Systematic empirical analysis of e-campaigning is limited, however. The spectrum of research findings currently available range from the argument that there is no marked effect of e-campaigning on voter behaviour – since the internet reinforces rather than challenges contemporary political practices – to the contention that there are significant gains to be made by candidates utilising the internet in imaginative ways. Ten years ago, there was a growing consensus within the e-politics literature that the internet was leading to minimal or no change within wider institutions of governance and the citizen body as a whole. But as the Web itself evolved, evidence is emerging that the impact of online campaigns is moderated by the type of Web tools used. Most politicians, in Ireland and elsewhere, presently focus on attempts to capture mainstream media coverage on their websites and make very little use of Web 2.0 technologies. Yet these are now

revolutionising the way the internet facilitates new forms of political communication: building websites that are genuinely interactive, posting videos on interactive video channels, establishing profiles on social networks and blogging.

Recent evidence from the Australian general election of 2007 suggests that an exclusive emphasis on using Web 1.0 capabilities is not a wise strategy for ambitious politicians. Australia is one of the global leaders in levels of internet use. Facebook, YouTube and Google have enjoyed a growing popularity among the electorate over several years, and so it provided a good context for research on e-campaigning. Use of new Web applications had more than doubled in the two months prior to the 2007 general election. The internet was still far behind TV as a source of election news but was rapidly catching up with radio and newspapers and was expected to surpass radio within a decade.

Against this background, Gibson and McAllister (2011) set out to systematically compare the impact of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 campaigning on Australian voters' choices in 2007, while controlling for a wide range of other factors. Their goal was to interrogate growing academic and media orthodoxies about the effectiveness of the Web in securing votes. They conclude that Web 2.0 technologies certainly make a difference to voters and are much more effective in political campaigning than the more static Web 1.0 platform, with its emphasis on candidates placing their personal pages on party websites, sending out email newsletters and advertising their online addresses in traditional outlets. By contrast, the interactivity and dynamic interconnectiveness of Web 2.0 virtual spaces leads to messages being transmitted widely and virally via supporter blogs to very large numbers

of people linked to Twitter, Facebook, online video and grassroots activist sites. Gibson and McAllister conclude that this is where real political conversion and mobilisation may be taking place during election campaigns.

If these findings are replicated in future research, it means that it is Web 2.0 technologies that make the difference to voters and therefore the dominant narrative of Web research studies since the turn of the millennium will need to be challenged. This narrative privileges the idea that major political parties are merely reinforcing their offline dominance in the online sphere and nothing else is taking place. In the Australian election, it was the smaller parties that successively exploited the more grassroots-oriented types of new media that can create significant resonance and mobilising force with the electorate. In broader theoretical terms, it seems that direct Web effects are far less likely where voters convert to supporting a candidate after simply viewing his/her web site in a passive way. A better model is one of indirect, two-step effects, where the Web becomes a source of information for political activists who go on to mobilise others, something like the 'opinion leaders' discovered in the US presidential election campaign in Ohio in 1940.

In order to understand the full gamut of public communication about politics, researchers in the past have sampled newspapers, analysed selections of television programmes, dissected documentaries or listened to radio news broadcasts, all perfectly legitimate endeavours in the age of the mass media. Since the emergence of the Web in the mid-1990s, the challenge now is to understand the impact of this quite different platform on

political communication. New methodologies need to be developed for this, to analyse online social media as outlets for political expression and public debate that generate truly enormous data sets for the researcher. How do we grasp the significance of the massive network of people involved in Twitter, in terms of organised political campaigning? Answers to this are only just beginning to emerge (see Moe and Larsson, 2012). We have not yet begun to investigate 'Type B' political communication in online environments, though the savviest of politicians know that this is fertile ground for opinion formation.

Conclusion

New media developments obviously have great relevance for politicians and journalists reporting on politics. But they are also very relevant to the long-standing debate on the persistence of a political 'knowledge gap' in many democracies, despite the spread of new technologies and increasing access to the internet. Political knowledge is not equally distributed in society and there is plenty of evidence that the gap between the most and the least knowledgeable citizens is widening. This is due to a number of factors: socio-economic structures, disparities in educational levels, differences in rates of literacy and newspaper reading habits, different patterns of media consumption. But it is also related to differences in media content between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers and between privately owned and public service radio and television channels.

The media environment of some countries creates conditions favourable to political knowledge gain, while in others, the media system leads to a widening knowledge gap.

As Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out in their comparative study of three major media systems across Europe – the Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralist model, the Democratic Corporatist model in North/Central Europe and the North Atlantic or Liberal model – regional differences in levels of political awareness can be traced to the relative dominance in the media sector of either market forces or strong traditions of public service media. These differences can have a serious impact on levels of political knowledge in the population and ultimately on the kind of democracy that emerges. It is surely in the public interest to foster policies that broaden and deepen democracy by providing all citizens with affordable opportunities for participation in political discussion that in these times surges through the public sphere in ever increasing volumes.

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