

Political Communication

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The concept of political communication refers to both a set of professional practices and a theoretical and scholarly discipline. As a professional practice, the term “political communication” suggests a series of communication processes that have been given labels as varied as propaganda, electoral marketing, political marketing, political campaigning, and political public relations. Political communication has developed into an academic field of inquiry, with foundations in theories and methods from communication, political science, sociology, psychology, marketing, history, rhetoric, and other fields. Its multidisciplinary nature explains the difficulty in finding a straightforward definition. But it is agreed that political communication focuses on interaction between *political actors, the media, and citizens*, which is marked by its persuasive and strategic character.

The question posed by Lasswell (1927) on the effects of propaganda in the United States—“who says what to whom via which channels with what effects?”—is shared by a great deal of research in the political communication field. This simple question imposes and highlights the basic lines of analysis for the communication process in general and political communication in particular. Talking about *who* means analyzing the communicator, who controls the information. Content analysis of the messages makes it possible to find answers to *what*, and media analysis, which may involve a direct medium, using political advertising (e.g., posters or leaflets), or an indirect medium (e.g., editorials or opinion pieces in newspapers or on TV), reveals the *channels* used in the communication process. *Effects* analysis, a field that has been widely explored, particularly in North American literature regarding political campaigns, makes it possible to study the impacts of the communication process on audiences (*whom*) and normally focuses on voting behavior (using polls, for instance).

The Lasswell communication model assumes that the communicator always intends to influence the receiver, that all messages have effects, and that the process is unilateral in the downward direction. For a long time in history, political communication was in fact seen simply as a linear process of information transmission from political actors, as parties or candidates to citizens, which could be direct but also mediated by the media. As is shown in Figure 1, we see the direction of communication being caught by the media and then channeled out again, what is now known as the mediatization process. However, from this traditional point of view little or no communication takes place in the upward direction, that is from social groups to the political sphere.

Nonetheless, thanks to the democratization of most political systems, the nature of political communication has changed. Political communication shifted to the public

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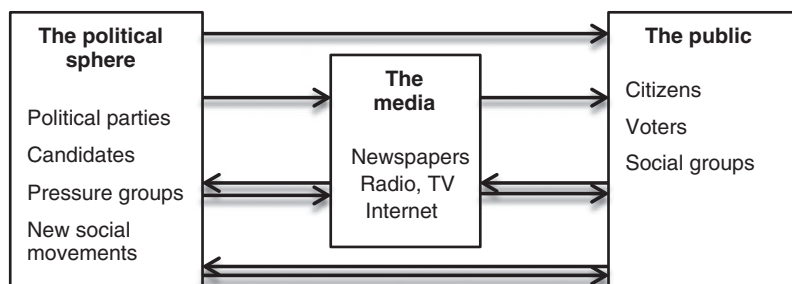


Figure 1 The political communication process.

Adapted from Jensen (2001).

sphere when people, mostly as a result of increased access to information, became involved in political activity. The simple act of voting is no longer enough and voters have become active citizens who are able to organize and become involved in political causes, thereby developing horizontal communication among political actors and citizens and giving rise to actions and protests that are increasingly covered by the media.

The growing struggle for media space, whether by official elective political agents, such as political parties or candidates, or by non-official organizations, such as new social movements or even terrorist groups, demands more and more complex models and theorizations to understand contemporary political communication (Lilleker, 2006). Nowadays, as shown in Figure 1, the communication process is also in the upward direction—from public opinion to the political sphere.

The field of political communication therefore deals with the construction and dissemination of messages that may potentially have a direct or indirect impact on politics. Classically, political parties are the most important political organization in political communication and policy-making processes. But they are not the only significant organizations in the political communication context. Message communicators may be other organizations, such as think tanks, nongovernmental organizations such as churches, unions, environmental organizations, human rights organizations, or other interest groups. Journalists are also very important agents in political communication processes, as are new social movements.

Political communication research

Political actors and the production process

A significant section of political communication literature focuses on production processes, that is the way in which messages are generated by political actors and spread either through traditional media or “new” media, including but not limited to the context of elections.

According to Norris (2000), we can consider three different communication stages, namely regarding campaigns: pre-modern (from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the 1950s), modern (from the end of the 1980s), and postmodern (since the

beginning of the 1990s). While in the modern period political communication was dominated by television, the postmodern period has seen the emergence of the Internet as an important new player, helping transform the mass media campaign into a “hyper-media campaign.” Obama’s presidential campaign in 2008 became known as the first Internet election.

Several authors have devoted themselves to studying new technologies, especially the use of the Internet not just by politicians but also by new social movements and the media themselves, and researching the way in which it has changed both political behavior and production of political content. Accepting Habermas’s thesis that the advent of the mass media brought about a “re-feudalization” of the public sphere, some authors saw the birth of the Internet as the rise of a “new public sphere” (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1997). On the other hand, other authors defended the “normalization thesis”: the thesis that politics on the Internet is nothing but “politics as usual,” dominated by the traditional, offline players (Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

In the era of the “permanent campaign” (Blumenthal), political communication is not limited to political marketing in the context of elections. Political communication also considers the role of communication in governing, incorporating communication activities that influence the operation of executive, legislative, and judicial bodies, political parties, interest groups, political action committees, and other participants in political processes. Thus a vast body of literature focuses on studying the “professionalization of politics,” which can be seen in the establishment of a class of political consultants, opinion poll professionals, and PR and media managers (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002). Some are dubbed “spin doctors,” a term that has a connotation of manipulation of public opinion. Several authors debate the consequences of the professionalization process for the strategic communication of political parties, governors, interest groups, and even for democracy itself.

Within a media ecosystem that sees constant technological evolution, recent work has also generated a growing body of research on the changing structure of the news industry, notably the economic basis of the newspaper industry and the legal structure regulating press and broadcasting.

Media and the messages

Content analysis of the messages produced by different political agents and conveyed by the media is a classic branch of political communication research. The biggest sources of political communication are public speeches, televised political advertising, print advertising, political posters, televised debates, and websites, especially during election periods. This branch of inquiry is based on the disciplines of rhetoric or linguistics to study the themes, metaphors, language, and political symbolism, and uses essentially qualitative methods.

The study of political messages is more prolific in election periods. The reason for this is certainly due to the importance associated with selecting the official representatives of democracy and concern about the quality of the messages offered to citizens, who choose those representatives. Interest in the study of presidential elections

rather than local/regional elections derives from the strong presence of North American researchers in the field. Some international comparative studies also stand out, above all on topics linked to the European Union, such as European elections.

Since electoral messages are broadcast in different formats in the media, comparative studies of the news coverage of politics are also a recurring theme. The most common form of comparative study on news about politics focuses on the media sector of one country in particular and deals with paid advertising, published press releases, opinion columns in newspapers, or television reports themselves. Studying the roles that the different media play in coverage of candidates and their electoral manifestos is also a popular exercise. As is the phenomenon of personalization of politics in the media, the issues of personality and celebrity have now become a part of the political landscape. The analysis of the tone and quantity of messages carried in the information media, or, in other words, the study of balance among parties in news coverage has always been the focus of great attention.

The mediatization of political messages through media channels is a strong research area and has many other approaches. One example is the study of the relationship between politicians and journalists, especially regarding access to government information and governments' control over the media. There are also various studies on the coverage that the media dedicate to political institutions belonging to different branches: executive (presidents, governments), legislative (parliament), and judicial (courts). Another recurring topic that can be the object of a comparative study, often from a diachronic perspective, is the agenda-setting reporting of policy issues and the representation of social minorities in the news media in recent decades. The study of agenda-setting extends to many other issues, such as the coverage given to political scandals. The impact of negative publicity on election results is also a popular research focus.

The effects and the people

The study of the potential effects of exposure to different types of political messages has been one of the most fruitful fields of research in political communication. Many authors devote themselves to understanding how the members of an audience are influenced in terms of perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors when exposed to different types of mediated messages, whether contained in an advert or a news story. Some researchers study the impact on perception and opinion regarding political themes (knowledge of the themes or recognition of a political leader), others on political attitudes and political values (support given to a particular party or cause) or on political behavior (i.e., voting intention).

Mass communication theories have inspired a significant number of political information processing studies. *Agenda-setting* theory has proven to be one of the most robust theories (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The core assumptions of this theory are that the media do not tell us what attitudes or opinions we should have (what to think), but they do tell us which issues we should be focusing on (what to think about). This means that by seeing an issue covered in the news media—and seeing it covered repeatedly and with great emphasis—we come to share with the media the view that the issue has

legitimacy and thus place it on our own mental agendas. Agenda-setting is therefore the creation of public awareness and concern with salient issues by the news media.

The assumption that the media agenda precedes the public agenda is a view close to *gatekeeping theory*. This theory emphasizes the role of editors in opening the “gates” to only certain stories or themes, which are those that join the media agenda and therefore reach the public. Several authors have also linked research on agenda-setting to *media framing studies*. Research in the field of framing assesses the way in which journalists organize the world and condition members of the audience to understand news and events. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. The central idea behind framing is contextualization: Framing puts information in a situational or cultural context that delineates how people evaluate information, comprehend meanings, and take action.

Initially applied to the study of news in the press and on TV, the scope of research in the field of agenda-setting theory has broadened to the effects of communication in “new” media, especially the opportunities for interaction and political participation that they provide. Some researchers have placed their hope in the Internet to increase civic engagement, particularly among young voters. Others see new technologies as just one more tool for the elites in power to maintain their position of hegemony.

Among many other important theories for studying the effects of the media, the *spiral of silence theory* (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) and the *media uses and gratifications theory* (Blumler & Katz, 1974) stand out. The *spiral of silence theory* suggests that people may be silenced when media messages about public issues are at odds with their own beliefs, even if they actually hold the majority opinion. *Media uses and gratifications theory* looks into the psychological rewards of media usage (i.e., entertainment, surveillance, and social utility). It makes it possible to analyze the effects of a political campaign from the perspective of the public rather than the campaigner.

Methodological approaches

Examining an early twenty-first century review of specialized literature research (Graber, 2005; Lin, 2004, pp. 70–71), five major theory traditions in political communication research and the corresponding choices of method could be identified: rhetorical analysis of political discourse, propaganda studies, voting studies, mass media effects, and the interplay of influence between government, press, and public opinion (Lin, 2004, pp. 70–71). The *first* is the tradition of rhetorical analysis in public political discourse. This approach is generally qualitative in nature and historically and critically examines the source of a political message (such as the speaker’s motives and styles) and the message itself. The *second* is the tradition of political propaganda study during the post–World War I to post–World War II periods. Scholars focused on how governments used propaganda/persuasive messages to influence public opinion. Lasswell’s (1927) quantitative analyses (content analysis) of messages generated by the government demonstrated the power of mass political communication in forming public opinion.

Within the *third* tradition of research—voting studies—specialists combined a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., survey research, in-depth

interviews, observation with participation, content analysis with biographies, and panel studies with focused interviews). Lazarsfeld and his colleagues published *The People's Choice* (1944), which is a classic work in the field of voting study. Lazarsfeld is considered the father of the survey method but he was also well aware of the analytical power of qualitative research. Two of the central theoretical insights developed by Lazarsfeld and his various collaborators—the *two-step flow of communication* and *opinion leadership*—emerged during observational fieldwork and can be considered the basis for studies on the effects of mass media, the *fourth* tradition in political communication research. Some scholars (i.e., Klapper in *The Reinforcement Theory*, 1960) later proposed a minimal effects model of mass communication. They argue that the media do not have a dominant effect on people's beliefs and behaviors because people filter life experiences selectively. The most common method to study effects has been to draw upon panel representative surveys and, more rarely, experimental methods.

As for the interplay between government, press, and public opinion, the *fifth* tradition of research, Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922/1997) was the first to examine the agenda-setting function of mass media. In the chapter "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," Lippmann made the important observation that people's behavior is a response not to the environment as it actually exists but to the environment as they think it exists. Although he never used the term, the idea he was presenting was essentially what we now call agenda-setting. Content analysis of media and interviews of audiences are common research methods within this theoretical approach.

In conclusion, research in political communication is based on multiple methods, common to the social sciences and humanities field, ranging from quantitative to qualitative approaches. The most widely used method is quantitative, namely content analysis. Public opinion polls, surveys research, focus groups, and intensive interviews are also common, as well as experimental study. The latter have been used widely to show message impact within a controlled environment. Over the years there has been some fluctuation in preferences for quantitative or qualitative methods. There have been more supporters of quantitative methods, but qualitative methods have been making a comeback in recent years.

Political communication and related fields

Several indicators point toward the establishment of political communication as an autonomous discipline. In particular, extensive publishing activity, as seen in the proliferation of widely cited handbooks and the well-regarded *Journal of Political Communication*, is essential to the field's theoretical and methodological grounding. The creation of political communication sections at great international academic associations, within both the field of communication and the field of political science (ICA, IAMCR), is another indicator.

Political communication is not only an area of academic research but also an area of professional practice. And, just like any other discipline focused on the actions and interactions that take place in the political sphere, it is not always easy to distinguish between its areas of practice or outline its identity. That difficulty is compounded

because the use of public relations and marketing strategies and tactics permeates many areas of political communication.

The “emergent paradigm” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007) of strategic communication could bring to light a new understanding of the political communication field. In a seminal article by Hallahan et al. (2007), strategic communication is defined as the purposeful use of communication by any organization to fulfill its mission. The purposeful communication of politics is already a prominent field of inquiry, with different terminological and conceptual options: political advertising (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006); political communication management (Johnson, 2008); political marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2009, 2012; Newman, 1999); political public relations (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011); and political reputation management (Schnee, 2015).

Notwithstanding the fact that all these notions have both theoretical and conceptual nuances, they all agree with the idea that political communications are intentional and objective-driven in election campaigning as well as in supporting government policymaking. Moreover, whether focusing on controlled media, such as speeches, ads, debates or social media strategies, or uncontrolled media, such as news in print or on television, the media are considered the cornerstone of any political communication strategy.

Political actors, such as in corporations or other organizations, cannot afford to disregard the media, that is, how the media frame issues and actors. That is the reason why both public relations and political communication studies have been especially concerned with the construction of political reputation and its impact on stakeholder perceptions and actions, something that is also called “image management.” It is in this sense that public relations is used in political communication research to refer to purposeful activities by political actors to influence the media agenda. This is also known, in a more critical perspective, as the “packaging of politics” and “spinning tactics” (Franklin, 2004).

Also within the scope of political marketing discipline, public relations have often been reduced to media relations management. They are thus simply another marketing tool, alongside advertising, to make it possible to reach the political goals set. In this context, several authors see political marketing as part of the “postmodern” or last stage of the professionalization of political campaigning (Norris, 2000). However, if understood as communication management, political public relations cannot be restricted to merely a strategy of media relations. Public relations make it possible to develop communication and relations between the political organization and different audiences at internal level, as regards intraparty communication, and at external level, through the relationships established with journalists, naturally, but also with party members, sympathizers, lobby groups, donors, and citizens in general. In the political domain, as in the business domain, despite the importance of relationships with the press, the contribution of public relations to an organization’s mission goes far beyond this essentially tactical function.

In a broader sense, the main similarity between political communication and public relations is that both are about relationships formed through communication. The difference is that political communication research pays more attention to questions

and conflicts of power (or abuse of power) than public relations research (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Power and power struggles are at the heart of politics, which is adversarial by nature, and, contiguously, they are also central to political communication. In public relations theory and research there is a strong tendency to assume that all conflicts can be solved and that relationships between organizations and publics should be mutually beneficial (see, for instance, the symmetrical theory).

As an academic field of research and professionalized practice, political communication would benefit from the inclusion of public relations theories and research and vice versa. Cross-fertilization with research in corelated fields of inquiry like political marketing is also needed. Contrary to what one might imagine, few bridges have been built between these different schools of thought (Strömbäck, Mitrook, & Kioussis, 2010).

In fact, one main assumption of the discipline of strategic communication is precisely that the communication activities of all types of organizations can be best viewed from an integrative perspective. There are three main reasons to subscribe to this somewhat ambitious idea. First, in politics as in the business context, it is increasingly difficult today to differentiate between traditional communication activities. See, for example, the current debate about publicity versus advertising; content marketing versus brand journalism. Second, it is also challenging to define which medium/media or method/methods have the greatest influence on the behavior of the impacted audiences. Media hybridization, new media ecology, and media convergence, to name just a few, are central concepts in this debate. Third, an integrative perspective that looks beyond disciplinary differences to search for common points could open up new avenues to a more comprehensive understanding of the communication phenomenon in politics.

SEE ALSO: Agenda Setting and Building; Communication Effects; Framing; Gatekeeping; Propaganda; Public Interest; Rhetoric; Spin; Strategy as Practice

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