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The International and Post-disciplinary Journey of Political Communication: Reflections on “Media-centric and Politics-centric Views of Media and Democracy: A Longitudinal Analysis of Political Communication and the International Journal of Press/Politics”

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ABSTRACT

Political communication research has become more international over the past decades, but this has mainly meant expanding the scope of our discipline from the very United States-centric perspective that characterized its founding years to the broader realm of liberal Western democracies. As a result, a wide gap remains between our knowledge of political communication in countries in the so-called Global North and Global South. Besides expanding its international outlook, contemporary political communication research needs to tackle the challenges of reconciling different normative perspectives and to embrace the opportunities of “post-disciplinary” approaches.

KEYWORDS

Political communication;
comparative research;
internationalization; post-
disciplinarity

Through their analysis, Erik Bucy and Heather Evans have performed a valuable service to the discipline of political communication. While we often discuss the current state of research at conference panels and informal gatherings, many of us tend to do so on the basis of our own selective reading and interpretation of those parts of the literature we are most familiar with, or interested in. Yet, as the field grows in relevance and scope, the likelihood diminishes of any one political communication scholar being aware of more than a small slice of the research conducted beyond their own interests and specializations. This is why we need more systematic and critical analyses of the literature, as Bucy and Evans provide in this issue of *The Forum*.

Another merit of Bucy and Evans’ analysis lies in shedding new light on the complex but crucial relationship between how we understand the world and how we evaluate it – or between analytical approaches and normative assessments. This nexus is particularly salient at a time when political communication scholars are increasingly motivated and incentivized to study a constellation of phenomena that concern many supporters of democracy around the world. The list is long and, at a minimum, it includes online disinformation, media manipulation, hate speech, foreign interference in elections, populist campaigning styles, mass surveillance, extreme fragmentation, discriminatory microtargeting, the decline of professional news organizations, and the concentration of huge communication power in

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a small number of quasi-monopolistic global corporations. Many articles published in *Political Communication* and *The International Journal of Press/Politics* have tackled these challenges, which have also been the focus of landmark special issues in both journals (de Vreese et al., 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). Providing and disseminating the best available evidence on the causes and consequences of democratically problematic developments in political communication is not just an exciting scholarly enterprise. It is also a duty to society as governments contemplate how to address those challenges and discuss policy changes whose unintended consequences may, in some cases, be more troublesome than the ills they aim to cure.

Bucy and Evans show that the field of political communication has become more international over the past two decades. For someone who edits a journal whose very title starts with the word “international,” this is obviously a welcome development. And yet, this internationalization is not unbounded and evenly distributed across all corners of the world. Instead, it is essentially an expansion of scholarly focus from the United States to other Western liberal democracies.

I illustrate these patterns based on some additional analyses of the data collected by Bucy and Evans, to whom I am grateful for making them available for the purposes of this response. Here, I focus on the articles published in *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. Using the same procedure as Bucy and Evans, I augmented their 1996–2016 data by, first, randomly sampling one issue of the journal for each year in the period 2017–2020 and, secondly, coding the countries covered in the articles published in these four additional issues. The resulting corpus comprises a sample of 25 years’ worth of articles. To highlight changes over time, I divide it into two periods: from 1996 until 2009 (when 71 articles were coded) and from 2010 until 2020 (when 66 articles were coded).

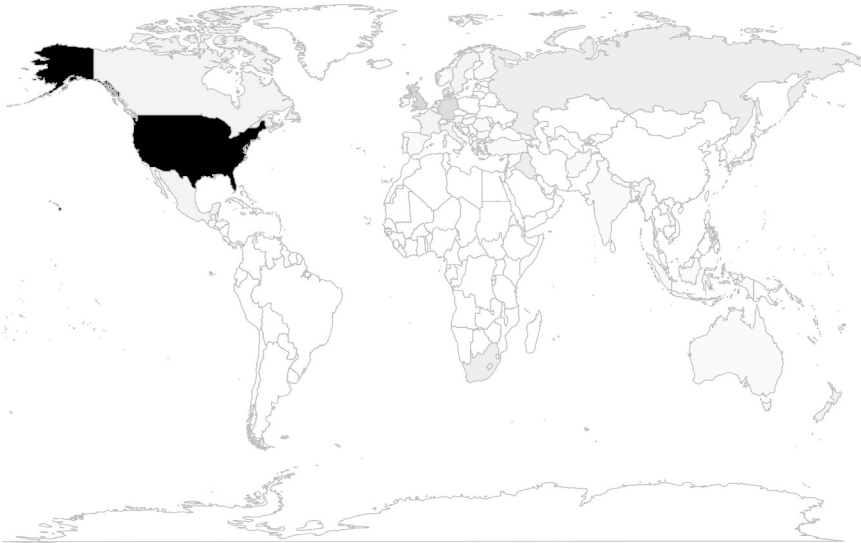


Figure 1. Countries covered in articles published in sampled issues of *The International Journal of Press/Politics* from 1996 until 2009 (71 articles). author’s elaboration based on data collected and kindly made available by Erik Bucy and Heather Evans.

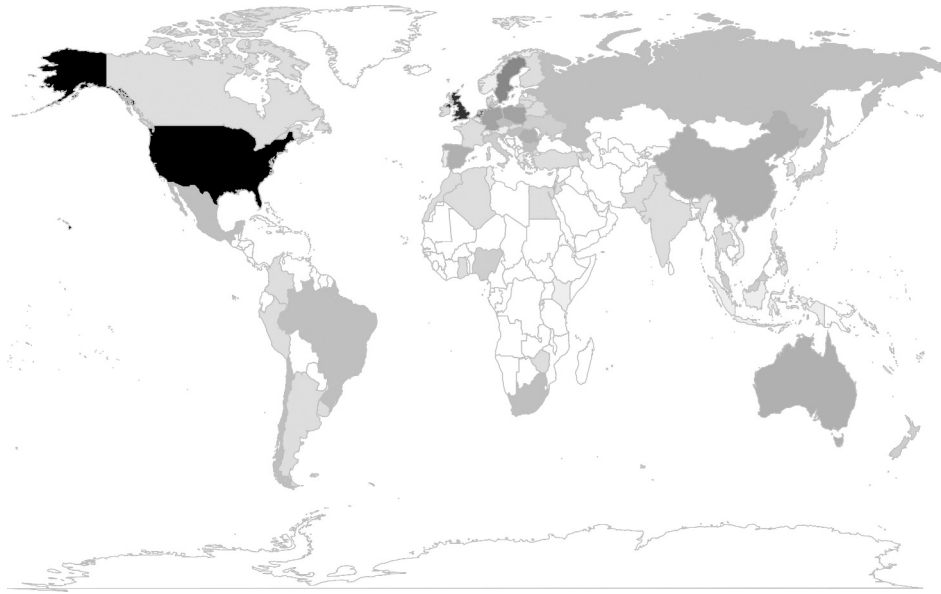


Figure 2. Countries covered in articles published in sampled issues of *The International Journal of Press/Politics* from 2010 until 2020 (66 articles). author's elaboration based on data collected and kindly made available by Erik Bucy and Heather Evans (for the years 2010–2016) with additional data collected by the author based on the same sampling and coding criteria as employed by Bucy and Evans (for the years 2017–2020).

The sheer number of countries studied during each period reveals a sharp increase in international coverage. The 71 articles coded from 1996–2009 include a total of 36 countries while the 66 articles from 2010–2020 feature 70 countries overall. The average study in the first period covered 1.57 countries, in the second period 3.25 countries. The United States has consistently been the most studied country, but its prominence has declined substantially. In 1996–2009, the US appeared in 70% of the articles and made up 44% of the total countries analyzed. In 2010–2020, the percentages were 26% and 8%, respectively. The starkness of these contrasts is confirmed by the world heat maps shown in [Figures 1](#) and [Figures 2](#). The maps visualize the number of articles published in the journal based on the countries covered, with darker colors representing higher numbers of articles. Countries colored in white were not featured in any article published in a given period.

In sum, we have made substantial progress in “de-Americanizing!” if not our discipline, our object of study. While the map in [Figure 1](#) (portraying the period 1996–2009) is staggeringly lopsided, with one big, US-shaped blotch of black in a canvas full of light gray and white, the map in [Figure 2](#) (covering 2010–2020) features quite a few strokes of gray and dark gray. (It should also be noted that the color scales are different across the two figures and are based on the distribution of articles within each period, so the black color of the US in both maps represents a different degree of dominance across them.) However, even the more recent map is by no means balanced, especially when considering differences between the so-called Global North and Global South. For instance, in the 2010–2020 sample there are as many articles focused on Sweden (8) as there are on China and Hong Kong (5), India (2), and Indonesia (1).

Perhaps the most intriguing insight in Bucy and Evans' contribution is the distinction between media-centric and politics-centric research. Their key intuition is that political communication research has shifted its dominant approach from a view of the media as a peripheral system, whose main task is to serve the paramount needs of political institutions and actors and to enable citizens to interact with them, to a central component of democratic life that needs to be understood in its own right. The trend shown by Bucy and Evans suggests that political communication scholars have become more aware of the crucial and autonomous role of media, whether due to the rise of digital and social media or some other factor.

Bucy and Evans emphasize that media-centric political communication research tends to regard "media as central to democratic life" and to be "supportive of the media's role in public life." This conceptualization is convincing when applied to studies based on democratic political systems, which as discussed above constitutes the lion's share of the corpus analyzed by the authors. However, because of the imbalance in articles published on democracies versus authoritarian regimes, whether and how this insight applies to research in non-democratic political systems remains an open question. Is "media-centric" research possible in autocratic political systems, where the state or a single party directly control, censor, or flood most media with propagandistic content? As the discipline hopefully intensifies its international expansion, it will be interesting to see how scholars come to terms with the empirical and normative implications of media-centric political communication in authoritarian regimes.

What was most interesting to me, however, was the growth of published articles that employ *both* a media-centric *and* a politics-centric perspective, thus aiming to incorporate both approaches rather than limit themselves to a single set of viewpoints. This pattern is consistent with Silvio Waisbord's (2019) depiction – and celebration – of communication as a "post-discipline," where scholars coalesce around particular problems or questions based on a heterogeneous constellation of theories, methods, sometimes even ontologies. Research on disinformation is a good example of how such an eclectic approach can help scholars understand complex phenomena. Because politicians, journalists, digital platforms, governments, and citizens can all contribute to increasing or limiting the circulation of false content in public and private discourse, only research that combines different disciplines, approaches, and methods can fully capture all relevant behaviors by these and other actors, as well as their multiple interdependencies and interactions. In sum, for political communication research to treat the media as peripheral and ancillary, as it often did in the past, was surely less than desirable. By the same token, however, for political communication to systematically overlook or downplay political institutions and dynamics would also be myopic.

Another striking finding is that more than half the political communication research surveyed by Bucy and Evans adopted a neutral normative tone toward the democratic role of media, with a noticeable reduction over time of articles drawing negative conclusions. I suspect that scholars who replicate Bucy and Evans' analysis ten or twenty years from now may find that the proportion of neutral normative stances is declining, as researchers increasingly address societally challenging issues that encourage them to take sides. I also imagine that the normative tone may grow to become more negative once again. As political systems confront the manifold crises of our times, and as researchers are more inclined to acknowledge the key role of communication in shaping societal phenomena,

media may increasingly be seen – or at least studied – as part of the problem rather than the solution.

This may be particularly true for digital media, and to this end it would be intriguing to differentiate studies in Bucy and Evans' corpus based on whether they focus on print and broadcast media, on digital and social media, or on both. As scholars grapple with the host of digital threats to democracy that came to the fore in 2016 and afterward (Miller & Vaccari, 2020), the questions we are asking are increasingly focused on how digital media may weaken, rather than strengthen, democracy. This is a stark reversal of the generally optimistic, and arguably media-centric, outlook of early research in this subfield. However, just as the pioneer scholars of digital politics soon found that reality was more complex than the rosy, one-sided scenarios that inspired their inquiries, the new wave of research may discover that the internet's contribution to democracy is more nuanced than in the most dystopian visions underlying these agendas.

We know that social and political phenomena are more nuanced than black-or-white juxtapositions, and yet we sometimes strike devil's bargains when we employ those types of contrasts. Painting in broad strokes can be a helpful theoretical, narrative, and argumentative device, but it ultimately risks trapping us inside ultimately unproductive and unrealistic debates. This is why it is important for political communication scholars to continue asking different sets of questions, inspired by both positive and negative intuitions about the role of media in politics and of politics in media. Research that both recognizes the centrality of media and embraces communication's post-disciplinary ethos may be best placed to capture the multiple ways in which media and politics influence each other and, in turn, affect the livelihoods of citizens in democratic and nondemocratic regimes.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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