Political Communication Faces the 21st Century

By Doris A. Graber, with the assistance of James M. Smith

The study of political communication has come a long way. If we take Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Politics* written in 350 B.C. as a starting point, political messages have been noted, dissected, and speculated about for well over 2,000 years. So where are we now, in the 21st century of the Christian era, and where should we be heading?

Delineating the Field

To begin, I will define the field and describe the data that I gathered to test the current waters. The field of political communication, as defined in this article, encompasses the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics. The message senders or message receivers may be politicians, journalists, members of interest groups, or private, unorganized citizens. "The key element is that the message has a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals, groups, institutions, and whole societies and the environments in which they exist" (Graber, 1993, p. 305). There are many other definitions, of course, but all encompass the same essential elements (Denton & Woodward, 1998; Hahn, 2003; Perloff, 1998).

Given that political effects are at the heart of political science and are a key interest of many communications scholars, one might assume that the field would be in the mainstream of the two disciplines as judged by university-level courses and the number of articles in flagship journals. But that is not the case. In political science, political communication remains very much a sideline. It fares better in communication, but shares the limelight with many other subdisciplinary specialties. Marginality is common in interdisciplinary fields. Unfortunately, it hampers growth because it discourages many promising young scholars from concentrating on the field. It also handicaps intellectual cross-fertilization because research

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Table 1. Articles in Flagship Journals

Journal name	2000–2003 article total	Political communication articles
American Political Science Review	165	8 (4.8%)
American Journal of Political Science	218	26 (9.0%)
Journal of Politics	210	29 (13.8%)
Communication Research	112	19 (16.9%)
Journal of Communication	150	30 (20.0%)
Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly	175	53 (30.0%)
Totals	1030	165 (16.0%)

published in specialized journals does not enjoy the wide audiences of mainstream journals and therefore lags in citations in the mainstream literature. The expectation that marrying multiple disciplines would lead to greater interdisciplinary collaboration has not come true (Stout & Buddenbaum, 2002).

Table 1 shows the percentage of political communication scholarship published in flagship journals in the two disciplines for 4 years, starting in January 2000 and ending in December 2003. Scrutiny of the subject matter of these research articles indicates that a large number of the political science offerings deal with issues concerning elections and public opinion. Frequently, these articles are oriented more toward election outcomes or the topics about which opinions are tested than about communications issues. The numbers shown for political science journals in Table 1 would be cut in half if they included only articles with a primary focus on political communication.

The Data Set

For my more detailed review of recent developments in the field, I focused primarily on a random selection of political communication articles that appeared in the professional journal literature. Although my review also included books, I concentrated on articles because they tend to capture the most recent scholarship from the broadest array of scholars. The period of scrutiny summarized below covers 4 years: January 2000 to December 2003. My assistant, James Smith, and I scanned social science journals in the parent disciplines—communication and political science—in search of articles with a primary focus on political communication. That procedure yielded "hits" in the 11 journals listed in Table 2. The table also records the number of articles selected from each journal because the title suggested that they were highly relevant to our mission.

In the 137 articles selected for detailed analysis, we focused on the subject matter, the research design, the methods, and the findings. A large number of these articles came from the two journals that focus most specifically on the sub-

Table 2. Journal Data Base

Journal name	2000–2003 article totals
American Journal of Political Science	1
Communication Research	16
Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics	40
Journal of Communication	17
Journal of Mass Media Ethics	2
Journal of Media and Religion	3
Journal of Media Economics	4
New Media and Society	10
Political Communication	40
Popular Communication	1
Television & New Media	3
Total	137

field, *Political Communication* and the *Harvard International Journal of Press/ Politics*; *Communication Research* and the *Journal of Communication* were runners-up.

Table 3 presents the major theme found in each of these articles. It also indicates how many articles and what percentage of articles focused primarily on each theme. The table illustrates a long-familiar pattern in political communication, namely the predominance of articles dealing with election campaigns. If we add articles about other aspects of elections and about campaign advertising, almost a third of all published contributions in these prime journals for political communication research fall into that crucial but narrow area of concern.

Well-Covered Topics

Obviously, political communication as defined in this article is a huge topic. Equally obviously, coverage has been unbalanced, with many important issues receiving scant attention. Instead, scholars in this field have concentrated much of their research on issues related to creating and maintaining high quality, democratic governance. We will first focus on these amply covered issues and then turn to two newer areas of interests—issues related to the manner in which individuals cope with political information and issues related to the use of new communication technologies.

Table 3. Major Published Political Communication Themes

Theme categories	# of articles carrying theme
Election campaigns	21 (15.3%)
New media	14 (10.2%)
Civic engagement	13 (9.5%)
International relations	12 (8.7%)
Information processing	9 (6.5%)
Public opinion	9 (6.5%)
Campaign advertising	7 (5.1%)
Political actors & rhetorics	7 (5.1%)
Media economics	7 (5.1%)
Popular culture	7 (5.1%)
Journalism practices	6 (4.4%)
Framing	5 (3.6%)
Media bias	4 (2.9%)
Agenda setting	4 (2.9%)
Comparative politics	4 (2.9%)
Elections	3 (2.1%)
Talk radio	3 (2.1%)
Television	2 (1.4%)
Totals	137 (100%)

Elections, Civic Learning, and Miscellaneous Problem Areas

Elections. Why have multiple aspects of electoral politics remained the most widely covered research area in recent decades? Among many reasons is the political importance of selecting public officials in democracies and concerns about the quality of political messages offered to the citizens who select these officials. The fact that elections often are exciting contests and that they occur with a fresh cast of characters at regular intervals has also contributed to the steady popularity of this area of inquiry. Because election messages are transmitted via various formats of mass media, it has become a popular exercise to study and compare the different roles that various media play in covering candidates and issues and in transmitting other election-related messages (Flowers, Haynes, & Crespin, 2003).

In recent years, social scientists have become increasingly interested in political advertising and in political debates (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). Scholars want to know whether advertising messages deal with the main issues that the candidates stress and whether it is clear from news stories what precisely the candidates are proposing or opposing. Scholars also want to know how the candidates define themselves and define their opponents in terms of personal and professional qualifications. The impact of negative advertising has become a popular research

focus (Burden, 2002; Gordon, Shafie, & Crigler, 2003). Researchers are eager to learn how negative advertising affects political developments and election outcomes. How do these messages impact what voters think and how does that differ by gender, age, and education (Holbrook, 2002)?

Because most Americans presumably assign greatest importance to politics at the national level, U.S. scholars have concentrated their election research on the study of U.S. presidential races. Interest in Congressional elections appears to be on the rise, but the numbers of researchers who study state and local elections has remained comparatively small. Use of the Internet for campaigning in mayoral elections and for contacting local communities, however, has attracted some attention recently in papers presented at professional meetings. Such papers are usually the harbinger of research that will be published in the journal literature within a year or two (Hussey, 2004; Krebs & Holian, 2004; Ruhil & Marschall, 2004; Samson, 2004; Sanders, 2004).

Civic learning. A great deal of research effort is going into assessments of the role played by news media in providing information that citizens need to fulfill their civic duties. This is a highly controversial research area because there is no agreement among scholars about the requirements of democratic citizenship and the implications of the findings about citizens' political knowledge. Nor is there agreement about the way political messages should be framed and expressed to assure that most voters can understand them.

Many theorists and pundits consider most citizens to be woefully ignorant and poorly qualified for citizenship duties (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000; McGraw & Pinney, 1990). They base their conclusions on polls that show huge gaps in citizens' factual knowledge about political events and many blame inadequacies in news coverage for this state of affairs (Bennett, 2003; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kalb, 2001; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Patterson, 1993, 2000, 2002). Others disagree, pointing out that more qualitative research tools like focus groups, depth interviews, and experiments yield contrary conclusions. These disparities have raised questions about the appropriateness of survey measures to gauge what people actually know and how well they can cope with civic obligations (Graber, 2001; Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998, 2000; Popkin & Dimock, 1999). The different methodologies yield disparate results because qualitative research probes what people know and allows respondents to frame information in their own way and to discuss the areas of political knowledge with which they are familiar. By contrast, surveys ask for knowledge about topics chosen and framed by researchers, topics that often cover areas of little interest to respondents. Questions usually focus on knowledge of readily measurable details, such as the names and offices of political leaders, the ups and downs of current unemployment or violent crime rates, or such procedural facts as the percentage of votes needed to overturn a presidential veto or end a filibuster (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Answering such questions requires a command of schoolbook knowledge that many people never learned or have long forgotten. The scores provide insights about political sophistication but may fail to reveal how well average citizens are equipped to judge the political scene and deal with civic issues.

Much of the argument also involves the validity of democratic theorists' assumptions and expectations about how much political knowledge American mass media can and will transmit and what citizens can and will learn. Critics charge that these assumptions are out of tune with psychological, physiological, and economic reality (Bartels, 1993; Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Critics also claim that the vast majority of average citizens, contrary to theorists' hopes, survey political news haphazardly, spending less than an hour daily on it. They develop choice criteria for consuming some stories and ignoring others that deviate widely from the theorists' ideals. (Chong, 2000; Hutchings, 2003; McGuire, 1999). In fact, citizens' appetite for important political information is hardly voracious.

Theorists expect news media to cover the political issues that they deem important and to provide a wealth of factual data and contextual information to a presumably news-hungry public. They fail to consider, though, that most U.S. media are commercial enterprises that must be concerned with attracting the kinds of clienteles and advertisers that allow them to make substantial profits. Journalists cover the news with these considerations in mind, focusing on dramatic events and people (Shaefer, 2001). They have never been motivated or even able to gather all potentially newsworthy information (Graber, 2003; Lupia & McCubbin, 1998; Simon, 1985).

Another area of controversy concerns the appropriate format for political news. Audience data consistently show that substantial portions of most audiences flock to entertainment and avoid overly complex news. Accordingly, the most widely used news media present much of the news as "infotainment," which leads to the charge that they are neglecting their civic responsibilities. However, research has shown that audiences do gain political knowledge from soft news offerings and that they would not consume this information in more complex versions (Baum, 2002; Butsch, 2003; Prior, 2003). Still, their knowledge of specific facts and figures does not equal the knowledge commanded by more politically sophisticated citizens who consume a richer news diet. It is also worth mentioning that citizens at all levels of political sophistication increase their knowledge levels if they consume more political information and if they engage in political discussions about it (Scheufele, 2002).

Problem areas. Other amply covered topics relate to the role the media play in enlightening citizens about international politics and global issues. This research is almost always critical. Most researchers conclude that news stories are unbalanced, narrowly focused on limited aspects of international happenings, and dismissive of perspectives that differ from mainstream American views. They are also diminishing in numbers and in the areas that are routinely covered (Entman, 2004; Gilboa, 2002; Kluver, 2002; Lee, Pan, Chan, & So, 2001; Soroka, 2003).

Scholars have also been critical of the role the media may be playing in perpetuating serious social problems plaguing the status quo in the United States. For example, political communication scholars have investigated the verbally and visually created media images of politically disadvantaged groups, like people of color or women, homosexuals, or homeless people (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gordon et al., 2003; van Dijk, 1993). The scholars' main concern is that these groups are either ignored, marginalized, or shown in a distorted light

that may be demeaning or unduly exalting. Scholars wonder about the social impact of distorted media treatment and about the consequences for the self-image of members of disadvantaged groups or ostracized groups.

Many of the articles that criticize media coverage also accuse journalists of biased general political orientations. Most of them explicitly or implicitly indict the media for displaying a right-wing, conservative bias that perpetuates an undesirable status quo, hiding its flaws and avoiding references to alternative forms of government. Supporters of mainstream politics, in turn, complain that the media foster a left-liberal bias. It has remained difficult to resolve the controversy by developing scholarly standards for measuring bias because there is no agreement on what kinds of imbalances in coverage constitute bias.

The Study of Information Processing

Opening the "black box." In the past, the human brain was usually considered a black box that social scientists studying information processing could not penetrate. Recent advances in brain imaging have changed that, allowing communication researchers to consider the neurobiological and psychological properties of human brains when trying to fathom how people process political information. The clues to brain functioning come from various types of electronic and magnetic brain scans of humans engaged in complex mental activities. Such scans have shed light on many aspects of learning, opinion formation, and memorization that scholars had previously observed but for which they had no good explanations.

For instance, it is now clear that audiences interpret incoming information in line with information previously stored in their long-term memory. Because individuals' memories differ in content because of unique life experiences and cultural variations, the meanings conveyed by new information differ depending on the mix that results from blending old and new information. That explains why audiences who are exposed to identical news stories often interpret their meanings quite differently. Likewise, brain research confirms that most mental tasks entail feelings as well as cognitions. In fact, feelings generally develop first, followed milliseconds later by cognitions (Marcus et al., 2000).

Several aspects of information processing have inspired a significant amount of research. They include "priming"—the human brain's propensity to draw on recently activated thoughts in reacting to new information—and "framing"—the practice of message transmitters to present messages from particular perspectives, thereby tapping into specific thinking patterns stored in the receivers' brains.

Priming. Evidence of priming effects confirms that people do, indeed, absorb information from news stories and that information guides their thinking and judgments (Iyengar & Simon, 1991; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). For example, news stories that mention specific problems encountered by a particular politician prime audiences to evaluate that politician's performance in terms of their stored reactions to these problems rather than in terms of reactions to less publicized issues (Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002).

Students of priming been busy trying to specify how priming works in different circumstances. For example, priming effects differ depending on how

well informed and interested news consumers are and how amply exposed. Knowledgeable audience members who have firm, well-grounded political opinions tend to be less susceptible to priming than audience members who know little about issues that dominate the news (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Lodge & Stroh, 1993; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Other factors, such as degree of trust in the accuracy of news media information, are also contingent conditions (Eveland & Shaw, 2003; Miller & Krosnick, 2000).

Framing. Message framing, too, has a powerful impact on people's thinking. The same event, framed in diverse ways, can produce diverse and even conflicting reactions from audiences whose thoughts are guided by specific frames (Brewer 2001; Krosnick & McGraw, 2002; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). For example, normally favorable reactions to a president's visit to a disaster area can become highly unfavorable if the visit is framed as a ploy to win votes. When sociologist Philo Wasburn (2002) compared framing of identical events covered by reporters in different countries, he documented substantial differences in the framing of events like the 1982 Falkland war between Great Britain and Argentina, the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis, and the 1996 U.S. presidential nomination conventions. Similarly, Claes de Vreese (2002) reported that television newscasts in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands framed issues concerning European integration differently and that these differences were reflected in public opinion in these countries.

These examples also demonstrate that there are characteristic, culturally linked patterns of news framing that depend very much on the cultural orientation of the story's narrator. Proof of cultural differences in news framing also supports researchers' contentions that news is a constructed product (Altheide, 2002; Wu, 2000). Another significant finding is the discovery that disjunctions between audiences' internalized frames and frames of news stories diminish comprehension because the new information does not match past learning stored in memory (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Lupia & McCubbins, 2000). News framers must consider this fact if they want to succeed in conveying specific meanings to their intended audiences.

The role of emotions. Just as progress in the neurosciences has enhanced the study of human cognitive functions, so it has broadened insights into the role of emotions in information processing. Neuro-science studies have shown that people find it easier to store and recall dramatic, emotion-arousing stories than emotionally neutral news. This happens because emotional arousal releases stimulants into the bloodstream that sensitize perceptions and increases their impact (Damasio 1999, 2003; Gazzaniga, 1992, 1998; Goleman, 1995). Recent research underlines the accuracy of these findings (Dolan & Holbrook 2001; MacKuen et al., 2001; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Rahn, 2000). Stories with emotional angles capture larger audiences than stories that are bland irrespective of their intrinsic importance (Biocca, 1991; Butsch, 2003; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; McQuail, 1997). For example, a look at the roster of news stories that captured most public attention between 1986 and 2003 shows that half of them involved natural or man-made disasters, military events that endangered the lives of Americans, and anger-arousing pocketbook issues like the high price of

gasoline. Average citizens can readily identify with these kinds of emotion-arousing events (Graber, 2001, 2004).

The potential negative effects of emotionally arousing stories have also intrigued researchers. Sensational stories may alienate some people from the media and from politics. Failure to vote in elections has been blamed on the negative emotions aroused by cynical news stories that undermine trust in government (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Rahn & Rudolph, 2001). Other research has raised questions about the validity of these findings, illustrating that much work remains to be done to refine these and many other conclusions drawn from current research. For instance, the finding that negative news discourages participation is called into question by studies that show that the publics who pay most attention to news stories are most receptive to new information, most optimistic about politics, and participate most actively in political affairs (Bennett, Blaney, & Pier, 1999; Chanley, 2002; Norris, 2000). These facts could exonerate the media as a cause of political alienation, or they could indicate that elites are more immune to negative emotional framing than are mass publics (McGuire, 1999; Zaller, 1992).

The Impact of "New" Media

The fact that average citizens' opportunities to observe their government in action have mushroomed with the proliferation of cable television channels and the birth of the Internet has lured scholars into these areas. In combination, the new venues bring a much broader spectrum of political views to the fore and offer many new opportunities for interested citizens to participate in politics (Bucy & Gregson, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001). Some scholars pin their hopes on the Internet for increasing civic engagement, especially among young voters (Delli Carpini, 2000; Shah et al., 2001). Others see new technologies as merely new tools that current power elites are using to maintain their dominance (Mosco & Foster, 2001).

Although most people do not yet take full advantage of the massive amounts of political information available via the Internet, roughly two thirds of all Americans do have access either from home or from their workplace. By 2010, access is expected to be nearly universal, but will most people use it to inform themselves about politics? Currently only one third of all Americans, primarily the well educated and economically secure, regularly use the Web to watch political news offerings (Bimber, 2003; Margolis & Resnick, 2000). That number is expected to rise, producing ever-widening opportunities for studying the impact of Web-based information on political processes (Graber et al., 2004).

Political Communication Theories

The theoretical underpinnings of political communication studies are drawn largely from the fields psychology, political science, and communication. This mixture is hardly surprising given the fact that political communication deals with the substance of politics along with human behaviors in response to political messages. Hypotheses about paying attention to political messages, for example, draw heavily on selective choice theories drawn from psychology, rational choice theories bor-

rowed from political science, as well as uses and gratifications theories popular in communication. Most of the relevant theories relate to individual-level phenomena, like information processing in general, or special features such as various aspects of opinion formation and persuasion (Christen & Gunther, 2003).

Information Processing Theories

Here is a brief overview of available theories drawn from psychology (Glynn, 1999): Cognitive consistency theories try to explain how people juggle their opinions to avoid inconsistencies that are presumed to be psychologically painful. Consistency theories include various balance theories that explain how people rationalize their discordant opinions to avoid cognitive dissonance. For example, fans of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, confronted with the negative news about his embarrassing dalliance with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, were able to focus on Clinton's political achievements as well as downgrading the scandal information by questioning the motives of Clinton's accusers (Zaller, 2001).

Functional theories, like uses and gratifications postulates, try to explain what kinds of needs people attempt to gratify by their choice of particular information. They might be knowledge needs, the desire to gain rewards or avoid punishments, or gratification of ego-defensive needs or the desire to express cherished values. Political communication scholars have been especially interested in exploring how citizens with different political goals vary in choosing and processing election-related information (Huang, 2000).

Scholars draw on reasoned action theories to explain how people use information to form their beliefs and rationalize their actions even when beliefs and actions defy rationality criteria (Kuklinski et al., 2000). Rational choice theories involve complex calculations about the personal, social, and economic costs and benefits of various actions (Lupia & McCubbins, 2000). Social judgment theories postulate that a person's established views often become the point of departure for evaluating the merits of new and old information. These views are embedded in the schemas stored in their memory. Hence voters tend to judge presidential candidates by the memories of dramatic past policies in which these candidates were involved (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993).

Political communication scholars also rely increasingly on theories based on neuro-biological findings about the capacity of the human brain to absorb and store the massive amounts of political information that people encounter in modern environments (Damasio, 1999, 2003). Cognitive processing theories postulate how audiences handle incoming messages to extract their meanings and coordinate them with their prior beliefs. Samuel Popkin (1994), for example, demonstrated that people tend to use shortcuts to simplify information searches. Rather than trying to gather massive amounts of information about an unfamiliar candidate, they use party affiliation as a "heuristic." If she is a Democrat, they endow her with their stereotypical view of the qualities of Democrats; if she is a Republican, that heuristic leads to the Republican stereotype.

Numerous case studies and, more recently, experimental research have tried to fathom which messages are stored most readily in memory, making them avail-

able for future retrieval, and what conditions enhance or impede storage. Overall, the research has shown that people ignore most of the political messages easily available in their environment because they overlook them or because the messages do not seem relevant (Graber, 1993). The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000), for example, reported that people polled nationwide in 2000 routinely ignored well over half of national and international news stories to which they were exposed because they deemed the stories unimportant or boring.

The available evidence provides only limited support for dissonance avoidance theories, which claim that people avoid messages that contradict established beliefs, selecting supportive messages instead. People apparently tolerate dissonance quite well because they are used to considering problems from varied perspectives and because they often are ambivalent about the merits of various policy options. Most commonly, people remain unaware of dissonance within their belief systems or between their existing beliefs and new information (Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000). The preference for internalizing consonant messages seems to spring primarily from the fact that audiences can readily incorporate consonant messages into existing mental schemas without first analyzing a new situation and then forming their views about it as well as harmonizing other views with it.

Similarly, current research offers only limited support for the claim that choices of information hinge on the usefulness of various messages to fill a need for information or to gratify some psychological need. In fact, contrary to uses and gratifications theories, most people ignore much useful and potentially gratifying information. That suggests that neuro-biologists may be correct when they emphasize that the limited ability of humans to cope with vast amounts of information is the major factor in failures to attend to information that is readily available in their environment.

Media Impact Theories

Agenda setting. Agenda setting remains the predominant theoretical approach to analyzing the impact of media messages on audiences. Agenda-setting theorists contend that political views of mass audiences and elites about the relative importance of political events and about the characteristics of political actors and political situations are shaped by the information made available by the mass media to which they are exposed directly, or through reports from other sources (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; Soroka, 2003). That means that mass media information is the basis for forming public opinions—the presumed wellsprings of governance in functioning democracies (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Gross & Aday, 2003; McCombs & Zhu, 1995; Wanta, 1997).

Numerous studies have tested and confirmed agenda-setting effects in general, showing that news stories influence audiences' overall perception of issue importance or create images of particular issues like the l990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis, famine in Ethiopia, or equipment failures in nuclear facilities (Bosso, 1989; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Rubin, 1987). Agenda-setting effects have also been documented for online newspapers available on the Web and for Internet chatroom discus-

sions (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Roberts et al., 2002). Many of these studies have employed combinations of audience surveys and content analyses of the media on which audiences relied (Kerr & Moy 2002; Kim et al., 2002).

The significance of the agenda-setting phenomenon has prompted a massive amount of research to ascertain how mass media personnel select the issues that they cover and what determines the particular frames and other presentation factors that are chosen and the contexts in which these news images are presented. Theories drawn from sociology, economics, psychology, communication, and political science have been used to explain news choice processes and the consequences that they allegedly produce. All modes of transmission—print, audio, or audiovisual—can set the audience's agenda, though their potency varies depending on differences in topics and audience sophistication (Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002; Lee & Cappella, 2001).

Some studies have focused on the circumstances that make audiences receptive to media messages. For instance, John Zaller (2001) developed and tested a model of political persuasion known as RAS for how people "receive, accept, sample" information. He found that people do resist arguments that clash with their political predispositions but only at the rare times when they recognize that a discrepancy exists. Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins identified trust as an essential element in political persuasion. "Without trust there is no persuasion; without persuasion, people cannot learn from others; and without learning from others, it is very difficult for citizens to learn what they need to know" (Lupia, 2001; Lupia & McCubbins, 2000; Popkin & Dimock, 2000). What seems to matter most when it comes to internalizing political messages is their content and framing and their manner of presentation and message interaction with the existing beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of various audience members (Entman, 1993; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001).

Subjective theories. The theories discussed thus far belong mostly to the objective, positivist vein of social science research. A number of subjective theories are also in vogue, but they are far less common in the literature except in journals like *Critical Studies in Media Communication* and *Discourse and Society*. Adherents of these interpretist or constructionist and deconstructionist theories deny that reality exists in any positivist sense. They contend that reality arises from the shared perceptions created when people communicate with each other. How people act and react in society hinges primarily on how they perceive and conceptualize their society based on their communications with others. For instance, the acts of terrorism experienced by U.S. citizens on September 11, 2001, were interpreted from a broad array of perspectives that evolved through dialogue in diverse communication environments. These perspectives put markedly different faces on the meanings and implications of the events (Lazar & Lazar, 2004). Subjective theories are based on group interaction theories that borrow heavily from psychology and sociology.

When interpretists theorize in the critical vein, they draw on Marxist theories to hypothesize about the social consequences of communication. Accordingly, the focus is on the uses of communication to subordinate various groups in society, such as ethnic minorities and women. Researchers look for message constructions

designed to lead to quiescence and submissiveness of publics who are under the thumbs of the repressive dominant groups who control capitalist societies (Schiller, 1992). As is often true when intellectual debates about the merits of theories become entangled with battles over the merits of political philosophies and the political systems linked to them, the debates have created more heat than light and neither side has been willing to concede weaknesses in its intellectual armor.

Research Methods

Political communication research methods are diverse, mirroring practices in the social sciences and humanities. There have been some fluctuations in preferences for quantitative or qualitative methods. Proponents of quantitative methods have soared to the top, but qualitative methods have been making a comeback in recent years. Another change relates to the topics addressed by investigators. In the past, political communication research has focused almost exclusively on political messages relating to actual events. Scholars now realize that fictional situations presented in printed and audiovisual media also shape people's perceptions of the political world that surrounds them. Accordingly, studies of the politically relevant content of mass media entertainment offerings are becoming more common.

Content Analysis

Content analysis remains the most widely used method for examining political messages. Judging from a review of the current literature, much of it is still performed manually even though the number of useful computerized content-analysis protocols has been increasing (e.g., Catpac II 2000; Diction 2000; General Inquirer, Internet version, 1997). In line with varied research goals, content analysts may focus on denotational dictionary meanings or connotational extended meanings evoked by the literal message. In the latter category, researchers frequently examine messages as clues to underlying political, social, and economic conditions, such as international tensions, confidence in government, or fear about economic declines.

For example, researchers have examined media coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act to detect if it advantages the interests of the corporate owners of the news medium that covered the story (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000). They have analyzed the political motivations behind the frames used to tell news stories, such as the advent of the euro as Europe's new currency or public journalism in New Zealand. They have speculated about the consequences of particular frames (McGregor, Fountain, & Comry, 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and analyzed election campaign speeches to detect the presence of specific themes and rhetorical patterns (Benoit et al., 2000; Hershey & Holian, 2000). Message content has also been used to infer the psychological characteristics, beliefs, motivations, and strategies of political leaders (DeMause, 1986; Winter & Carlson, 1988). Even when the psychological characteristics remain obscure, valuable inferences can be drawn

about power configurations by knowing which political personalities are cited and in what connections their messages are reported.

Content analysis, besides being extremely tedious and time consuming, albeit more intellectually sensitive if performed by human coders, has always had problems that are discussed extensively elsewhere (Graber, 2004). Space constraints do not permit detailed exposition in this essay. Suffice it to say that very little has been done to test the degree of distortion that content analysis problems produce or how to overcome them. Examples of problematic procedures are the common practice of coding only small portions of news stories, thereby omitting many important themes and nuances and limiting coding to denotational meanings (Althaus, Edy, & Phalen, 2001; Woolley, 2000).

The dearth of audiovisual coding continues to distort the findings of the many studies that focus on television and other audiovisual offerings (Graber, 2001; Hart, 2000; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; Wang, Liu, & Huang, 2000). The sparseness of audiovisual coding is especially unfortunate because most Americans receive the bulk of their messages about politics from audiovisual media transmitted over the air, via cable, or via the Internet. Coding audiovisual news with minimal or no attention to the meanings conveyed by visuals deprives political communication scholars of important insights into the transmission and reception of the most widely used political messages.

Public Opinion Polls, Surveys, Focus Groups, and Intensive Interviews
Public opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, and intensive interviews remain the most common techniques for assessing which political messages have been received by particular audiences, how the messages have been interpreted, and what effects they have produced in the minds of audience members (Miller, 2002). A survey of research methods used in 79 political communication studies reported in social science journals in 2000 showed that survey research was the primary method in 48% of the sampled articles, content analysis was used in 20%, whereas experimental research was used in 16% of the contributions. In 9% of the articles, intensive interviews were the primary research methodology. Miscellaneous other techniques, including focus groups, accounted for the remaining 6% (Graber, 2004).

Polling problems. Currently public opinion polls and surveys are facing very serious sampling problems. Thanks to easily installed, inexpensive screening devices, privacy-conscious citizens can block unwanted incoming phone calls. Most survey researchers rely on random digit telephone dialing, selecting phone numbers in line with scientific sampling criteria. The technique is derailed if some population segments block access to sizeable numbers of their telephones. Sampling accuracy also suffers when large population segments rely primarily or exclusively on cell phone services that hamper access to pollsters.

A new addition to survey methodology is the use of Internet technology. It, too, has been plagued by sampling problems because surveys initially relied on self-selected participants to answer questions. This problem has been largely overcome by choosing representative samples of U.S. households via traditional random sampling methods and then asking members of the household to agree to respond to surveys displayed on their television sets (Chang, 2001; Dennis, 2001).

The technique was used successfully during the 2000 presidential election. It allowed researchers to test the impact of the campaign and reactions to speeches and television commercials by candidates George Bush and Al Gore on a state-by-state basis, rather than only nationally (Jackman & Rivers, 2000).

However, it should be noted that comparisons of scientifically and unscientifically aggregated Internet samples indicate that there is little difference in poll outcomes. The explanation is that self-selected samples attract much larger numbers of respondents than the usual scientific surveys, and larger numbers have lower margins of error (Bishop, 2001; Park, 2001). However, none of the Internet samples collected in the opening years of the 2lst century represented the views of the entire U.S. population because almost one third lacked Internet access.

Aside from sampling problems, the usefulness of survey research for studying the impact of political messages remains seriously marred by unresolved problems in survey construction and question wording, and by lack of information about the information that respondents have already internalized. More intensive interviewing methods suffer from involving small numbers of individuals who may not be representative of larger populations. However, focus group research and intensive interviews often serve as pilots that pretest hypotheses for studies done on a larger scale. They may also fill gaps and broaden the insights gained from larger surveys. A combination of research approaches would be ideal in many research ventures but is usually too expensive. Again, this article is not the place to go into details about the many serious shortcomings in audience research. They are discussed in great detail elsewhere (Asher, 2004; Graber, 2004).

Experiments

Political communication researchers are turning increasingly to purely experimental studies to probe message impact. Experimental studies usually involve exposing small numbers of individuals to selected information stimuli. Investigators then measure to what extent the stimuli have produced changes in the respondents' fund of knowledge and in their opinions about political matters (Iyengar, 2001; Leshner, 2001; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000; Neuman et al., 1992). Some of these tests have involved measuring physiologic reactions like heart rates and skin conductance and even blood flow to brain cells (Grabe, Lang, Zhou, & Bolls, 2000). Such research has helped substantially in discovering message and context factors that aid or deter learning and in comparing the merits of various research tools (Wright, Aquilino, & Supple, 1998).

Unlike field research, experimental studies enable researchers to control the stimuli to which their subjects are exposed, making it easier to establish causality. For instance, experiments have demonstrated convincingly that respondents' intellectual skills, prior knowledge, and motivation to learn play major roles in information acquisition. They have proven that much information to which people are exposed is never internalized and that individuals' predispositions tend to color the meanings that they extract from messages. Experimental research has also shown that the priming phenomenon and message framing have a powerful impact on the meanings conveyed to audience members.

The price to be paid for the advantages of experiments in demonstrating causal connections is the fact that the effects may hold true only in the artificial setting of the laboratory. For instance, a laboratory finding that a report about a president's use of foul language reduced his appeal to voters by 30% may have little validity in the real world where people's brains are usually bombarded with all sorts of stimuli, including a multiplicity of messages relevant to politics. Competing news about the president, purposely omitted from the laboratory tests, may wipe out the impact of the president's verbal lapses.

Internet experiments are the newest additions to the experimental research toolkit. Shanto Iyengar (2001, p. 227) one of the pioneers of this method, claims that

> traditional experimental methods can be rigorously and far more efficiently replicated using on-line strategies . . . . researchers have the ability to reach diverse populations without geographic limitations. The rapid development of multimedia-friendly Web browsers makes it possible to bring text or audiovisual presentations to the computer screen. Indeed, the technology is so accessible that subjects can easily "self-administer" experimental manipulations.

Iyengar contends that demographically sound samples can be easily and cheaply recruited on the Web, if adjustments are made for the lingering digital divide (Iyengar, Hahn, & Prior, 2001). Thus far, only a handful of researchers have been enticed to follow in his footsteps.

A major problem in Internet-based research is the impermanence of much computerized information on the World Wide Web because of rudimentary data-archiving methods. Besides making it difficult for investigators to double-check the accuracy of their data, it also makes it nearly impossible for other scholars to check and replicate prior research. Considering that the ability to replicate findings is a hallmark of scientific research, the fragility of Internet data currently makes this resource questionable as a solid database.

Data Analysis Methods

Turning to data analysis methods: Political communication researchers use the familiar social science and humanities tools, ranging from qualitative approaches, like eyeball comparisons of presidential speeches, to complex quantitative and clinical and laboratory procedures. Again, the methodological toolkits have become much more well stocked, especially in the realm of quantitative methods (Little, Schnabel, & Baumert, 2000; Lomax, 2001; Roberts, 1997; Stevens, 2001). Investigators use multiple analysis procedures in many research projects to ensure that the findings are not artifacts of one particular method of analysis. Comparisons among methods also help determine which is likely to prove most effective in particular types of research.

Future Directions

Choice Criteria

The brief sketches of directions for future research that follow are more of a wish list than a prognosis. As mentioned earlier, political communication research has been spotty, dealing extensively with some issues and neglecting others. Aside from some of the obvious choices, it remains unclear and mysterious why some topics have surfaced while others remain shrouded. Walter Lippmann's (1922/1965) metaphor about the press comes to mind. Like the press, current research "is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision" (p. 229). What will light up is unpredictable. So, here is my list of 10 major targets that, when hit by researchers' searchlights, would give political communication scholars better insight into neglected aspects of the field that are especially relevant for 21st-century political problems.

Communications policy formulation. As the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 so amply demonstrated, legislation in the mass communication realm is the outcome of a tug of war among multiple powerful interest groups. Each is trying to protect its turf, and many are mostly concerned with their financial welfare. There has been very little systematic input from the scholarly community because the unpredictable searchlight rarely targets communications policy issues. Scholars are therefore missing golden opportunities to study policy issues, which are intrinsically interesting, while also allowing them to inform policy makers about the likely consequences of current laws and about the lessons that should guide future legislation. In an era when the increasing complexity of the mass communication scene is begging for sound policy leadership, it is high time to address these issues.

Preserving the open marketplace of ideas. This is another important area in which scholarly interests and public interest concerns can work in tandem. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protects the freedom of the press from government intrusion, is the crown jewel of the U.S. media system. Many developments that the framers of the constitution did not anticipate now threaten press freedom and restrain access to the open marketplace of ideas.

One major threat is the increasing polarization of media ownership of the most widely used media enterprises. A shrinking number of ever-larger industrial conglomerates, interested primarily in the profitability of their media holdings, furnish much of the news for the general public. Although critics of the current media system like Robert McChesney (1999) and Dean Alger (1998) have been vocal in condemning polarization and warning about dire consequences, few scholars have examined the situation dispassionately. James Hamilton's (2004) econometric-based study of the impact of economic motivations on the selection of news stories is a welcome exception. Many more carefully researched analyses of the economics of news production are needed.

Among other press freedom concerns, the political correctness issue and wartime suspensions of First Amendment rights come to mind as particularly trou-

bling (Dickerson, 2001). It is surprising that these topics have received so little attention despite the fact that they raise profound questions about "freedom for the thought we hate"—to use Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's famous phrase. The well-intentioned concerns about avoiding language deemed offensive to disadvantaged groups and concerns about security in an age rife with terrorism have muzzled citizens in all walks of life, including journalists, other opinion leaders, and government officials nationwide. In the strictest legal sense, these may not be First Amendment issues except when legislation is involved, but the widespread damage that even social restraints on free speech pose are an area worthy of scholarly exploration.

Global cultural differences. Political communication is not only interdisciplinary, requiring knowledge of sister disciplines, it also requires studying global cultural differences because political communication varies substantially from culture to culture. A great deal of attention is being paid to subcultures on the American scene, such as the cultures of racial and ethnic groups, cultural differences between men and women and between groups of diverse sexual orientation, and differences based on age, education, and place of residence. However, studies of political communication in non-American cultures, aside from research on problems of language heterogeneity, remain fairly rare. Truly comparative studies are especially scarce (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004: Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hills, 2002; McPhail, 2002; Lowenhaupt-Tsing, 2005; Sobel & Shirayev, 2003). Given the fact that globalization profoundly affects politics in the United States and elsewhere, the sparseness of new research about its political consequences borders on the irresponsible.

Media as agents of political socialization. The role played by political communication in political socialization has been largely neglected, even though the role of the press as a tool for shared political socialization has become increasingly difficult in an era when the U.S. population represents a much broader array of ethnic and religious traditions and spans a much wider range of socioeconomic and educational experiences. The many new media that have emerged in recent decades, thanks to advancing technologies, further jeopardize social cohesion. Scholars have speculated about the divisive consequences of media proliferation, but few have tested them (Rahn & Rudolph, 2001). The fear is that people will find it increasingly difficult to agree on common political agendas and that norms of tolerance that are so crucial in democracies may weaken (Dahlgren, 2001; Entman & Herbst, 2001; Sparks, 2001; Sunstein, 2001). The lack of interest in studies of political socialization is also surprising because the demise of the Soviet empire raised many questions about the type of mass information needed to resocialize adults as well as children to function within democratic regimes. Political communication scholars have done little to provide guidelines for action.

Public information campaigns. These campaigns are another sparsely covered area. Governments all over the world regularly engage in numerous public information campaigns in public policy areas like disease prevention and health maintenance, crime and disaster prevention, environmental protection, education, and child welfare (Crompton & Lamb, 1986; Graber, 2003; Rice & Atkins, 2001). Public officials also use public relations tactics to popularize or condemn existing or prospective policies (Garnet & Kouzmin, 1997; Hess, 1984; Krueger et al., 2000;

Maltese, 1994). In general, these efforts, irrespective of their importance for the public's welfare, do not make it onto the radar screens of social science researchers. The same holds true for public relations campaigns directed at the nationals of other countries during periods of great political strain when mutual understanding is most pressing.

The rhetoric of political leaders. Leaders' rhetoric used to be a fairly active research area but its popularity has been declining in recent decades. It deserves revival. Leaders' discourse is a powerful political stimulus—it is broadly disseminated, and elite and mass audiences pay attention to it because leaders can implement their proposals. In the past, rhetoric has been studied mostly as an instrument of political persuasion or as a reflection of the thoughts and intentions of political leaders. There has been much less interest in the message flows that explain elite decision making. Scholars know too little about the roots of crucial decisions. Biographies of some political leaders and studies of particular events such as the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom to drive Iraq's Saddam Hussein from power fill the gap partially, but more syntheses are needed to reveal general trends (Post, 2004; Renshon, 2004).

The rhetoric of negotiations. The impact of communication factors in domestic and international negotiations also tends to be sparsely covered, although articles in *Discourse and Society* occasionally cover the topic. Most of the ample studies of legislative bodies, such as the U.S. Congress, the British Parliament, or the United Nations pay little attention to the important verbal battles that take place there. Even Congressional hearings conducted to investigate major political events, such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States, are rarely analyzed with a focus on the practical implications of various rhetorical approaches. The factual information that is disclosed and the interpretations that are offered may be reported, but the systematic, comparative analysis of the rhetoric employed during negotiations is missing.

Learning limitations. Many factors that bear on comprehension of news have received minimal attention from social scientists, even though advancements in neuro-psychology have opened many new avenues for research. The human brain is a fantastic instrument for learning, appraising, and judging extraordinarily complex information, but it does have physiologically determined limitations. To make stories about complex political issues comprehensible, these limits must be more fully investigated and tested so that they can be respected. It is pointless to present news intended to inform audiences in formats that deter learning or even preclude it. For example, much audiovisual news is presented at a pace that exceeds the comprehension capabilities of listeners, especially older ones.

User-friendliness factors. The disincentives for learning from news content need to be examined more widely so that they can be corrected. News stories often overwhelm people with more facts and figures and even pictures than they can readily absorb. When journalists present alternative policies, they rarely provide sufficient guidelines for evaluating these alternatives (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). News stories about the 1993–1994 healthcare reform debate, for example, never classified the 27 different reform proposals introduced in the U.S. Congress into easily comprehensible categories.

To compound the confusion, complexity levels of print and broadcast statements are often beyond the capacity of audiences with limited education or language skills in the language used by the medium. Many stories lack sufficient contextual information to allow average persons to assess their meaning within the larger context of happenings in the political world. Given scholars' concerns about citizens' sparse knowledge of politics, it seems surprising that so little effort is devoted to discovering what makes most political news stories unattractive and what could be changed to make them as highly appealing as they are on many occasions (Baum, 2002, 2003; Brants, 1998; Patterson, 2002).

Network analyses. Political systems cannot function without effective networks for transmitting political messages. The paths that messages take often determine which messages lead to political actions and which die from inattention. Computerization of message transmission has altered patterns of message flows in major ways, and with it, patterns of influence. People who are not connected to the networks through which important messages flow may be unable to participate effectively in politics. Yet, despite the intrinsic and growing importance of political communication networks in a world where such networks have become global, political communication scholars continue to shun network analysis as well as most other system-focused studies of communication patterns.

Epilogue

As Lippmann (1922/1965) remarked more than 80 years ago, shining the searchlight intermittently and haphazardly on the political scene will not produce the full picture that is needed to make sense of the political world. What, if anything, can be done? The paucity of resources to investigate all essentials that should be understood makes it unlikely that political communication researchers will ever be able to attain reasonably complete knowledge. That makes it important to guide the research light more deliberately to crucial targets rather than allowing it to roam haphazardly. The research choices that I have recommended are based on my belief that scholars, as citizens of their country and the world, should prioritize research that holds the promise of improving political life. Others may have different goals. The important thing, it seems to me, as we move deeper into the 21st century is to collectively create a road map for more systematic research development, rather than leaving the outcome to chance. Guided development, even if it turns out to be flawed, is preferable to aimless drift.

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