


Introduction: New Trends and Challenges in Political Communication

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Recent discussions about “new trends and challenges” in the field of political communication start from a diagnosis of crisis: the crisis of the economic model of the press, crisis of professional standards and status of reporters, crisis of the emerging formats of news, and so on. They tend to attribute most of the problems to technological change brought on by the Internet (for a review, see Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Technological changes, however, are only part of the changes. Political communication in crisis is not only at the core of the contributions in this special issue, but it is also present in past research agendas. The economic viability of the prestige press, investigative reporting, and public or community media drew attention during the last decades of the past century. Scholars also were concerned about issues ranging from the ideologies and professional routines of news workers to the changes from “hard” to “soft” news formats, from the tabloidization of the press to the colonization of programming by infotainment (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Atkinson 2001).

This pattern points out that instability is inherent to political communication, given the contentious relationships and constant mutation among politicians, constituencies, and media and public relations specialists. Technology emphasizes rather than generates the present disjunctions in and future challenges for how societies communicate politics and policies. From this perspective, new trends in the field relate to classic questions, particularly, how political representation and mediatization evolve in an always-changing environment.

Articles in this issue highlight three traits of the current political communication environment: disillusion about a single and unified public sphere, transnational information flows, and the technological empowerment of ordinary citizens. These issues are central to research agendas and offer a general overview of current research trends in the field.

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The End of a Common Public Sphere?

Public television systems and the prestige press are not the platforms socializing citizens into imagined national spaces anymore. The contemporary media cannot fulfill the promise of melding and crystallizing a national identity fixed in a specific geographical territory; put differently, the media no longer address audiences as members of a single nation and space-bounded polity. The media do not represent “a nation talking to itself,” in American playwright Arthur Miller’s phrase. The increased ability of audiences to choose among distinctive spheres of public debate represents the increased segmentation of publics driven largely by the availability of new media. A greater degree of pluralism may result in the absence of communicative outlets that provide a common, communicative ground for citizens. These two processes tend either to celebrate difference or to criticize segmentation among the public. They may result in disparate forms of information consumption. But as the first three articles show, both tendencies are occurring at the same time, although at a different pace. It remains unclear whether the new political communication environment provides myriad micropolitical spheres that collide or creates synergies among old and new media. Nor do we know whether the result will be either a common yet diversified public sphere or overlapping public spheres. Media fragmentation might be compatible with consensual politics under some conditions. If political communication platforms help sustain different loyalties toward distinct political communities, then fragmented publics may not be at odds with consent. Constituencies thought to be making electoral choices or displaying participatory actions that range from the local to the global or from the particular to the common good could work in an integrated fashion. A press combining diverse geographical frames and overlapping political loyalties would certainly meet all publics moving across space and time boundaries, and interacting simultaneously at different levels.

Two forces could tame the risks of fragmentation and dispersion: the extension of transnational dynamics and the digital empowerment of citizens all over the world. Global political events permeate national press agendas and provide cohesion among them. Web 2.0 allows citizens with resources and higher levels of formal education to report information. Old and new media, some under individual control (as in the case of bloggers), also display converging and centripetal synergies, countering the dispersion of politics and news.

Transnational Contents and Audiences

The global diffusion of information flows, transnational integration of media economies, and migrant publics are key characteristics of contemporary politics and communication. The breakdown of state control of communication is taking place at the global and local levels, as the media reach beyond national borders and build decentralized, denationalized information landscapes (Fraser 2007). Expressions such as *international* or *global public opinion* reflect these developments (Volkmer 2003).

If such a thing exists in fact, it is when opinion forms with the strengths of local roots and of wide global extensions. Large-scale audiovisual broadcasters and digital media address widely dispersed populations. At the same time, hyperlocal or highly specialized new media represent specific publics and contents. From an optimistic point of view, the levels of politics could integrate for democratic purposes if the electoral choices presented and the participatory venues that publics follow are not antagonistic. Real global issues, such as climate change, antiwar mobilization, or economic upheaval stress the need to identify *glocal* connections: where local, national, and global dynamics intersect, conforming to interconnected *political spaces* that represent politics.

Political communication should recognize that state control over national media systems and state capacity to model collective identities is diminishing but also acknowledge that the end of the nation state is far from an irreversible and general phenomenon (Norris and Inglehart 2009)). Nationalist or ethnic backlashes in public discourse have proven feasible avenues for change, especially during economic crisis, culture war, or social turmoil. Communication media usually frame the backlash as either opposed to the interests of national constituencies or against the Other, be it the migrant or foreigner. The main challenges international political communication faces are connected with two seemingly opposed dynamics: the vanishing of nation-states and the return of nationalistic, and xenophobic, discourses.

Given this situation, one may reasonably call for rethinking standard imperialistic critiques as well as the alternative proposal promoting a multipolar environment and an intercultural turn in international political communication. Both the standard and alternative approaches, if still valid, should recognize that neither a prominent center for emitting and controlling international news flows nor the hybrid result of their reception in different parts of the world is sufficient to judge the suitability of each perspective. The undeniable evidence is the ability to reach most countries and deliver a political message to populations not anchored in any media bound to the communicative space of the nation-state.

Technopolitical Empowerment of Citizenship

The technopolitics thesis posits that the Internet, blogosphere, and interactive social media provide new opportunities to make political processes public. They provide citizens with autonomous platforms of communication. Personal media can become mass media. Digital devices allow populations—individuals and collective actors—to perform as proactive agents in political communication, not merely as mostly passive and reactive receivers as in the classic model. To be democratic and political, messages must incorporate notions of coauthorship with the public of prosumers instead of mere consumers. Digital technopolitics might alter the contours of representative democracies by giving space to deliberative and participatory innovations, including nonmediatized (apart from news media) and nonmediated (direct, without representatives) ways of communicating with representatives (for a review, see Bennett 2008).

An opposite hypothesis is equally dependent on technology. It builds on the *panopticon* metaphor, referring to models of audience control and surveillance by states and corporations through digital information and communication technology (ICT). Once again, political communication faces two opposing views with empirical evidence supporting both sides. Technology is neither irrelevant nor determinant, but it is dependent on the institutional interests of market and administrative bureaucracies. Technological outputs also depend on how populations use them according to their skills and resources. Predicting their impact, however, is difficult. The nature of institutions can foster democratic or autocratic objectives. Also, social practices of digital ICT can support positive and negative political cultures.

Several articles focus on the consequences of the technological empowerment of citizens for modern political communication. Publics become active decoders of messages they gather and comment upon, whether classic or modern media; factual, fictional, or mixed formats; and contents created locally or in distant settings. Social media users participate in public deliberation while watching television programs and influencing their future. Online readers comment, distribute, and contest journalists' accounts of political life. This dynamics suggest a new media environment in which convergence is only a starting point for reflection. The active public is not longer restricted to the contextual interpretation of political messages. Citizens now engage in building their own information, messages, and even campaigns of mobilization, based in and extended through digital devices, as the current Arab and southern European cycles of political unrest demonstrate. The long-term impact of these processes is far from evident. But the ever-changing actors, formats, and techniques used to communicate politics and policies will reconfirm the ever-changing nature of both the analysis and the practice of political communication.

This issue features examples of recent and innovative scholarship about new trends and challenges in the field. As guest editor, my purpose was to go beyond a descriptive presentation of particular cases and, instead, present research that advances, summarizes, and questions important lines of inquiry. The project emerged during the seminar organized by ACOP (Asociación de Comunicación Política) at Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in the fall of 2009, where some authors originally presented early drafts of their articles. The result is a collection of six articles that offer original contributions and address a handful of key themes to understand current processes of political communication.

New and Classic Media Environments, Cases, and Approaches

The first three articles highlight specific aspects of the linkages between classic and digital media, giving attention to the interplay between television and social media, user-generated content in online news and, the influence of “old” and “new” patterns of consumption among audience. The opening contribution by O’Loughlin and Anstead (2011) examine how Twitter users generated a hybrid experience around a

BBC program that became a media event. The authors show that television and ICT allow political engagement of active viewers in several modes: one-to-one (tweets to one person but publicly available), one-to-many (retweets), and many-to-many (through hashtags, making content “agreeable and searchable”). Instead of superseding older media, new technologies augment and renew what the author calls the *viewertariat*: “viewers who use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it” (p. XX). In 2009, the appearance of Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party, on *BBC Question Time*, became one of the most high-profile political discussions on British television. The analysis shows the enduring role of television as the provider of big media events, generating “centripetal dynamics” in a pluralistic new media environment. The analysis highlights the change of TV viewing from home discussion to many-to-many communication that social media makes possible. O’Loughlin and Anstead point to challenges or tensions between elite-led institutional modes of discussion and bottom-up, organic forms of participation. This dynamic leads to assessing how new participatory publics will be “monitored, analyzed, and integrated into broadcasts or governance” (p. XX).

Carlos Ruiz and coauthors (2011) analyzed more than fifteen thousand reader-generated comments from the online versions of five national newspapers in five countries: *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *The New York Times* (United States), *Le Monde* (France), *El País* (Spain), and *La Repubblica* (Italy). Drawing on Habermas’s theory of deliberative democracy, they explore whether public debates in the media provide the supposed benefits of deliberation. Two models of audience participation emerge from the analysis. *Communities of debate*, as the authors define, grow from mostly respectful discussions among press commentators holding diverse points of view. *Homogenous communities* express feelings about current events with less argumentative debate. The first coincide with the British and U.S. newspapers; the latter are present at the French, Spanish, and Italian dailies. They argue that the characteristics of each media system, liberal or polarized, following Hallin and Macini’s typology, explain differences. Communities of debate in the liberal, northern Atlantic systems rank higher in “logic and coherence,” the “cooperative search for truth,” and the “agreements based on the best argument.” On the other hand, debates in the southern European countries serve homogenous communities that the authors describe as having “a dialogue of the deaf.” Polarized models show a tendency for external pluralism, in which citizens participate in the spaces their news website of choice provides, mostly finding positions similar to their own and editorial content that fosters political polarization. In contrast, newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom build on internal pluralism, and users’ conversations show a higher degree of democratic maturity, a greater level of argumentation, and more respect among participants and pluralism of ideas.

The association between new media and fragmented, divisive, and potentially polarized public spheres is one of the most interesting challenges in the field. The article by Magdalena Wojcieszak and Hernando Rojas (2011) addresses the issue of

whether communication technologies enable new publics that influence political extremism. Their study advances a new conceptualization of public, *egocentric publics*, a phenomenon enabled by new communication technologies, one that overcomes the traditional dichotomy of small groups and mass publics, captures social interactions on a mesolevel, and places the individual at the center of his or her broader network. Wojcieszak and Rojas test whether these egocentric publics mitigate or exacerbate extremism.

Also, the authors examine different “guises” of extremism, providing a useful conceptual distinction between extremism related to partisanship, political ideology, and two specific issues, same-sex marriage and internal conflict in Colombia. Furthermore, they take into account various patterns of “old” and “new” media use mapped through recent polls conducted in Colombia, differentiating not only among media (i.e., radio, press, television) but also among media formats (i.e., nonpolitical and political). Their systematic investigation sheds light on the potential effects of traditional and new media use patterns. For example, watching television for entertainment and seeking entertainment in online venues are positively related with some instances of political extremism. The study also discussed the relationship between extremism and the use of traditional media for political information. Hard news on television was negatively related with ideological extremism, but newspaper use had a positive relation, an association attributable to local newspapers that continue to foster partisan views in their editorial lines. These findings make a case for differentiating between various extremity forms and various media use patterns.

The most notable contribution of this article lies in providing initial evidence on egocentric publics and their association with extremism. The authors find that such expressive Internet uses as e-mailing about politics and current events, visiting political blogs, joining discussion forums, and commenting on articles or opinion pieces online are related to the two issue-specific extremity forms. Contrary to what some commentators fear, these relationships are negative. This may be due to the increased size of egocentric publics, the resulting increase in network heterogeneity, and the greater publicness that expression within these online publics entails. The results matter because they “challenge the notion that endogenous linking patterns or like-minded online associations provide little space for counterattitudinal exposure or dissimilar conversations to occur” and because they “highlight the importance of new communication technologies in explaining political extremity” (p. XX). Because the relationships are likely bidirectional, the authors conclude that political socialization and interpersonal networks may also interact with media use, as well as passive and expressive online activities. Fine-grained distinctions related to the tested issues help cast light upon extremism, and—as future research will determine—on other attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors.

Wolfgang Donsbach and Anne-Marie Brade (2011) explore the contributions of communication research to the practice of political communication. The analysis shows the compatibility between academic and professional approaches. The authors propose a mutual interrelation between the theories and measurable variables of social sciences and the needs of practical politics and public relations to adopt procedures

based on evidence. The thesis especially applies to three trends in political communication: (1) deprofessionalization, or the coexistence of a large proportion of high-quality news next to the nonprofessional inputs of audiences; (2) fragmentation that might increase the ideological bias of sources and the selectivity of users; and (3) randomization, or the unpredictable character of communication effects in the new media environment. The neat exposition of theoretical models and solid empirical results suggest three main contributions or “services” of political communication as a scientific field to public relations practice (the application most allied with business): “(1) modeling the field and its variables, (2) providing methods for the measurement of PR effectiveness, (3) measuring PR effectiveness and its quality” (p. XX). Contradictions emerge between “normative communication research and PR practitioners,” and Donsbach and Brade ask for “a balance in the applied utilization of evaluation results and the moral desirability of those implementations, especially when it comes to politics” (p. XX). In that way, academic efforts “can also serve as a safeguard for the functioning of democracy” (p. XX).

This idea underlies Carole Bell and Robert Entman’s (2011) analysis of how television covered the tax cut policies in the United States. Their study shows the fruitful results of combining quantitative content analysis, qualitative textual analysis, and narrative analysis to discuss news frames in a nonelectoral study. They examine media coverage of leading TV news to discuss interests and sources. They discuss the results by drawing upon the *sociotropic values* that might have helped lower and middle classes reject tax cuts. They argue that “coverage subtly favored the Republicans’ (and then Obama’s) preferred framing of the policy by neatly directing Americans’ attention to its apparent collective benefits in terms of economic growth while deemphasizing the skewed, particularistic benefits.” Economic growth, practically, the unique sociotropic value available to lay audiences, served to obscure the distributive or redistributive effects of the tax cuts, which the authors demonstrate “impaired Americans’ ability to conceptualize their political self-interests in particularistic income-group or class terms.” The critiques were divorced from the discussion of social values. Equality was more likely to be debated in relation to gay rights or race disparities than regarding wealth and taxes. Far from adopting a conspiracy thesis to explain the biased representation of hegemonic social values, the authors advance a three-layered explanation: the nonideological character of the U.S. media system emphasizes political competition over substantive policy, the electoral prospects of political candidates rely on big financial contributors, and a disparity exists between the conservative and liberal communication apparatuses. Although the study concludes that those factors are intrinsic to the United States, they are also present in other countries, especially when economic information is at stake. Bell and Entman’s contribution allows a deeper understanding of what roles the media and class polarization play in contemporary politics.

The authors acknowledge that the application of more sophisticated techniques and practices can lead to citizen disempowerment because of manipulative government communication. But they “argue that to describe these practices as “professional”

without referring them to as an overarching regulative ideal fundamentally misunderstands what it means. Professions are usually governed by codes of practice. These codes typically contain generic statements suggesting that those working within a particular profession should, for example, act in the interests of the people they serve and the wider general public, promote good practices, keep up to date with continuing professional development, and behave with integrity.”

Kevin Barnhurst (2011) offers a theoretical discussion of the state of news media, paying attention to the technical, labor, and economic facets of the current crisis. His contribution challenges existing perspectives by asking for a deep reexamination of the dominant paradigm of political communication and its “functional metaphors, economic background assumptions, an emphasis on method, and a legacy of structuralism” Barnhurst provocatively argues that the emerging media environment is beyond the grasp of classic approaches: “Contradictions crisscross the landscape of political information. The public is made of jackasses somehow discerning not to trust the press, which itself chases attention down a political rabbit hole. Journalists have entered a looking-glass world, writing longer explanations because they mistake what they produce for short, episodic texts, while publishers announce their innovations at the same time they resist new technologies but blame them for every problem” (p. XX). Barnhurst outlines an alternative approach that is relevant to other articles in the issue. Keeping an eye on young publics, hybrid genres, and contemporary media expressions of public opinion, Barnhurst shows the need to attend to *representation*, while “introducing subjectivity as another pole for political communication thought, placing feelings and narratives alongside information and reasoning at the center of research” (p. XX). Among the motivations for doing so are not only the disjunctions between classic approaches and the current dynamics of political communication but also, as Barnhurst concludes, that “new research can follow another path, focusing on what science has previously ignored: passion, faith, comedy, and hope—states that have produced great works of journalism and politics as well as literature and art” (p. XX).

Collectively, the six articles illuminate some of the main questions in the field. They explore the changing character of public spheres, political actors, and technological resources. They also identify how communication practices and institutions shape processes of media reception, use, and coauthorship; public opinion polarization; and state-managed communication. While allowing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, this special issue also aims to advance innovative venues for and modes of inquiry.

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Bio

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