Political Communication Research:
An Overview of the Past and the Present

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Abstract

The evolution, currency and future possibilities of research in the field of political communication have already been delineated and outlined by Anne Johnston (1990), Lynda Lee Kaid (2004), and Doris A Graber (2005). In line with the concepts introduced by these scholars, this article attempts to present the scope, relevance, theoretical groundings and methodologies adopted in the latter-day research activities in the field. The major subfields like Election Communication, Agenda-setting, Political Learning, Priming and Framing, Political Rhetoric, Political Advertising, and Political Campaigns Debates are covered in this review.

Introduction

In common parlance, the term Political Communication is defined as mere communication of politics. But as the term is impregnated with dense theoretical aspects and scholarship as it refers to a field of study which is interdisciplinary in nature. Brain McNair (1995) defines the term as "purposeful communication about politics". This definition entails the following facts:

1. The types of communication regularly made by political leaders and actors in order to realize certain objectives

2. All forms of communication the respondents like voters and news columnists make addressing these political actors

3. Communication made by media persons through news reports, debates, editorials, etc. on political actors and their activities

Political scientists have attempted to define the term, but most of them failed to attract acceptance. A few successful definitions are discussed here: political communication is the "role of communication in the political process", according to Steven Chaffee (1975) (p.15, Kaid, 2004).

Communication in politics as a discourse can be traced back to ancient days, and over time, its fundamentals have undergone changes. The idea has been debated and hypothesised for over 2000 years, beginning with Aristotle's "Rhetoric and Politics" in 350 B.C (Graber, 2005). Of late, in its modern interpretations, the field is interdisciplinary in nature overlapping the areas like sociology, history, journalism, rhetoric, media studies, etc. Political communication as a field does not confine into mere electoral contexts. It has considerable say over executive, legislative, judicial bodies in addition to the workings of political parties, political actors, interest groups, etc. (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008).

Delineating the Field

There are different viewpoints available while approaching the field of political communication. The field is concerned with messages which can directly or indirectly influence the political milieu, especially in terms of their construction, dissemination, and

reception. It also takes into consideration the role of senders and receivers of those messages. They are either political actors, media persons, citizens, interest group member, or the governing organizations: "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, 2005).

That many scholars of communication are concerned with the day-to-day political events and their effects on various realms and behaviors, both the disciplines—Political Science and Communication—are here to stay in mainstream, interlaced in terms of production of knowledge and dissemination of the same by dint of university programmes, courses, and production of articles in journals. However, the interdependency is more a demand from the side of the discipline of communication for political communication as a field is only a contributory stream in political science. In contrast, political communication is an integral stream in the field communication. Graber says that political communication performs well in communication but competes for attention with many other sub-discipline-specific specialities (Graber, 2005).

The Diversity of Theories

The discipline of political communication studies draws ideas, theories, and methodology from the fields like politics, communication and psychology. The triangular overlapping can be easily justified for the relationship between the three fields: the substance is from politics, communication studies messages in terms of production and reception while psychology provides theoretical understanding on human behaviors along with responding to such messages. Simply put, any hypothesis on the reception of political messages presupposes theories of 'rational choice' from political science, 'selective choice' from psychology, and ' uses and

gratifications' in communication. The incorporation of uses and gratification theory can be taken as a tool to identify the interest and need people to gratify by their choice of subscribing to specific information. Their choices may be due to either knowledge needs, or attempt to fulfill ego-defensive needs, the desire for certain rewards, or to avoid punishments, to express some values etc. (Graber 2005). In this way, scholars in Political Communication focus on people's goal-oriented choices and the process of information about the polls (Huang, 2000 – cited in Graber, 2005).

Any analysis regarding the influence of messages on audiences has to be placed against the theoretical approach of agenda setting. Agenda-setting approach perceives that the information provided by mass media has the capacity to shape the political views and opinion of audience about all political happenings as well as the conduct of political actors. It is the mass media messages that people get directly exposed to, and thereby agenda setting is possible in this area of political communication (Soroka, 2003; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997 – Cited in Graber, 2005).

Why Study Political Communication?

The interrelationship between politics and the mass media is based on complementary and interdependent factors. Recently, the capacity of different institutions like political parties and interest groups to formulate public preferences has suffered a decline. The traditional role of those institutions has now been transferred to the hands of mass media. Therefore, "Media Politics" has become all pervasive in the field of politics. As a result, wide recognition has been given to the practice of making use of—manipulation of— media messages to achieve political objectives. Rather, the practice is counted as the most essential tool for political survival.

In line with these recent developments in the field, research in political communication also is updated. As has been foreseen by

the scholars like Steven Chaffee and others, research methodology has replaced the one-dimensional reliance on survey research in order to adopt newly-formulated methodologies in the field. The field has now developed into possessing strong research tools. An extensive growth in scope and relevance is visible in identifying the target of interest. (Iyengar, S, 2001).

Currently, the researchers in political communication focus on a variety of topics due to the changes reflected in the field. Whereas the researches in the past were concerned with political messages related to happened events and episodes, scholars in the field nowadays focus on the manifold scope and capability of fictitious stories in various forms—printed and audiovisual—to shape audience's perceptions and opinions on the events happening around them. Accordingly, many studies have been carried out on the politically-relevant programmes offered by mass media. (Graber, 2005)

Methodological Advancements

In political communication, there are many different kinds of study methodologies. The diversity is available as a reflection to the practices in its umbrella fields like humanities and social sciences. Both quantitative and qualitative methods hold prominence in the filed even though initially, qualitative method had been undermined. Whereas, overcoming it, qualitative method has also availed equal position recently (Graber, 2005). Public opinion polls, surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews are the most common tools used to assess the impact of messages. These tools help us comprehend how the messages have been received and interpreted and how the audiences responded to them. They can also identify the effects these messages have on them (Miller, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005).

A study conducted in 2000 to identify the frequency of research methods adopted in Political Communication by taking up as many as 79 studies in the field shows the following results: 48% of studies adopted survey research as primary research methodology; 20% of studies used content analysis; 16% went for experimental research. Only 9% of the articles took intensive interviews. Other methodologies including focus groups constituted 6% (Graber, 2004).

A new trend of following experimental studies to analyse the impacts of messages is found. In experimental study, a small number of respondents are involved and they are exposed to select information stimuli to comprehend the extent to which these respondents are influenced by the stimuli in their process of opinion formation on political events (Neuman et al., 1992; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2000; Leshner, 2001 - cited in Graber, 2005).

Data analysis techniques are also as varied as research methodologies in the field of Political Communication. All data analysis tools found in social science research, from most familiar eyeball comparisons of presidential addresses to complicated numerical, clinical and lab techniques, are also resorted to in this field. Also, there exists a practice of using multiple analysis tools. It helps the researcher ensure the plausibility of results that one method provides with. In addition, this multiple analysis helps us understand which method of analysis is most accurate among them all (Graber, 2005).

Research Focus Areas in Political Communication

Media and Politics

A.   Newspapers

Newspapers occupy a substantial role in providing the electorates with political messages and information. De Tocqueville's notions

concerning this argument endorse the role of creating politically-informed electorate played by newspapers. This argument has been further validated by modern surveys. These surveys establish that those who read newspapers are more knowledgeable about politics than those who do not (Weaver & Drew, 1993; Robinson & Levy, 1986 – cited in Druckman, 2005). Druck Man opines those newspapers provide better coverage than other media—qualitatively better and quantitatively more than television can provide (Druckman, 2005).

B.   Television

Many studies have identified a considerable difference between newspaper readers and those who rely on television in relation to developing political malaise, evaluation of candidates, voting behavior, and political engagements (Miller & Reese, 1982; McLeod, Glynn, & Mc Donald, 1983 – cited in Johnston, 1990). Hahn (1987) highlights the flip sides of television as a means to disseminating political messages. According to him, television as a medium has reduced the scope of investigative journalism along with personalizing politics, especially when it comes to the role of media on the presidency. He is in the view that this tendency of television robbed citizens and electorates of their powers along with creating a sense of political alienation within them (Hahn, 1987 - cited in Johnston, 1990).

C.   Digital Media

Introduction and popularity of Internet and cable television channels have gained for the average citizens the power to realize their political volition and observe their choices of government. These new platforms offer better political information and views to the citizens, and provide opportunities to them to be active political participants (Dahlberg, 2001; Bucy & Gregson, 2002 – cited in

Graber, 2005). Some academics believe digital media will boost political participation, particularly among young voters (Shah et al., 2001; Delli Carpini, 2000 – cited in Graber, 2005)

Communication with Voters

In the past decades, electoral politics and its related aspects are found to be the busiest place of research areas. It is mainly because of the importance attached to the whole process of selecting qualified officials to place in democratic power, and also due to the quite need of maintaining the quality of messages provided via media. Additionally, the area of electoral politics is ever renewed as the contests occur in certain intervals with fresh political strategies, events and electoral candidates. Also, this field of inquiry is concerned with election messages. Election messages are circulated through mass media, and therefore, it is relevant to conduct studies as to what mass media in their variegated forms can do in terms of candidature, political issues, and political messages circulated at the time of election (Flower, Haynes, & Crespin, 2003 – cited in Graber, 2005).

The whole process election and the procedures thereof have been influenced and undergone a drastic change thanks to media coverage, especially of issues pertaining to elections. Many studies have been carried out on topics related to this phenomenon within the framework of election communication, and they argue that the media coverage during elections has caused damage to so many political parties. These studies identified a shift in the focus of political parties from organizing campaign activities to media exposure (Trent & Friedenberg, 1983; Joslyn, 1984; Arterton, 1984; Lang & Lang, 1984; Graber, 1989– cited in Johnston, 1990).

Researchers have always inculcated within them a predilection to the area of election communication even though there are various other possibilities of study in the area of Political Communication.

Researchers in the filed mainly focus on the types of messages, issues, and arguments revolving around the candidate in relation to their effects on electorates. At the same time, there is a vast scope for study on the types of communication that the electorates make to the candidates. On the other hand, it is media coverage of election campaign and its impacts on electorates that attracts the scholars of election communication, rather than any other focus area of the discipline. These scholars claim that election campaigns are tantamount to communication campaigns. According to Tent and Friedenberg (1983, pp.15-16) "political election campaigns are campaigns of communication" despite the fact that there are other various aspects having a sway over the whole process of elections viz economic, cultural, historical, psychological etc. (Johnston, 1990).

Some scholars attribute much influential value to the visual aspects of election coverage. According to them, visual portrayal of a candidate in television can have equal impact on the viewers as the verbal reports can (Kepplinger, 1982; Moriarty & Garramone, 1986; Masters, Sullivan, Feola, & MC Hugo, 1987 – cited in Johnston, 1990). Moreover, there are researches conducted to establish the complementary correlation between television news and newspaper consumption and the process of developing perceptions about the image of candidates and political stance on issues of relevance (Mc Leod, Glynn, & Mc Donald, 1983; Hofstetter & Strand, 1983; Choi & Becker, 1987– cited in Johnston, 1990).

Studies on Agenda-Setting

In their empirical study (1968), Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw probed into the ability of the media to influence political agenda. The study revealed that media have a prominent role in influencing the votes of undecided voters by highlighting certain issues as the most important political issues of the general interest. They identified this theory as working in the 1968 U.S. Presidential

Election. The undecided voters responded to the highlighted issues, and it corresponded in the election race. As a result, they introduced the concepts like "media agenda" and "public agenda." Media coverage during elections with an underlying agenda to highlight certain issues and downplaying others can be taken as media agenda while voters agenda concerns are categorized as public agenda. In their hypothesis, they proposed the idea that the public agenda can be set by media agenda. They referred to this phenomenon as "agenda setting." In order to establish this media agenda, they conducted analysis of the contents of newspaper coverage during election times. At the same time, they established the public agenda by the dint of a survey conducted on some randomly selected undecided voters. They identified a great prospect in the study, and therefore they made an extensive study by selecting all voters in the next presidential election which occurred in 1972 (Lasorsa, 2008). Based on the findings of McCombs and Shaw, many explorations have been subsequently made to identify the capacity of news to set public agenda. Though McCombs and Shaw construed the media influence as to making people the way the media designs, studies carried out afterwards examined the potential existence of other factors that might affect agenda-setting (Johnston, 1990).

This avalanche of researches conducted subsequently in this way testified agenda-setting of news stories to a great extent. Scholars established how these media reports affect how the public views potential political outcomes. It was testified in various national and international matters of importance like the Persian Gulf Crises of 1990-91, and Ethiopian famine and technological issues with nuclear power plants (Rubin, 1987; Bosso, 1989; Iyenger & Simon, 1993 – cited in Graber, 2005). According to Iyengar et al. (1982), those who view media stories that concentrate on a particular issue will be invariably convinced of the importance of the issue the news stories

address (Johnston, 1990). At the same time, Williams, Shapiro and Cutbirth (1983) hold the opinion that media has the ability to set public agenda during election campaign if they decide to set news stories in desired ways. Similar studies have been carried out on online newspapers on web and the extended possibility of them in the form of internet chatroom discussions to identify agenda-setting effects (Roberts et al., 2002; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005). These works mainly resorted to audience research and analysis of media materials (Kim et al., 2002; Kerr & Moy 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005).

Political Learning and Knowledge Acquisition

Another domain of inquiry which gains attention in the latter-day research field comprises of aspects like political information, political behavior and political attitude. Here in this domain, researches are conducted to decipher various modes of processing political information with regard to acquisition of political knowledge, political participation, political learning etc. The domain also focuses on news media's role in raising the audience's knowledge level, especially about their political and civic duties. Studies conducted in the area pave the way for controversies regarding the desirability of requirements for civic engagement and the credibility of the conclusions on citizens' political awareness. In addition, Graber (2005) puts it; there is no agreement among the scholars as to how the political messages are to be created in order for the voters to better understand them.

Researchers of Political Communication have explored the field of Neuroscience to comprehend the process of reception and assimilation of political knowledge that human brain encounters in large amount in the modern world (Damasio,2003, 1999 – cited in Graber, 2005). Newer developments in the field of Neuroscience, especially about cognitive functions, have benefitted these scholars

in navigating their study to comprehend the role of emotional faculty in information processing activities. As per the findings in Neuroscience, human beings tend to store more dramatic and emotionally-charged stories than neutral ones. Damasio and others establish that emotional arousal creates stimulants in blood streams. It intensifies the effect and makes perception more sensitive (Gazzaniga, 1992, 1998; Goleman, 1995; Damasio 1999, 2003 – cited in Graber, 2005).

When it comes to political information process, it is relevant to discuss the findings of Lodge and Hamill, (1986). They conducted a study on schema of interpreting information and found electorates resort to various schemas for information processing. According to them, those who are more knowledgeable and aware of political campaigns, issues and policy differences between candidates tend to use partisan schemas. Scholars in the field have identified various factors that influence information process and decision making of voters. They are the level of campaign, election climate, campaign phase, and characteristics of electorates (Whitney & Goldman, 1985; Hurley & Wilson, 1987 – cited in Johnston, 1990). Also, researchers like Bositis and others discuss the influential aspects of political information on the decision-making power of voters (Kennamer & Chaffee, 1982; Bositis & Miller, 1982; Nimmo, 1985; McKelvey & Ordeshook, 1986 – cited in Johnston, 1990).

Priming and Framing

Information acquisition and myriad of the related aspects have prompted scholars to pursue their studies in the field. Theoretical frameworks of "priming" and "framing" occupy considerable relevance in them. Human brain is found to rely on recently activated thoughts while responding to new information. This propensity of brain is called Priming. At the same time, framing is a process of neuro-transmitters presenting messages from a particular perspective by shutting down all other perspectives (Graber,2005).

One example of priming is how people assimilate news articles and how they affect their thought processes and decisions (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Iyengar & Simon, 1993 – cited in Graber, 2005). In other words, viewers of a news story of a politician addressing an issue prime the audience to evaluate his performance based on the recently stored reactions rather than in a larger purview or with consideration of the issue as a more publicized issue (Valentino et al, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005).

In the same fashion, Message Framing also shapes thinking process of the viewers. The possibility of framing a single event in different ways can inculcate conflicting reactions in the audience. The conflicts arise as only specific frames guide the audience's thoughts (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000; Brewer 2001; Krosnick & McGraw, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005). Philo Wasburn (2002) identified differences in how similar events presented in other nations were framed. The Persian Gulf Crisis of 1990–91, the 1996 U.S. Presidential Nomination Conventions, and the 1982 Folk Land War between Argentina and Great Britain were the events incorporated in the comparative analysis he carried out. Another study by Claes de Vreese (2002) lends credence to this understanding. Different framing of the single issue related to European integration reflected on public opinion in the countries like Netherlands, Britain, and Denmark (Graber, 2005).

Political Rhetoric

Political Rhetoric as a sub-field and research area has been explored more than any other areas in the field of political communication. Scholars have shown a great amount of interest to better understand how rhetoric strategies of political actors construct "realities" (Johnston, 1990). There are different methods and techniques employed by researchers to analyse rhetoric. Traditional tools of rhetorical criticism (the Burkean Pentad) have been employed by

many scholars while others make use of analytic techniques which are widely used in the discipline of communication (Johnston, 1990).

Scholars have undertaken studies on the language use of political actors. S.K. Foss (1982) in his study brings out the differences in the language use by the presidents during campaigns and that when they are in office. During campaign, they are found to be more idealistic with discourses, but it gives way for more pessimistic outlook as they step into power. There are innovative technological tools to carry out content analysis of the language used by candidates. DICTION is a computer programme used by Hart (1984 a, 1984 b) in order to show the variance in language use of presidents (Johnston, 1990).

Political Advertising

The latter-day social scientists are found to be navigating their studies to the concept of political debates and advertising (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005). They mainly check if the matters on which candidates give emphasis are accurately conveyed to the audience through political advertising. They also study the extent to which the news stories are successful in passing the same message intended by the political actors. They also probe into a candidate's positioning of himself or herself in terms of professional and personal credentials as compared to other opponents. Political advertising and the contents of them hold relevance as a field of inquiry owing into its relationship with information regarding the image and stance of political actors concerned. Moreover, as a subfield, it gains popularity among researchers because political advertising has the capacity to influence perceptions of electorates, their interest in political campaign, voting decisions, etc. (Johnston, 1990).

As a field of inquiry, political advertising will flourish on its various prospects as it is capacitated to bring about desired success on the

one hand, and at the same time, negative effects as a boomerang effect. There are many such incidents cited by researchers as examples for the backlash effect (S.Merrit, 1984; Garramone, 1984 – cited in Johnston, 1990). The effects of unfavourable advertising are a common research topic nowadays (Gordon, Shafie, & Crigler, 2003; Burden, 2002; – cited in Graber, 2005). Scholars focus on the impacts of negative advertising and its repercussions on the outcome of elections. They are eager to carry out such studies by involving different variables like age, gender, education qualifications, etc. (Holbrook, 2002 – cited in Graber, 2005).

Political Campaign Debates

Televised discussions, especially those staged during elections times, is another scope of study in the field of political communication. Queries like how such debates influence the electorates in formulating perceptions on candidates and political issues have always attracted researchers in the field. The educational impact as well as its reach to large target audience places debate at the top of political communication methods. Televised debates have other advantages also: they provide scope for equal access to mass media. Also, when it comes to national leadership qualities, audience gets an option to execute an audition on them. Moreover, as researchers propose, such debates are more of a democratic vein as they inform all candidates the strength and weaknesses of each other (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006). Political debates during election campaigns in the U.S hold most relevance in terms of political communication. There are countries that hold political debates in order for candidates to decorate the positions of Chancellors, Prime Ministers, and Presidents. The practice of holding debates between candidates can be traced to Swedish debates happened as early as 1958. Countries like France, Germany, South Korea, Poland,

Sweden, Greece, and Holland continue to follow political campaign debates for leaderships (Benoit & Sheafer, 2006).

Coverage of International Politics

Coverage of international news also plays a pivotal role in fostering political awareness among citizens. Researchers hold the opinion that most of such international news is either undermined, highlighted or dismissed. Such news coverage is found to be gradually decreasing in numbers (Lee et al, 2001; Kluver, 2002; Gilboa, 2002; Soroka, 2003; Entman, 2004 – cited in Graber, 2005).

There are various concerns over the coverage of foreign affairs when the news flow over national boundaries. Most often, these news flows are found to be one-directional—from the West to the Third World Countries. Similarly, scholars have identified that the focus of news coverage by western countries on the Third World Countries has been narrowed down to issues like disaster, political coup, violence etc. (Johnston, 1990).

Government and Media

Government and media constitute yet another important subfield of political communication. Researches have been conducted to comprehend how media attention on presidency influences the functioning of the office. Studies have validated this relationship between presidential coverage and the media. The media and the president were the focus of a special issue of "Presidential Studies Quarterly" published in 1986 (Johnston, 1990).

Apathy and Alienation in Politics

Contents and presentation styles of news stories influence audience in different ways. Some categories of news stories, especially the ones which arouse negative emotions within the viewers, are found to alienate them from the whole business of media and politics. This phenomenon can be termed as "political malaise" and cynicism

(Zimmer, 1983; Platetz & Entman, 1984 – cited in Johnston, 1990). Researchers have also been captivated by the potential drawbacks of emotionally stirring stories. Sensational contents may turn people off to politics and the media. Many studies hold media as responsible for people abstaining from political activities like voting and also for developing cynical stories. Such people lose trust in government as well as the whole political processes (Rahn & Rudolph, 2001; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997 – cited in Graber, 2005).

Politically Underprivileged Masses

Studies have addressed the politically disadvantaged groups of people like the coloured, homosexuals, destitute and transgenders. These studies focused on contents of both visually and verbally created media images of those groups (Van Dijk, 1993; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gorden et al., 2003 – cited in Graber, 2005). These groups of people are either ignored or segregated in media stories, or if they find a space at all, that is either distorted or unduly hyped. This distorted representation of media has been taken up for studies by scholars (Graber, 2005).

Conclusion

Lippmann (1922/1965) demands the scholars of the area of political communication to be relentless in terms of their inquiry. According to him, intermittent and haphazard enterprises cannot produce the repertoire of knowledge that is required to comprehend the entire gamut of political world. The paucity of knowledge resources can only result in creating a discipline which otherwise will be inefficient to cater to the demands of epistemological march ahead. In order to achieve a well-grounded knowledge frame, it is decisive to focus the searchlight more steadily with targets. (Graber, 2005). The scholars in the field have to stay abreast with the newer developments in all other related fields like sociology, psychology,

communication, journalism, etc. along with being informed of recent and relevant literatures. The interdisciplinary nature of the field and advancements in technological aspects will always throw challenges. But the scholars who take up such challenges will always be rewarded (Johnston, 1990).

The above article is merely an effort to provide an overview of the study of political communication. Each theme and subfield would require a Herculean effort to review and analyse. New technology, the development of new research tools, and the fact that political communication research is so inter-disciplinary all have the potential to take it to further heights. Furthermore, it is a subject of research that is continually expanding and developing.

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