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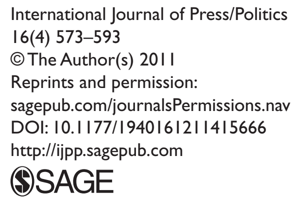
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Kevin G. Barnhurst[1]

Abstract

Political communication research in the United States, despite two decades of change in how the public receives information, follows theories that rely on definitions of citizenship from a century ago and on metaphors growing out of communication techniques and practices of five decades ago. A review of the state of news media, facing technical, labor, and economic crises, and the state of political science, illustrated through research methods, leads to a reexamination of communication at the intersection of media and politics. Political communication theory has come to rely on functional metaphors, economic background assumptions, an emphasis on method, and a legacy of structuralism. The crisis presents current theories with challenges for the representation of citizens and the press in democracy. Especially as young adults reject older forms of information, political communication can renew itself by deepening existing theory and shifting from old effects rationality to a new "media affect" sensibility.

Keywords

citizenship, journalism, news business, qualitative methods, technology, theory

Political communication research is at a turning point, its direction unclear in the face of unprecedented change. The conditions of public information are transforming technologies of political knowledge and common perspectives on political life. But political communication research has had difficulty keeping up. Conference planners still receive a bulk of papers going over familiar ground, especially functionalist research on agenda setting, gatekeeping, and the like.[1] As the field expands in each

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national setting, scholars repeat existing studies, so that in Spain, for instance, researchers have been retracing ground covered decades ago in other countries under different circumstances. Assailed by turbulence in politics and tumult in the media, political communication has remained cautious in method and theory, its firm traditions and horizons generating few new ideas and rendering inert the drama going on in the world today. Political communication in the current century has lost its moorings.

One way to lay new footings is to de-center the paradigm of functionalism—a view that focuses on how communication processes have effects on politics and vice versa. The paradigm aims to produce useful research results within existing power relations of politics (and of research). By eliding ethical questions about who will put the results to use and to what ends (or relying on an unexamined "public good"), functionalists tend to accept and reinforce the status quo. The paradigm assumes that behavior and rationality can explain political communication, without admitting the possibility of what Dewey called the "deeper levels of life" (1927: 184) essential to a full account. The paradigm also ignores the qualities underlying human activity by focusing on relational, causal operations, excluding what builds intrinsic value in social relations, what makes life worth living, and "what it's like" (the *qualia*, in philosophical terms) for individuals to experience, feel, and know subjectively. Finally, the functional paradigm relies on a background assumption that its objects of study—politics, media, opinion, agendas, and the like—simply exist on the political landscape. But they do not. Publics and politicians must imagine that land, and so an alternative is the paradigm of representation.[2]

Representation is the pattern of action and language revealing what the people in societies (and what scholars in turn) imagine (Anderson 1991; Arendt 1973). In politics, it occurs through the devices and techniques citizens and leaders employ on the public stage (Eliasoph 1998; Goffman 1959), through the media assumed to provide the best way for political actors to express their style and moral legitimacy (Carey 1989; Corner and Pels 2003), and through the larger picture of what the public landscape holds and how it holds together (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). Representation introduces subjectivity as another pole for political communication thought, placing feelings and narratives alongside information and reasoning at the center of research.

Functionalism concentrates on what semiotics calls the *signifier*, the concrete or observable manifestations of (in this case) political life, where representation concentrates on the *signified*, which occurs in the mind and collective consciousness but makes itself manifest in its consequences. Both are necessary to understand what any sign means to the individual and society. In studying the complex *effects* connecting communication and politics, research has left aside *affect*, the passions and moral judgments that drive political learning and socialization, political commitment and involvement, and political mediation and criticism. Affect has existed continuously but seemed beyond the reach of social research before recent movements in social thought. Media *affect* is a blind spot as long as political communication ignores representation and builds only on functions and media effects.

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In the mode of normal science, political communication tends to move deductively from accepted notions, follows predictable procedures, and so reaches foregone conclusions. The pattern develops backwards, the ease of familiar ideas and tasks leading the researcher along an already determined path. Path dependency can reduce social science to boilerplate, reproducing set assumptions about methods based on obsolete theories without confronting how conditions have changed. The crises that now trouble media business plans, audience choices of entertaining content (especially among the young), and politicians' selection of channels for making claims, as well as scholarly regimes to study them all, are not new (Swanson 2001) but occur foremost in representation. A central problem for political communication is to reexamine its reigning metaphors and question its images for depicting politics and the media, asking where those pictures come from and whether they relate to the emergent environment.

What follows is an attempt to work inductively from current conditions—the state of the media, especially press practices, and the state of political science and communication studies—toward another paradigm. As an essay it is exploratory and tentative. The changing public media and research practice together suggest the need to rethink political communication. But an essay is not a manifesto. It neither reviews the literatures it touches on nor proposes a research program, but tries instead to make familiar terrain seem strange. It begins from the narrow compass of U.S. political communication, a harbor of functionalism. And it can only point to potential sources of new ideas, without undertaking the multifaceted task of sorting, judging, and developing them, a job best left to the collective efforts of scholars in the field around the world.

State of the Media

In recent years, the U.S. news media have entered a state of crisis,[3] suffering what seems like one crisis but is several intense and interrelated crises: in technology, audiences, economics, and workforce. Technological crisis has emerged in the modes of disseminating political information. A common view in the United States is that new techniques transform the modes of disseminating news. As one prominent journalism professor suggested: "when technology changes, journalism has always been forced to change, too."[4] The expansion of the Internet has seemed to determine the political lay of the land (Winner 1978), in which technique plays a main role. The view is not only common—a web search on the exact phrase "technology changes politics" yields fifty-two million hits—but also held among elites, who say that "new communications technology . . . changes politics greatly" throughout history.[5] Mobile devices are only the latest wave of technologies affecting political communication. But the changes are occurring not only in functions but also in representations, and affect—the enthusiasm for and fear of gadgetry—drives the transformations in technique.

Besides adjusting to irresistible technologies, journalism must adapt to a similar rise in expectations for its audiences: that U.S. media foster interaction with (primarily young) readers, viewers, and users, that is, the public. In 2002 the Pew Center for Civic

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Journalism launched J-Lab, the Institute for Interactive Journalism, at the University of Maryland,[6] and in 2006 the MacArthur Foundation created its digital media initiative.[7] That year J-Lab announced, "Changes in technology are also empowering individuals to take a more personal—and local—stake in news coverage."[8] Research has abounded (e.g., Bird 2003),[9] but a key to understanding the phenomenon is the image of U.S. journalism, which executives now expect to foster collaboration with audiences in creating information. The institutional changes illustrate how interactivity has become central to the representation of how to generate public knowledge.

New techniques and their potential for engaging audiences overlay economic issues. For decades, as U.S. news businesses were reorganizing into publicly traded properties with shares for sale (Schiller 1989), media ownership not only consolidated but also achieved high levels of profitability.[10] Trade in the market for news media involved acquisitions that ran up large debts.[11] On that backdrop, declines in media company stock values in the late 2000s affected shareholders wherever private owners had gone public and issued shares (McChesney and Schiller 2003). The functional crisis reaching its zenith in 2008 was acute in some media sectors; the minority-owned press experienced a "drastic decline in the number of papers" as perhaps half of them closed.[12] And the crisis was also general for news media. Craigslist, founded as not-for-profit, eroded what formerly provided about 40 percent of U.S. press income: low-cost classified advertising (Picard 2004). Google, Yahoo, and other news aggregators ate into the main source of income, higher cost display ads (Patterson 2007). The revenues (always volatile) from both sources slumped during 2008, "including a precipitous decline in classified advertising" and a loss of half of local advertising.[13] Splitting advertising (and audiences) among more media outlets has been a long-term trend in news media, sustainable only while overall ad buying increased (Picard 2002). After decades of growth in both revenue streams, newspapers saw advertisers begin migrating to the Internet, but online ad rates then declined. Industry rhetoric became alarmist: "Journalists and commentators have spoken of wholesale destruction and devastation caused by crippling changes that have shattered the industry's business model and left a wounded democracy without means to survive" (Picard 2009: 1). The concrete outlook seemed either grim, especially for newspapers,[14] or an opportunity for media reform (McChesney and Nichols 2010). But economic crisis also took place at the level of representation, as a consequence of rhetoric (McCloskey 2006) and of redefining the public (Carey 1995).

The same logic applies to the fate of labor, as local media monopolies diluted. Owners, managers, editors, and reporters say conditions have changed largely because of new technology.[15] Financiers, politicians, and analysts agree.[16] In the past century, local media managers could hire and fire workers in markets isolated behind protective barriers. As weaker newspapers closed, more American cities became one-paper towns, allowing owners to hold down wages.[17] Although U.S. government policies limiting radio and television station ownership eroded, local broadcasting, like newspapering, required large investments in plant and equipment. Economic factors provided not absolute, "iron" control but de facto monopolies, especially in local

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journalism labor markets (Cranberg et al. 2001), so that steady, local journalism work with benefits required getting a job in a media company. Mainstream media still provide the bulk of news content but have been laying off workers. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that "newspaper publishers cut nearly 50,000 jobs between June 2008 and June 2009, a record rate" amounting to 15 percent of the industry workforce.[18] The share of minority workers declined even faster.[19] Workers, including many in tenuous, low-paying jobs, had to become more productive in their daily routines,[20] creating more content quicker in print, broadcast, and online. Labor is the first budget line managers trim when executives find the stock market pressing on companies to raise share values while servicing debts.[21] The crisis for labor has a concrete, functional dimension.

But it also unfolded at the level of representation, in the U.S. image of work, workers, and their value. Journalism job losses began a decade before the Great Recession,[22] as part of a broader shift in the understanding of working conditions (Hardt 1996). Workers in newspapers and broadcast news departments (the legacy media industries) but also in new technology companies experience similar conditions (MacEachen et al. 2008), putting in overtime without protections from a union or the state, developing extensive, varied skills (Sutcliffe et al. 2005), and facing pressures unsustainable over a long career. In the new, knowledge economy, the manufacture of intellectual property reduces workers' production to works-for-hire but also attenuates the understanding of mainstream media. In the imagined system, safeguards negotiated for journalists become a weight that helps sink the legacy media, which supposedly become obsolete and less central not only as a source for news but also in U.S. political life. Their large audiences and continued productivity suggest that the image of mainstream media workforces is incomplete, another facet of a crisis in representation.

The crises in technology, audiences, economics, and labor appear to form an inescapable box with no point of escape to improve the lot of the workers, owners, and public. But the calamity, despite real-world consequences, is foremost a crisis of representation. Any collectivity imagining itself in a technological vortex, with no economic plan or job security, goes into crisis. Ideas do have consequences. One must then wonder about other sources of innovative thought. Where are the alternative perspectives, and if they do not exist, then why not? Because of the concern for democracy, political science seems a good place to start looking for answers.

State of Political Science

Political communication is a hybrid, and a brief excursion into political science can shed light on conditions that delimit attention to representation, subjectivity, and affect in the field. The passing of "high modern" times had a profound influence on philosophy, then the social sciences, and even business management, not to mention arts and letters (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Angus and Jhally 1989; Bauman 1992; Best and Kellner 1997; Jameson 1990). But political science in the United States has hardly responded to the intellectual debates of the late twentieth century. A bellwether

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of how the arguments influenced social science is research practice. Anthropologists, for example, began to question the scientific basis of ethnography (Geertz 2000). Within political science one might suppose post-structural thought and political science thought, which share an interest in political power, would likely coincide, but qualitative methods illustrate a different outcome (Barnhurst 2005a).

A common (although shaky) assumption is that quantitative methods, since their founding in the twentieth century, have sustained a protracted conflict with the qualitative methods that had characterized social research earlier on (Barnhurst 2004). In the quantitative–qualitative binary, researchers using quantitative methods purportedly pursue hard facts, accumulating data one investigation after another. The stereotypical researcher takes measurements to provide keys or levers useful in making politics work and solving social problems, a practical benefit of a larger project to build a monument to modern science brick by brick. A hero in any story must face opposition, in this case from retrograde social scientists. The stereotypical qualitative researcher, confronting Goliath, is a David struggling to preserve values indigenous to an older sense of *science* that sought to preserve human experience and increase understanding.

The sketch bowdlerizes quantitative and qualitative methods; the images of researchers are melodramatic types, especially in light of how the best research blends methods; and the metaphor of battle is unfortunate. But a fundamental premise of social science is the existence of social facts. It does not matter that the conflict is illusory; if researchers believe it to be true, it becomes true in its consequences (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). At the annual conventions of political scientists, qualitative methods appear regularly only in the political theory and history sections. In more typical sessions, quantitative methods dominate. Conference organizers seem unable to confront the disparity among the forms of research practice. The same pattern holds for research journals leading the discipline, textbooks training political scientists, and concepts underlying the discipline (Barnhurst 2004).

Movements emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to protest the imbalances in political thought (Easton 1969; Surkin and Wolfe 1970), not only in everyday politics but also in academia, and other social sciences began to change. After anthropology and sociology, communication studies soon followed. The entrance of post-structuralist theory and methods transformed other fields of social inquiry. But what happened in political science? In large part, political scientists rejected the public and disciplinary critiques, as well as subsequent objections from critical theory and cultural studies (with some exceptions, such as Lichbach and Zuckerman 1997). Political scientists also tended to ignore the resurgence of Chicago-school qualitative methods. The critical movement in political science soon calmed down, becoming a small interest group little associated with qualitative thinking.

The hierarchy today in the discipline—its organizations (the American Political Science Association [APSA] being the largest), main journals, and university departments—deemphasizes humanistic approaches (Barnhurst 2004). In 1990 a new protest emerged against quantitative orthodoxy in political science, its granting agencies, departments and curricula, professoriate and professional groups, and its editorial

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boards and acceptance patterns for journals. The movement took the name *perestroika* from an anonymous letter that a fictitious Mr. Perestroika addressed to leaders of the APSA and circulated in clandestine form via email (unlike the typewritten carbon copies of the Soviet era samizdat). Later the debate reached the pages of *PS: Political Science & Politics* and unfolded—to the credit of APSA—across a series of issues in the official journal (e.g., "Shaking Things Up?" 2002). But except for nominating a protest candidate (who lost) for association leadership, the discipline undertook no broad reform.[23]

Political science remains without widespread knowledge of not only qualitative methods but also measurement critiques. *The Cult of Statistical Significance* (Ziliak and McCloskey 2008), to cite one example, demonstrates a fundamental error that underlies most work in political and social sciences (as well as medicine and other fields). Reviews appeared in academic journals of mathematics and philosophy and in venues such as *Psychology Today*, *Science*, and *The Economist*, but more than two years later the book still met with silence in political science. The resistance belies its "very elementary, very correct, very important argument," wrote Thomas Schelling, a Nobel laureate and professor at the University of Maryland.[24]

Orthodox methods in political science have consequences, one involving the understanding of historical processes. Existing methods measure time-series variables that limit insight into long-term change. Generations are central to the representation of collective experience over time in politics and citizenship, and so the limitation bears directly on the institutional caution that has slowed understanding in political science. Another consequence involves political subjectivity itself. Existing orthodox methods tend to set aside feelings in the search for rationales to account for overt political behavior. They also put the young, a population central to transformations in political life, into a box labeled *political socialization* and placed on the sidelines, reducing awareness among scholars. Advancing methods of all sorts would require broader reform in the discipline but would allow it to tackle pressing issues such as the relationship between subjective experience and the formation of public opinion and the role that emotion plays in the labor of politics and the life of the citizenry, topics at the core of representation and affect in political communication.

State of Political Communication

A large, well-established discipline is one institutional context that provides philosophical direction for and creates some conceptual dependence within political communication research. Beside a body of main ideas (Bennett and Iyengar 2008) from political science stands communication as a co-parent discipline. The contributions of communication include an emphasis on the media in politics. Media studies rests on three legs—publics, products, and producers—but research concentrates on public opinion, especially voting. Research on voters is more precise and successful than any other area of political communication (Herbst 2011). Politicians, news workers, and audience members themselves get the least attention in research. The pattern of

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studies follows an economic logic (Arnold 1982). Granting agencies have focused resources on public opinion by establishing national surveys of political attitudes, demographics, and media use. Content analyses are a second concentration, because content is accessible and inexpensive even with little grant support, for the press if not for television and radio programs.[25] But content represents producers indirectly and the public even less clearly, and research tends to skew toward a survey view of public opinion and take inadequate stock of other political dimensions.

The resulting intellectual climate of political communication research encourages a few main ideas: *public opinion* to understand the audience; *framing* and *agenda setting* primarily, but also *priming* (and perhaps *cultivation*), to explain content (and audiences to a lesser degree); and notions like *gatekeeping* to assess producers (along with inferences from surveys and media content). The ideas emerged in the middle of the last century, when a functionalist and logical-positivist orientation dominated political science, parallel to the media-effects tradition in mass communication research (Nerone 2010; Chaffee and Hockheimer 1985; Klapper 1960). Attention shifted to critical theory and cultural studies in communication research by 1983, with a well-known edition of the *Journal of Communication* titled "Ferment in the Field."[26] The new scholarship soon formed its own silos (groups, meetings, and journals[27]), but critical and cultural ideas have begun appearing in political communication venues. One recent conference session included three standard effects papers plus one on the concept *hegemony*, using an operational definition necessary for its method (Mills 1959). Rather than illustrating the widening and deepening of theory, studies of the sort demonstrate how an orientation dominant in the specialty colonizes critical concepts.

Political science and communication also exist alongside occupations focused on practice: politicians and government leaders on one hand and journalists and media executives on the other. A practical emphasis is if anything stronger in the history of communication departments involved in training media workers. From the traditions of "behavioralism" (political science) and "media effects" (mass communication) comes a positivist tendency, and a tendency toward instrumental functionalism comes more from the worlds of journalism and government. The institutional boundaries of two large disciplines, their perspectives on the political communication field, their tendencies to focus on established ideas, and their practical structure and connections to occupational practice have created conditions that reproduce functional ideas (how to make existing politics and media work) and discourage representational ideas (how the polity imagines, narrates, and values politics and media) in political communication.

The pattern is evident in four aspects of political communication thinking that reflect an underlying philosophy: its metaphors, assumptions, emphases, and structures. First, the metaphors are practical (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), based on ideas that emerged in the middle of the last century when researchers began representing the American press as a mediator between the masses and political elites. A practical metaphor is central to each main idea, but gatekeeping was among the earliest. The gatekeeper metaphor was an invention to explain the work of a wire editor in the U.S. Midwest (White 1950).[28] Despite enormous change in modes of gathering and

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disseminating news and political information, the metaphor persists (Bennett 2004). Because it did not originate from a longer philosophical tradition or the popular imagination, it has not been central to the representation of American public life. Only practicality leads researchers and students to apply it to political communication. From one side, its birth from functionalist thinking in mass media research gives it a narrow reach, and from the other, its commonsensical basis applies everywhere. A worker in any setting, as well as anyone else, keeps the gates to information (parent to child and child to parent, for instance), and everyone inside the digital divide can open and close the gates using the media tools at their fingertips (Barzilai-Nahon 2008; Zittrain 2006). Commonsense or “zombie” categories can blind social research (Beck 2002).

Second, the main political communication ideas tend to have an economic character (Habermas 2006). Consider the double meaning of *choice* as a political as well as a consumerist concept (Dahlgren 2005). Public opinion also implies a consumer metaphor: a citizen’s vote for a party’s candidate is a buyer’s purchase of another corporation’s brand. The metaphor conflates two distinct phenomena, citizenship and public opinion. When polling became a social scientific technique in the twentieth century (Herbst 1993), scholars objected that surveys measure an atomized public, applying the model of one person, one vote, as if individuals possessed equal knowledge and say (Blumer 1948; cf. Lazarsfeld 1972). But public opinion is lumpy and local, with clusters of influence centered on collectivities, not a smooth or stratified blend of separate views. Some results of conflating economic and political ideas include marketing public policy, making candidates celebrities, and blurring political discourse to attract voters, as well as a focus on polls. Other main ideas in political communication harbor similar economic assumptions.

The third aspect is an emphasis on measurement. Agenda setting, another metaphor having a practical genesis (like the agenda of a business meeting) and a parallel in the market (like the shopping list), gives birth to so many studies partly because it lends itself to measuring. Although agenda setting originated in the mid twentieth century (Chaffee and Berger 1987), tracing its roots to Enlightenment philosophy might open wider vistas that could turn the idea into a more robust theory. But instead method, not theory, sets the direction (Shapiro et al. 2004). Research that begins with method develops in reverse, starting from an available tool that leads the researcher to perform its native operations (Soss et al. 2006). Despite exceptions, thinking of data sets first is a prominent feature in political communication research. Behind the approach are mid-century assumptions needing examination, such as the search for scientific command and control. The agenda-setting metaphor and method emphasis also contain a causality dilemma. Which came first, the idea or the evidence? Each predicts the other. And the dilemma goes hand in hand with economic assumptions. Faith in the market and faith in numbers are traits of U.S. American thought, but agenda setting and other main political communication ideas need philosophical elaboration to give them currency beyond students of communication. The existing configuration keeps the specialty insular, without much voice in public debates.

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The fourth aspect is structural, not only in the common sense of structures like the old-time wire services but also in the structuralist sense (Grossberg 1982; Thayer 1982; Wilden 1980). The main political communication ideas are images from an older system that disseminated information through a few loudspeakers to an audience of numerous individuals. But at the level of representation, the picture of public life seems to have grown less one-to-many and more many-to-many (Delli Carpini 2000; Livingstone 2004; Morris and Ogan 1996). Any political system requires a mechanism for representing how the body politic governs itself, and a popular myth of the information era imagines that computer systems allow individual users to represent themselves and so engage in self-government. Because public opinion cannot exist until represented, systems must develop some way to represent it. The picture of e-politics reifies a system of political communication through the metaphor of computer networks, but that representation fails to account for the main forces that seem to drive actual politics, such as a white, male sense of victimization and reaction against immigration in the developed West. The structures and the structuralism of half a century ago are also inadequate to current conditions and their representation (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2010).

The four aspects of political communication produce research developed without ideas adept in the representation of media and politics today. The metaphors lack what Karl Popper calls "scientific character" because they are self-fulfilling: "Once your eyes were thus opened you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of verifications" (1965: 33, 35). And given its method predilections, the specialization has difficulty understanding how citizens now imagine and experience political life, especially outside the rational-information zone and especially among the young. Voting does loom large in representations of the public will, but producers of political meaning get short shrift in political communication research, despite their centrality to the image of public life.

Contradictions for Theory

Practical metaphors, economic suppositions, method predilections, and structural notions mismatch current conditions but also generate contradictions in the key concepts of political communication, such as rational citizenship and social responsibility. The concept of rational citizenship (cf. Berelson 1952; Papacharissi 2010) grew out of the American progressive movement of the 1880s through 1920s and then took hold in political science (Barnhurst 2007). The discipline modeled political life as a pyramid with leaders at the apex and followers at the base where political participation seldom takes place. And so there followed a century of social-scientific literature that documents the ignorance, lassitude, and incapacity of the citizenry. But the model also offered a remedy: An ordinary person could emulate an illustrious citizen who, pursuing progressive movement activism, could develop into a grassroots, party, and elected leader ultimately. The progressives and scientists of a century ago presented themselves as emblematic citizens, whom the average citizen could responsibly imitate.

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One need only describe the ideal to cast doubt on it. Except for a few activists, most citizens will never reach anything near full-time employment in politics. The prospect is neither possible nor desirable because so high a level of involvement would exaggerate politics and narrow other productive activities essential for community survival. But reinventing the concept of citizenship will require scholars to resort to that incorrigible lot, the citizens. Their lives are not accessible initially by surveys, instruments that grew from and embody the older concept conflating citizenship with public opinion. Besides improving existing measures, the task requires thick description on the ground and new conceptions for how representations of democracy emerge in politics and the popular mind.

The idea of a socially responsible press emerged by the 1940s. Progressives and their successors considered news organs necessary to democracy, guardians of the public good, giving weight to what followed: decades of attacks against ignoble content in the American press. Citizens who lack sophistication and the capacity to attend to or take part in politics can never generate enough demand for political information. If baser instincts—lust, avarice, and fear—motivate audiences, then the press must satisfy them and has no choice but to descend to their level. Forces external to citizenship then appear to drive the provision of public information: The format, ever shorter, is one response to the unfocused citizen, and sensationalism is another. To grab attention, the press must focus on personalities (who), cover more events (what), chase the latest stories (when), and shift from international to local venues (where), at the cost of depth and explanation (why). Each of the five W's appears to transform in ways unhealthful to democracy.

But the appearance is baseless (Barnhurst 2005b). Over the past century, the contents of newspapers, newscasts, and news websites in the United States have presented longer, not shorter, stories. The contents focus less on individuals (and more on groups), contrary to common belief. And the coverage has become geographically broader, not more local, over the long term. In all five W's, journalists have defied expectation, but in doing so have lost audiences. The contradiction invites a reassessment of social responsibility, the normative ideal of public-spirited, objective, or balanced journalism. Perhaps personal or partisan news of low or middling quality encourages public criticism and engagement, and serious news the opposite. Respectable news content may gain sway over the public imagination, making the Fourth Estate a threat to the will of the people. The possibility may seem absurd but points again to the need for shifting focus to the representation of public information.

The pattern of contradictions extends to other key concepts in political communication. The conductors of the U.S. press, since the founding of the republic, have boasted of being forward-looking in technology, for instance. Their biographies claim they were early in adopting rotary and color presses, methods of reproduction such as stereotype molds and halftone images, and modern design. But news companies arrived late to innovations of the past century (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). Their dilatory history not only belies claims of a technology crisis but also raises doubts about the assumed relation between technology and public information. Perhaps technologically

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advanced media would exploit their advantage and be a danger by outstripping public understanding of how techniques can remake polities. In another instance, politicians and pollsters have been quick to decry declines in public confidence in institutions, a problem arising out of the same methods that confirm public ignorance. Leaders in the news media tend to interpret declining trust in the press as a failure in its performance because they see faith in the media and journalists as an asset and its lack an evil. But the opposite holds. Perhaps the intelligent citizen should be skeptical of institutions and, as Jefferson insisted, should not place faith in the press. A shrewd and adept citizenry would doubt any information derived secondhand (as it does in Spain, see Barnhurst 2000), and news is always a secondary account.

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. Each feature points to the crisis in representation, a decisive shift in picturing political arenas that sets off, in turn, the crises in the media workforce, technology, audiences, and economics. The organs of political information and programs of political research require better theories and methods to cut through the thicket of contradictions.

Opportunities for Renewal

Political communication is facing turbulent times but with institutional inertia and confronting contradictions while undergoing philosophical ossification. Scholars must do more than shore up the existing foundations, especially as the crisis in U.S. political information, in its main qualities, is spreading elsewhere along with political and technological change. Besides signaling those conditions, I have aimed to disturb the groundwork, not review the literature, and my main proposition is that research shift attention to representation. Political communication grows out of processes but also out of how actors and collectivities imagine politics, envision communication, and leave traces of those images in the actions they take.

At stake is the future of the field and its ability to speak to a new generation. Politicians and journalists also must face the young, who experience the extremes of political activation and disaffection and so excite hope and fear among their elders. The problem of the new generation is a fixture of modern life (Mannheim 1952), and yet researchers fail by not attending to the young, let alone trying to get ahead of them by developing original theory. Why should scholars care about youths and their ways? Because of what would happen to life if the young were to achieve the heights of activism or to descend into political cynicism and indifference.

The problem young Americans face in their political and media lives is clear: They want to reject the terms of the debate (Barnhurst 2007).[29] They do not agree with the prevailing definition of citizenship and prefer not to participate in an informative

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process with mainstream media inherited from half a century ago. They believe they have different ways that fit the new era better. But their situation is complex. Consider their attention to comedy news (Baym 2010). On one level, fake news contrasts with the network evening newscasts it has displaced among the young. A program like *The Daily Show* makes young viewers laugh, an emotion that helps the factual information stick and adds a measure of political insight. Host Jon Stewart peddles not a cynical but a partisan angle on current events. And he has clout. After his Comedy Central show hosted firefighters and police who had responded to the September 11, 2001, attacks, National Public Radio reported, "Congress did something . . . it almost never does. Both chambers—the House and the Senate—debated and passed the same bill on the same day. That is supersonic for Congress."[30] On another level, fake news is nothing new. Political satire has a long tradition, television is an old-fashioned medium, and political change still springs from the complex forming of opinion among publics that matter. But the attention to news parody illustrates how representation is shifting. Politics now seems to happen in intimate spaces (Jones 2006), where YouTube videos go viral and email blasts inflame computer users one by one, but wait: worldwide media conglomerates are also pushing government policies through legacy media.

One can make no better case for the need to update and innovate political communication. The young may want to reject the assumptions, forms, and contents of older systems, but they do not have unlimited degrees of freedom. Scholarship needs to broaden as the representation changes. The shift can include the functional paradigm, measuring, for instance, public opinion through Facebook and Twitter as well as through surveys (Herbst 2011). Discerning the course of political communication also depends on knowing about Asia (Papacharissi and Yuan 2011), with its growing population and clout, and about older generations, whose habits shift slowly and who do not simply vanish from life (as they do in the media). The young have a loud voice in popular culture, but theory must rebalance with the transforming representations of public life.

The specialization of political communication is at a decisive moment. To build new ways of thinking, theories must go beyond instrumental rationality. Defining politics as logical and functional can only partly encompass the links between persons and states. Citizenship goes beyond the zone of reason. If citizens dislike serious news packaged with the sound bites of politicians and opinions of journalists, the loss of audiences may make some elements in the public information system unsustainable. Although citizens focus only occasionally on politics, they do attend to media. Reality, drama, sitcom, and soap genres admit political content through the back door, as an aspect of the theme, setting, plot, character, or action—the stuff of fiction. The genres have in common a political communication at the margins, not the rational center of human volition and attention, and the marginal may characterize politics in everyday life. Rational functionalism says a lot about intentional acts that individuals direct toward logical goals but little about experience located in the margins, where resistance may germinate.

Renovating political communication requires attention to ethical and aesthetic as well as informational experiences. If the field is to remain vibrant, representation

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(e.g., Heikkilä et al. 2011; Nerone, forthcoming), collective memory (e.g., Edy 2011), subjectivity (e.g., Baym 2005; Vidali 2010), and affect (e.g., Aarøe 2011) must balance and share attention. Several intellectual regions might help. The latest contribution from medicine and biochemistry maps the intersection of reason and emotion (Graber 2005),[31] although it tends toward the functional paradigm. Phenomenology concentrates at the borders of mental life, although it privileges the individual consciousness. Visual rhetoric contributes a more collective view (e.g., Hariman and Lucaites 2007), although it is a field in formation (Barnhurst et al. 2004). Research on networks and convergence considers subjectivity and practice (Castells 2000; Jenkins 2006), and postcolonial studies suggest alternative perspectives on citizens and information, such as hybridity and "sharism" (Meng 2009; Valdivia 2003; Young 1995). Communication studies has a proud interdisciplinary status that can adapt the tools and insights from other fields to understand the representation of politics and communication.

Much of human experience is aesthetic, moral, spiritual, and above all emotional. In the general meetings of political science and communication, scattered across divisions and groups, papers investigate the new media *affect*, the feeling that lies behind human and mediated communication (Barnhurst and Quinn 2011). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *emotion* as an "agitation or disturbance of mind, feeling, passion," and the Royal Spanish Academy adds a second meaning, the "expectant interest with which one participates in something that is happening." The first definition describes an element fundamental to any political commitment and the second describes its importance in political action. Emotion is transcendent in political communication, for the individual as well as society.

Political communication can move toward a philosophy centered on sensibility. Research emerging outside the industrial West, in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, need not repeat past studies, orthodoxies, or perspectives. 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. From the new science could also emerge a philosophy of political communication that attends to the representation of citizenship, youth, and changing social geographies.

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Notes

1. Framing traces some roots back to pragmatism and others to functionalism (Iyengar 1987).
2. The essay relies on the cultural definition of the term from Stuart Hall (1997), rather than philosophical definitions such as from Nelson Goodman (1968), and incorporates what John Dewey (1927) called *presentation.*
3. See Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism reports at http://www.statofthemedia.org.
4. Jay Rosen, quoted by Paul F. Roberts, "InfoWorld Folds," *InfoWorld,* April 2, 2007, 9.
5. Nick Lemann, "How the Internet Changes Politics," Answers, http://video.answers.com.
6. See http://www.j-lab.org/about.
7. See http://www.macfound.org/education.
8. University of Maryland Newsdesk, press release, "Interactive Journalism Comes of Age," August 28, 2006, http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu.
9. New technology "has opened up the possibility for audience participation in the development of the 'story' on an unprecedented level" and "should not be belittled" (p. 183).
10. John Morton, "Why Are Newspaper Profits So High?" *American Journalism Review*, October 1994, http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=69.
11. Robert G. Picard, "Capital Crisis in the Profitable Newspaper Industry," *Nieman Reports*, 60, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 10–12.
12. Denise Rolark Barnes, Publisher, *The Washington Informer*, Testimony before the U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, Hearing on "The Future of Newspapers: The Impact on the Economy and Democracy," September 24, 2009, http://jec.senate.gov/public.
13. John Sturm, President and CEO, Newspaper Association of America, see note 12.
14. "Future of Journalism" Hearings, Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet, U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, Washington, May 6, 2009, http://commerce.senate.gov.
15. Cyra Master, "Media Insiders Say Internet Hurts Journalism," *The Atlantic*, April 2009, http://www.theatlantic.com; "The Digital Landscape: What's Next for News?" *Nieman Reports*, Summer 2010, http://www.nieman.harvard.edu.
16. Joseph Bower, "News Is Strategic in the Newspaper Business," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2001, http://www.nieman.harvard.edu.
17. Paul Starr, Professor, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, see note 12.
18. Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, Chair, Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress, Opening Statement, see note 12.
19. Comments submitted to the Federal Trade Commission by the National Association of Black Journalists, November 18, 2009, http://www.ftc.gov/os/comments/newsmediaworkshop.
20. Comments by the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, AFL-CIO, December 1, 2009, and by the Writers Guild of America, East, November 2, see note 19.

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21. The McClatchy chain made 21 percent profit in 2008 but cut nearly a third of its workers to pay the $2 billion cost of acquiring Knight Ridder. The Gannett chain made 18 percent profit in 2008, "with some papers earning as much as 42.5 percent," but cut 3,000 jobs. Comments of Free Press, Washington, D.C., November 6, 2009, see note 19.
22. Comments by the Media Access Project, Washington, D.C., December 2, 2009, see note 19.
23. The founding of the magazine *Perspectives on Politics* was a hopeful later development.
24. See http://press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=186351.
25. They depend on access to records such as the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which charges per recorded program ($100 in 2011) or segment ($27), http://tvnews.vanderbilt .edu.
26. Ferment in the Field issue, *Journal of Communication 33*.3 (Summer 1983).
27. The National Communication Association (NCA) developed a Critical and Cultural Studies Division and founded *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in 1984. The Cultural and Critical Studies Division emerged in Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication (AEJMC) and later adopted the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, which originated in the 1970s.
28. Its predecessor, a study on wartime rationing, found that more-knowledgeable housewives served as gatekeepers for younger ones (Lewin 1947). A contemporary, opinion-leader study did not cite gatekeeping (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).
29. See the Life History & Media Project, http://www.uic.edu/depts/comm/lifehist.
30. Andrea Seabrook, "Compromise by Congress Helps 9/11 Responders," *Morning Edition*, December 23, 2010. Congress responded not to survey but dialogic opinion (see Herbst 2011).
31. A popular rendition is "Memory, Mind, and the Self," in *To the Best of our Knowledge*, episode 179, Wisconsin Public Radio and PRI, originally aired April 2, 2011.

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Bio

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