

The third age of political communication

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the historical development of political media communication. The first age was a time of relatively easy access to the media; the second age showed the growing power of the media through access to television; and the third suggests an increasing proliferation of information channels within and beyond the mainstream mass media. Four current trends are analysed, with speculation of the subject of their future development.

KEYWORDS: political communication, third age, newszac, media in politics

INTRODUCTION

Fluidity and reassessment are hallmarks of the literatures of most areas of media studies

these days. Deep-seated forces of social, cultural and technological change, impacting on and possibly transforming communication institutions and processes, are obliging diverse authors to reconsider their conceptual frameworks and research agendas. To illustrate, words like 'reconstructing', 'rethinking' and 'revisiting' appear in the titles of as many as seven chapters of the latest edition of the *Mass Media and Society* reader (Curran and Gurevitch 2000). And the phenomena of our own scholarly meat and drink, the fascinating, ever-absorbing, highly challenging and societally significant area of media-and-politics, are specially exposed to the unsettling winds of change.

The subject of this paper, 'The third age of political communication', does *not* refer, then, to a syllabus of a course for the retired elderly! Instead, coined originally as the title of a background paper for a symposium on The Future of Political Communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), it reflected a hunch that we may be witnessing — and therefore be in a position to track the further evolution of — the birth of a qualitatively different political communication system, the third kind to have interrelated politicians, journalists, voters, key communication institutions, and their surrounding social structures and political cultures in the postwar period.

First was a time (in the late 1940s and 1950s) when much political communication, reflecting partisan positions and beliefs associated with relatively strong and stable political institutions, enjoyed fairly ready access

to the mass media. Next came the age of limited-channel network television, expanding the mass political audience and elevating the newsmedia to ever more powerful institutional standing vis-à-vis parties and governments. And the third, current and still emerging, period is marked by a proliferation of the main means of communication both within and beyond the mainstream mass media and is therefore an age of communication abundance, ubiquity, reach and celerity.

New patterns and adaptations are ensuing for all involved in political communication as a result. In gist, abundance changes how people receive politics in ways that have been little studied so far. To politicians, the third-age media system must loom like a hydra-headed beast, the many mouths of which are continually clamouring to be fed. When something happens, they are expected to tell the media what they are going to do about it well before they can be fully informed themselves. For journalists, the news cycle has accelerated, since more outlets combined with increased competition across them piles pressure on all involved to keep the story moving and to find fresh angles on it. Even norms and expectations of citizenship and democracy are being re-examined. The research community is consequently challenged to keep up with the evolving trends and to tailor its studies to the new conditions — especially since the third age of political communication is more complex than its predecessors, moulded more by conflicting cross-currents than by some dominant tendency.

In what follows, an attempt is made to outline the main trends that seem to be reshaping political communication in its third age. But before getting into that, certain developments over the postwar period in the societal environment for political communication should be acknowledged.

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

For one thing, those reservoirs of social support, on which politicians could rely in

the past through strong linkages of party loyalties to social class, workplace, neighbourhood and other groupings, have dried up or dwindled. For another, relations of elites to masses have been transformed by the evaporation of deference and increased public scepticism toward the credentials, claims and credibility of authority holders and experts in many walks of life. For still another, the ceaselessly escalating aspirations of a consumerist society — for a better life personally and for improved public services — have generated a remarkably broad agenda of problems that are not amenable to quick solution and which, at best, governments can only hope to ameliorate gradually over the longer term. As the headline of a recent *New York Times* article asked, ‘What if There Is No Cure for Health Care’s Ills?’ (Rosenbaum 2000). The upshot of all this is that competing politicians are today having to court backing from a more individualistic, volatile and sceptical electorate, which is fragmented into numerous disparately opposed constituencies, on the basis of issues and appeals of the moment.

Unsurprisingly, the role of the media in politics has become more pivotal in these conditions — a formidably selecting, amplifying, mediating and intervening force. Consequently, the lines of access to news which they afford, their ways of framing issues, their ways of constructing public opinion preferences and demands, and their occasional support for particular policies — have all become significant cards in the political game. The media — rather like a sultan choosing his sleeping partner for the night by lot — are sources of arbitrary favours (Blumler 1997)!

And thus the stage was set for the onset of what the author once termed ‘the modern publicity process’, involving a daily, unremitting, reactive and proactive competitive struggle among politicians and their increasingly expert and highly placed publicity advisors to influence and control popular *perceptions* of key events and issues through

the major news media (Blumler 1990). From this process, there emerged in turn the core features of the *professional* model of campaigning, which many of us have researched and analysed. Perhaps we should also think of it as a 'Siamese-twin' model, since it joins leading politicians and journalists in an inseparable but mutually counterproductive relationship. Whereas journalists continually face orchestrated attempts to set their agendas, politicians' initiatives are continually 'deconstructed for their base strategic significance' (Scammell 2000).

RESHAPING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Such was the legacy of the second age of communication. But how might media abundance affect it? Political communication is likely to be reshaped in this new period by five main trends. The first concerns its possible impact on the professional model itself. This now seems intriguingly uncertain. In one way, the professionalisation of political advocacy should intensify. In a more abundant but fragmented communication system, specialists' familiarity with the different news outlets and their (now more differentiated) audiences, an ability to plan campaigns in elaborate detail, and the organisation of prompt responses to daily events, opinion trends recorded by polls and focus groups, the charges of political opponents and the news frames defined by journalists will be yet more indispensable.

But is that all? Are signs appearing of some unravelling of this hitherto tightly woven process? Four straws in this latest wind have recently been evident.

First, a more realistic awareness may be growing of limits on the efficacy of news management tactics. Their success or failure may turn largely on the political context of the time concerned. After all, Mandelson, Campbell, Whelan *et al.* were most successful when Labour was in opposition facing a divided and battered government. But after a brief honeymoon in office, they have been

pushed ever more on to the back foot, relating more reactively than proactively to the news of the day.

Second, it seems that political costs as well as gains may flow from heavy and visible involvement in the process. As Philip Gould's focus groups have apparently shown, being convincingly tarred with the over-spinning brush can be quite disadvantageous to a leader and his government.

Third, politicians may put more emphasis in the future on getting their message out through less mediated lines of access to the electorate than TV bulletins and front-page news can afford — such as advertising, articles under politicians' names in the press, magazines and even think tanks, appearances in 'softer' media formats, staging press conferences live for television, and in websites.

Finally (and if so, this would be *really* encouraging), the emphasis on managing perceptions, impressions and imagery may be weakening somewhat in favour of offering big swathes of policy substance to independent-minded voters, who seem determined to make their own reality checks on how the fundamentals of politics are going.

A second reshaping trend arising from the advance of media abundance — with its explosion of outlets, some news-oriented but many sports/movies/and/entertainment-drenched — is the more competitive environment in which politics intended to inform, persuade and reveal must vie for the attention of editors, reporters and audiences. Even the BBC stated in a recent paper that its news, current affairs and political programming was entering 'a period of hyper-competition' (BBC News 1998).

The logic of this is like submitting political communication to the ravages of a shoal of piranha fish! The likely consequences include: less shelter for political journalism inside media organisations; fewer 'sacerdotal' treatments of politics (ie extended and respectful ones); less — and less prominent — attention to politics; and a tendency for

conventional news values, even entertainment values, to rule the political coverage roost, yielding more emphasis on politicians' personalities, power tactics and shortcomings, and novel trivialities such as Al Gore's embrace of his wife and George W. Bush's expletive through an open mike about *New York Times* reporter, Adam Claymer — or more 'newszac' as Bob Franklin (1997) would say.

But one cross-national qualification on this process should be mentioned here. So far, those piranhas seem to have had a more devastating impact in the USA than in this country and other European democracies. In the former, some outcomes have included: demolitions of firewalls that used to separate news from marketing departments; big reductions in network coverage of foreign affairs; more resources for sensationalist news magazines; over-the-top reporting of scandal; downward pressure on journalists' ethical standards; and big reductions in election coverage — around 40 per cent for both the primary and general election campaigns of 1996 compared with 1992. In fact, network attention to the party conventions of 2000 retreated even further, prompting Max Frankel (2000) to note wryly that the number of hours devoted by the networks to CBS's *Survivor* show 'already surpasses all the political news you are destined to hear before November 7'!

ELECTION COVERAGE

'Over here', however, the equivalent picture is more mixed. After reviewing published content analyses of the public and private TV news services of several continental countries, Kees Brants (1998) concluded that on the whole, though with variations here and there, political coverage standards were still being maintained. Certainly British TV coverage of the 1997 campaign was as massively swamping and almost as civic-spirited as ever. The BBC, for example, invested much time, effort, thought, planning, money and a heavy

artillery of specialist correspondents in the coverage, in order (as one executive put it at the time) 'to feed viewers a high-fibre diet with a certain amount of didacticism in it' (Blumler and Gurevitch 1998). But whether European public broadcasting can withstand the ravages of competition over the longer term remains to be seen. What, for example, will be the impact of the replacement of John Birt as Director-General by Greg Dyke, a new remit for BBC1, and the move of news from 9 to 10 p.m. on the BBC's coverage of the 2001 campaign?

Then, in a third trend, political communication is becoming more populist. The resulting attempts to get closer to popular priorities, outlooks and voices amount to a veritable sea change compared with past approaches. After all, much political communication was until recently a straightforwardly top-down affair. The issues of the day were mainly defined and discussed by politicians, journalists, experts and interest group leaders for reception and consideration by voters. Ordinary members of the public could reward or punish such communicators only by continuing to listen or by tuning out. Except for occasional vox pop clips, they were mainly represented in the communication process by surrogates, such as opinion poll results and questions put by interviewers to politicians on their behalf. Of course evidence of broad support mattered to all concerned, but on most questions this was presumed to emerge from a 'bystander' public rather than an active citizenry.

In part, the new-found populism is yet another product of the increased competition for attention, in which political and media elites are pressed to seem more audience-friendly. But it also stems from the decline of ideology, leaving a sort of legitimacy gap that populism helps to fill; from the growth of political marketing as an adjunct to campaign strategy; and from the diminished standing of political, media and other elites in popular eyes.

THE POPULIST UPSURGE

In the third age, then, anything that smacks of paternalistic discourse is 'out'. News organisations put more stress on the accessibility of the language in which political reports are written, on covering issues that matter most to people, and on making plain the relevance of political events to people's lives — personalising stories where possible, for example. More efforts are also made to engage voters in stories by featuring the comments of ordinary citizens. The voiced opinions of men and women in the street are being tapped more often in a veritable explosion of populist formats and approaches: talk shows; phone-ins; solicitation of calls, faxes and e-mails for response by interviewed politicians; studio panels confronting party representatives; larger studio audiences putting questions to politicians through a moderator; and town meetings of the air, deliberative polling and televised 'people's parliaments'. In addition, political and media organisations regularly conduct research into ordinary people's preferences, tastes and images of their own efforts and personalities — to help them keep in touch with the public mood and to stand a better chance of winning electoral support or audience share respectively.

This populist upsurge is certainly a mixed bag, ranging in style from the combative to the reflective and from the grossly voyeuristic to the ultra-Athenian. And so far, its consequences are not well charted. Political and media agendas may be shifting to put more emphasis on issues thought likely to ring bells with, sound alarms for and be immediately understood by large numbers of people — as with the recent focus on child abuse and asylum-seekers. Conversely, the more structural bases of political problems and process-oriented political developments could be downplayed. One populist offshoot, so-called 'talk-show democracy', was hailed by many American scholars for having supposedly energised the 1992 presidential campaign — though less has been heard

about this since then. Among some colleagues, the populist trend has attracted quite polarised evaluations, pitting what may be termed 'critical traditionalists', who apply blanket terms of abuse like 'dumbing down' to many recent trends in political journalism, against what may be termed 'popular culturalists', who seem inclined to applaud almost any cultural form so long as it is popular, typically lauding the populist thrust in broadcasting programming for inviting people 'to rethink and possibly revalue' their stands on moral, social and political issues (Hermes 1997). But whether in the end, the populist groundswell will mainly be empowering or merely symbolic, mainly redemptive or corrosive for civic communication, will depend on the aims of its producers and on how it is received by audiences.

A fourth trend is a degree of centrifugal diversification. Communication flows are relating to community boundaries and societal cleavages in new mixes. And again something like a sea change may be afoot.

After all, much political communication in the heyday of Age 2 was centripetal. The most attractive mass medium offered relatively little choice. The news audience was near-universal. Politicians aimed predominantly to project a limited set of master images and priorities throughout most sectors of the electorate. Conformist pressures on journalism fostered standardised notions of what counted as the top political stories of the day. Much investigative journalism presumed society-wide norms of proper and improper political conduct. Consensual issue agendas prevailed even across diverse news outlets. Minority communications supplemented without supplanting mass communications.

THE THIRD AGE AND CENTRIFUGAL DIVERSIFICATION

The abundance of Age 3, however, provides more channels, chances, and incentives to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions and tastes. This reduces

the size of the mass audience, both generally and for news. It facilitates the diversification of political communication vehicles and formats — ie mass mediated vs computerised; old vs new political journalism; nationwide vs subcultural discourse etc. It creates opportunities for would-be persuaders to seek more efficient impact by selectively focusing their communications on preferred population sectors. It creates openings for previously excluded voices to express their views and perhaps even be noticed by mainstream outlets. It gives more weapons to wagers of identity politics. And culture and knowledge gaps in society may widen, when at one and the same time, communicators are better placed to target their messages at bounded groups, and audiences are better placed to choose outlets that most suit their singular concerns and mentalities. One of the field's outstanding prophets even fears that, 'The central arena, the public forum in which different kinds of people could talk to or at least listen to each other is fading away' (Katz 2000).

But perhaps we should pause here to remember that 'centrifugal diversification' is not like an irresistible steamroller. In at least two respects its advance will presumably be conditional. Paolo Mancini (1999) refers to one modifying factor when stating that the 'possibility of diversifying instruments of communication and messages progresses at the same rate as social and economic interests become more differentiated'. The other arises from the continuing persistence of incentives among key communicators, including leading politicians themselves, to aggregate as large and heterogeneous an audience for their messages as possible.

Nevertheless, the implications of centrifugal diversification could be unsettling for much political communication scholarship. The presumption of mass exposure to relatively uniform political content, which has underpinned each of the three leading theories of political communication effects —

agenda-setting, the spiral of silence, and the cultivation hypothesis — can no longer be taken for granted.

Fifth, the political communication pitch is being invaded by what looks like a quite new kind of player — computer-based media, the Internet and all its interactive team-mates. Early impressions of its marginality are fast being swept away by the dynamic increase in Internet subscriptions, applications and usage. Moreover, cybermedia do seem to insert a distinctive set of attributes into the communication process — encouragement of active consumption; provision of large stores of data that may be tapped into by users in line with their particular needs; mechanisms of interactive exchange; and possibilities of involving large numbers of users in the expression of experiences and opinions on a given topic instead of just following other people's discussions as in broadcasting.

Of course it is too early to say what sort of a difference all this will make. The established communicators are trying to get a handle on it. Most news organisations have moved online with reworked services. US political parties and candidates are exploring a widening range of Internet applications that may eventually enter UK politics — to present their policies without journalistic interpretation; to raise funds; to mobilise supporters and get out the vote; to send personally targeted messages to voters with known demographic or opinion profiles; and to bombard journalists with a relentless stream of electronic 'press releases'. But the Internet has also amplified the voice and extended the reach of practitioners of single-issue politics, and, in a sort of electronic Hyde Park, given megaphones to an assortment of relative newcomers to political communication. These include amateur journalists, advocates of unorthodox opinions, and a host of well-meaning civic groups offering information, guidance, comment and ideas on a range of causes and personalities.

Amidst all this there may even be what is most appropriately perceived as a 'vulnerable potential' to revitalise political communication and enrich democracy. But no institutional structure exists at present to facilitate or promote that in any substantial system-changing way. To meet this need, a proposal for a 'civic commons in cyberspace' has been outlined in Blumler and Coleman (2001). This would involve the creation of an agency, publicly funded but independent of government, to encourage and report upon a wide range of exercises in electronic democracy.

CONCLUSION

So how might all this be summed up? The overall implications can be considered from three standpoints.

First, how has the shifting terrain affected the situations of the three main component actors of a political communication system?

For *leading politicians*, the pecking order of political voices in the news has altered. Whereas previous arrangements tended to give a privileged position in political communication output to the views of already established power holders, in recent times, (1) the political newshole has been shrinking; and (2) politicians face increased competition for media publicity from a wide range of advocates who operate outside the political parties, including diverse interest groups, social causes and movements. Hence, politicians must fight harder to get their messages noticed and passed on in their preferred terms, while media tolerance seems to have increased for stances that might previously have been beyond the editorial pale.

Then *professional political journalists*, like politicians, have also been slipping down a salient pecking order — that of access to news time and space for their reports inside their media organs. With communication abundance and increasing commercialism, (1) they have lost status, no longer addressing the entire nation through a small number of

authoritative channels, and (2) as with politicians, the range of significant actors involved in the mediation of politics has been broadened. The big players of political journalism no longer command the field they once dominated so prominently but are jostled by many new and less inhibited makers and breakers of news, presenters, sources of commentary and purveyors of scandal in talk shows, tabloids and websites.

As for *audience members*, abundance may be changing how politics reaches them. Much audience reception in the new conditions may turn on a tension between a greater freedom to choose, and an increased inability to avoid, political materials. Thus, with so many communication channels and forms available, it is obviously easier for people to look for and stay with that which interests them and to turn off whatever does not. Yet because political communication often blends with a flow of other materials nowadays, people can be exposed to it inadvertently as it crops up in genres and formats not usually designated as 'political'. Nevertheless, media abundance does appear to introduce a greater element of flexibility into people's approaches to political communication. One senses a potential for restructuring the audience here, differentiating political cognoscenti from 'hit-and-run' followers of public affairs and from 'anti-politicals', who may try, as far as possible, to close their eyes and ears to politics in the media.

Second, how might researchers respond to Third Age conditions? This is a large subject in itself, but five priorities stand out:

- (1) More observation research is desirable to ascertain how political communicators and media organisations are navigating the uncertainties and opportunities of change, redefining their purposes, adapting their strategies and resolving their conflicts.
- (2) Among the field's master research models, agenda setting may be most worth

pursuing. Are media agendas diversifying across the many different outlets of political communication, and if so, how are they being received by the audiences of those outlets?

- (3) Similar questions for empirical investigation arise about avenues of access to the political audience. Are voices of protest and heterodoxy getting a better shake — more attention and less pejorative coverage — than in the old days? Are the classic findings of *Demonstrations and Communication* (Halloran *et al.* 1970) out of date, or do they still apply?
- (4) Quite a lot is known about how politicians, journalists, critics and academics perceive the new-found political communication system, but what do ordinary citizens make of it? What impressions of how political communication is shaped nowadays are uppermost in their minds? How are those features evaluated, say, for helpfulness in following politics or for getting in the way of what citizens would most like to know?
- (5) Commentators have associated many benefits and dangers with the mushrooming new forms of populist communication. These cry out for systematic research exploration. For whom and in what ways, if any, are these populist approaches and programmes informing and involving or off-putting and disenchanting? What audience and citizen roles do they encourage people to adopt?

A third and final perspective is opened on third age sea changes in the author's most recent essay with Michael Gurevitch, in which it is asked whether the new conditions 'demand a new paradigm of political communication analysis' (Blumler and Gurevitch 2000). And, like true academics, the authors answer both 'yes' and 'no' to that question in a concluding section, mysteriously entitled 'Buddy, can you paradigm?'. But instead of saying more about that, it

might be preferable to close by drawing attention to the song that inspired the title of this piece. Dating from the 1930s depression in the USA, it went like this:

Once I built a railroad,
 Made it run,
 Made it race against time.
 Once I built a railroad,
 Now it's done.
 Buddy, can you spare a dime?

OR:

Once I had a framework,
 Thought it great,
 Wrote it up all the time.
 Once I had a framework
 That's now out-of-date.
 Buddy, what's my paradigm?

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