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Sumar

Comunicare politică și comportament de vot

Mădălina BOȚAN

New Perspectives on the Study of Political Communication / 9

Bogdan GHIONCU, Mirel PALADA

The Impact of Economic Indicators on Voting Behavior in the 2004 and 2009 Romanian Presidential Elections / 21

Flavia DURACH

Blogs as Sources for Political News / 33

Simona SZAKÁCS

The Making of the 'Soft Villain' in a Time Magazine Headline / 47

Studii și articole

Georgiana UDREA, Nicoleta CORBU

The Building of a European Identity and Its Challenges / 63

Iuliana Miron IOAN

L'étude de l'interactivité sur les pages web roumaines pour les femmes / 85

Loredana IVAN, Diana CISMARU

Women's Voices in Organizational Life in Romania. Using Interpersonal Skills to Lead / 99

Dan Florin STĂNESCU, Georg ROMER, Eva Alexandra PIROȘCĂ

Coping Strategies and Communication: A Qualitative Exploratory Study of Children with Parents Suffering from Acute Central Nervous System Injury / 109

Alina BĂRGĂOANU, Elena NEGREA, Loredana CĂLINESCU, Sergiu STAN

Innovations in the Organization of the Romanian Higher Education: Project-Oriented University / 119

Recenzii

Maria-Claudia CĂLIN

Google – de la companie la verb / 137

Bogdan GHEORGHITĂ

Politica în era digitală. Între perspective universale și realități românești / 141

Ceremonia de acordare a titlului de Doctor Honoris Causa profesorului Jan Sadlak

Remus PRICOPIE

*Laudatio of Professor Jan Sadlak on the Occasion of the
Ceremony of Awarding the Title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the National School
of Political Studies and Public Administration / 145*

Jan SADLAK

*Acceptance Speech at the Ceremony of Awarding the Title of Doctor Honoris Causa
by the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration / 155*

Contents

Political Communication and Voting Behaviour

Mădălina BOȚAN

New Perspectives on the Study of Political Communication / 9

Bogdan GHIONCU, Mirel PALADA

The Impact of Economic Indicators on Voting Behavior in the 2004 and 2009 Romanian Presidential Elections / 21

Flavia DURACH

Blogs as Sources for Political News / 33

Simona SZAKÁCS

The Making of the 'Soft Villain' in a Time Magazine Headline / 47

Studies and articles

Georgiana UDREA, Nicoleta CORBU

The Building of a European Identity and Its Challenges / 63

Iuliana Miron IOAN

L'étude de l'interactivité sur les pages web roumaines pour les femmes / 85

Loredana IVAN, Diana CISMARU

Women's Voices in Organizational Life in Romania. Using Interpersonal Skills to Lead / 99

Dan Florin STĂNESCU, Georg ROMER, Eva Alexandra PIROȘCĂ

Coping Strategies and Communication: A Qualitative Exploratory Study of Children with Parents Suffering from Acute Central Nervous System Injury / 109

Alina BĂRGĂOANU, Elena NEGREA, Loredana CĂLINESCU, Sergiu STAN

Innovations in the Organization of the Romanian Higher Education: Project-Oriented University / 119

Book Reviews

Maria-Claudia CĂLIN

Google – from Company to Verb / 137

Bogdan GHEORGHITĂ

Politics in the Digital Era. Between Universal Perspectives and Romanian Realities / 141

Ceremony of awarding the title of Doctor Honoris Causa to Professor Jan Sadlak

Remus PRICOPIE

*Laudatio of Professor Jan Sadlak on the Occasion of the
Ceremony of Awarding the Title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the National School
of Political Studies and Public Administration / 145*

Jan SADLAK

*Acceptance Speech at the Ceremony of Awarding the Title of Doctor Honoris Causa
by the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration / 155*

Mădălina BOTAN*

New Perspectives on the Study of Political Communication

Abstract

Political communication is a discipline still in search of a conceptual and methodological identity, unlike sociology, which had consistent conceptual scaffolding; political communication still faces a series of conceptual limitations. In this article, we review both classical and recent empirical research dedicated to political communication, arguing for a broader definition of effects and tracing recent social and technological developments brought by new media. This article also features some of the recently proposed interactive models of political communication, more complex than the traditional hypodermic approach.

Keywords: political communication, election campaigns, mass media

1. Introduction

Modern political theorists and specialists have been mainly preoccupied with understanding the social, psychological, political and economic transformations produced by media in contemporary societies. But societies have changed and so did people's response to media messages. Media exposure and its role in promoting political stakes is still one of the most empirically investigated topic, even though decades of academic research demonstrate that exposure to campaigns mainly reinforce voters' partisan views. In addition to that, traditional research has looked mainly at persuasion: effects of campaigns on voters' preferences, ignoring other relevant effects. The setting of campaign agendas, and alteration of the criteria by which candidates are judged are some of the recent conceptual developments.

Identifying the genesis of the political communication field might be relevant to the investigation of social changes that currently affect the composition of media audiences, and the access to information (and thus to political life itself). Turning to the historical background of the discipline, we stress the fact that political communication draws its roots from a variety of traditions and disciplines. Unlike sociology, mainly founded on the great sociological tradition of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Tarde, Simmel and later the Chicago and Columbia School, contemporary political communication is rather poorly connected to political science. The pioneers of the field, Harold Lasswell (1948/1973), and later, Murray Edelman (1967/1985) adopted multiple perspectives, from sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, journalism, public relations and economics.

If we think of the famous era of "minimal effects", which was defined by research conducted in the 40s-50s, we must take into account the context of a social system previous to

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mass communication, where communities, and interpersonal networks ensured especially through unions and civic associations membership influenced media consumption (Putnam, 2000). Back in those years, the researchers concluded that media messages were filtered through interpersonal communication and group membership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). At the same time, research dedicated to electoral campaigns in the 50s-60s in the United States have not established that campaign messages lead to opinion change, but moreover to reinforcing voters' preexisting partisan loyalties. "Hard" persuasive effects (change of opinion or behavior) are extremely rare because few individuals behave as rational voters (strong interest in politics, high level of information, lack of emotion etc).

Classical studies dedicated to voting behavior may have even deeper and more interdisciplinary roots; the psychological tradition of Lasswell's (now) commonplace formulation, "who says what, to whom and with what effects" (Hovland, Janis & Kelly, 1953) is one relevant example. Walter Lippmann (1922/2007) also captured for the first time the importance of understanding the relationships between media and government; in addition to that Tarde's theory (1902/2007) dedicated to diffusion, imitation and interpersonal influence has clearly influenced the research of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Merton and Katz (1944/2004, 1955).

These pioneers of the field have promoted the idea that individuals had a reduced ability to develop opinions and assessments about the political world or even about simple decisions related to fashion or other areas of everyday life (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Their views are more likely influenced by group membership rather than direct media exposure. Media influence was therefore seen as dependent on social and interpersonal filters, and so were they illustrated in the two-step communication flow model proposed by the researchers at Columbia (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944/2004). Contemporary theories dedicated to political communication tend however to emphasize the role of cognitions within the electoral process (cognitive responses to political and media messages).

Another milestone in political communication was represented by Murray Edelman's thesis (1967/1985), based on semiotic and language theories. Later the same author has begun to incorporate in his political theories the ideas of some prominent modernist authors (Foucault, Baudrillard and Derrida). Edelman's thesis on categorization and error in the political process resonates with a wide range of research dedicated to framing. Among the most relevant authors who coined this concept, we name those who are part of the symbolic interactionism paradigm of research, such as Herbert Blumer (1969) and George Herbert Mead (1934/1963). Later contributions of Erving Goffmann (1959/2007, 1961/2000, 1974/1991) have provided a bridge to more recent authors, such as George Lakoff (1987), Robert Entman (1993), Shanto Iyengar (1991) and many others who were interested in the cognitive effects of media exposure.

At the same time, the tradition of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, 1937/ 1972), which has incorporated into the political communication study neo-marxist ideas, for instance Habermas' theories (1962/2005) on the public sphere, has influenced many political communication theorists. Therefore, some significant conceptual imports have resulted in the field of political communication, campaign effects and political information processing. At the same time, a parallel approach (Festinger, 1957; Hovland, & Jennis, 1953 or, more recently, Zaller, 1992) has focused on emotional predispositions, demonstrating that predispositions do matter and can be pivotal.

Recent approaches in the field of political communication consider however media a key player in electoral communication, given that the ability of citizens to understand the political stakes and to assess the politicians depend on media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1991;

Scheuffelle, 2000, 2007), and that the controversial capacity of elites to influence public opinion is also dependent on media (Bennett, 1988; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Zaller, 1992). In the context of modern political campaigns their influences on voter preferences are far from minimal. The transmission of information, the setting of electoral agendas, and alteration of the criteria by which candidates are judged become some of the recent advances in political communication research. The last example, known as priming, refers to media influence on the voters' criteria in judging the political candidates (Entman, 1993, Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Iyengar, 1996; Scheufele, in 2000, Scheufele & Tewksbury, in 2007, Weaver 2007).

2. Political Communication in the Mass Media Era

Thinkers such as those mentioned above have helped shaping the field of political communication and campaign effects. Perhaps the main obstacle to understanding the real-world role of political campaigns is a limited definition of effects. The minimal effects and the two-step flow of communication models can be both explained as the result of a context where media and its social impact were not yet fully understood. The misunderstanding of media effects persisted for decades until they were more closely studied and reinterpreted by contemporary research (Zaller, 1992).

The current context of electoral communication, due to the mutations produced by new media, can create some confusion, some authors outlining some important variables in the process of political communication, such as the group membership decline (Putnam, 2000) and the emergence of new technologies that allow broadcasters to reach targeted audiences. The proliferation of TV channels, new media, and social networks allows an increased flexibility in defining political interests and participation. The new communication processes require a high level of interactivity, make larger volumes of information available, and are therefore likely to produce more engaged and better-informed voters.

To summarize, it is clear that political communication has reached a turning point not only in terms of communication technologies, but also in terms of political exposure and participation. The existence of better-informed individuals, and also a proliferation of higher media literacy among younger audiences might explain the increasing mistrust of politicians, the lack of faith in the political consultants and, in general, in the electoral process itself. Such "perverse" influences translate what the researchers and political specialists call "political ennui": a disinterest of young people towards the political phenomena as a whole, and towards vote, in particular.

The main impact of new media is related to the amount of available information. For example, citizens interested in the contemporary presidential elections have access to thousands of online resources ranging from news organizations to candidates sites or unknown bloggers. But given this overwhelming amount of information, will consumers know how to process it and use it to form better-informed opinions? There is no simple answer to this question; especially since media exposure and consumption patterns are changing so fast. Nowadays important audience segments cannot be reached anymore through conventional communication channels (e.g. television), the young people being absorbed by new mediums, such as video games or online social networks.

Until a few years ago, voters depended on the media coverage of politics. The explosion of Internet-generated resources has created an extremely fragmented media landscape in terms of information acquisition; television news channels and various new media being in a never-

seen before competition. New media increase the selective exposure to information and the disinterest for politics. A single example suffices to illustrate this new *status quo* of media consumption: between 1968 and 2003, television news audience has declined in the United States with 30 million viewers (Bennett & Iyengar, 2009: 43). Campaigns can now influence voters in more than one way. Confronted with partisan messages, most voters resist and rebut such messages. Audience fragmentation and the changing patterns in media exposure are therefore a more subtle form of influence, occurring even without the voters' awareness.

Since the emergence of theories dedicated to persuasion and attitude change in the '50s, communication researchers have formulated the hypothesis that exposure to political information will reflect some kind of partisanship. In other words, people will avoid information that is expected to be dissonant to their opinions and attitudes, looking for the information that is expected to reinforce their own beliefs (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944/2004). Party identification remains a salient feature of the American electoral process. However, nowadays reinforcing effects of campaigns must be attributed to the interaction between the content of campaign messages and voters' prior preferences (Iyengar & Simon, 2000).

A study conducted in 2004 and published in 2008 by American author Shanto Iyengar (Iyengar & al., 2004), used an innovative research design in order to analyze voters' exposure to campaign messages. Iyengar's team gathered an extensive selection of electoral speeches and TV commercials of both presidential candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush. The material was gathered on a multimedia CD and distributed to a representative sample of voters with Internet access, a few weeks before the election. Participants were informed that they were free to use the CD in what form they wanted and that the accessed information would be recorded on their computer. After the election, participants were instructed how to download and transmit the data collected to the marketing research firm that distributed the CDs. Pooled data have shown weak partisan preferences of the participants who had voted. Republicans and conservatives have been more active in seeking information related to Republican candidate George Bush, but Democrats had no preference for speeches or TV spots of either candidate. These data have indicated a stronger selective exposure among Republicans, which may be explained – believe the authors – by the popularity of pro-Republican channel Fox News, launched in 1986. A later stage of the study indicated that the Democrats have recovered the gap: in 2000, very few Democrat participants showed an aversion to George Bush's speeches, while in 2007 almost none of the Democrats did follow Fox News Channel.

Summarizing, we can say that the present media environment, which offers an abundance of alternatives to consumers, will tend to accentuate the inequalities in terms of political information acquisition. Secondly, increased information accessibility will lead to a high degree of selective exposure to political information. The current transition to a society in which each of us uses information in a different way will produce some changes in the direction of custom-made information era.

Analyzing the impact of such new practices on information producers, we can see that these new media consumption patterns will moreover increase the bias in the news, in order to gain or maintain market shares. On a more general level, partisan coverage seems to strengthen the hypothesis that new technologies will narrow, rather than widen, the viewers' political horizons. With time, avoiding unpleasant information might become so common that many consumers will turn to the favorite information source, whatever the covered subject might be. As a consequence, media audiences will be able to totally avoid topics and opinions that contradict their own opinions. Finally, this selective exposure process will produce a less

informed and more polarized electorate (which we already saw happening in the last Romanian presidential elections of 2009).

The reconfiguration of media audiences has significant consequences for media theoreticians and specialists. Researchers investigating the news exposure will find increasingly difficult to treat it as a potential source of political beliefs or attitudes. As we already argued, certain types of information can be deliberately avoided, meaning that exposure to media will mainly be a choice of partisan and politically involved individuals.

We anticipate therefore that media will reduce audience fragmentation in response to a particular type of news. The process of persuasion involves a certain level of attitudinal change in response to media stimuli. As media audiences are being dissolved into homogeneous electorate subdivisions it becomes increasingly unlikely that media messages will do anything other than reinforce voters' partisanship. This prediction has been emphasized in almost every consistent study of presidential elections since the 1940s.

The phenomenon of increasingly political polarization among the voters calls into question some postulates of contemporary media studies. Average voters will become increasingly reluctant to discrepant information, and messages that are counter-attitudinal will be actively resisted. For example, after consistent media allegations about the Bush administration's involvement in the Iraq war, the percentage of Republicans who gave an affirmative answer when asked if U.S. troops in Iraq have found weapons of mass destruction remained unchanged, while the percentage of Democrats who responded negatively increased by 30 percent (Bennett & Iyengar, 2009: 64). In short, Republicans have remained unaffected by the new wave of discrepant information.

Selective media exposure is increasingly based on partisan preferences, marking the transition to a new era of minimal effects. Other forms of media influence, such as agenda setting or priming continues to be important. These new aspects of political communication highlight the need for consistent conceptual scaffolding, in which the new social and communicational practices should also be inserted.

3. New Perspectives on Political Communication Research

Using mass media to achieve certain political goals is not only standard practice, but also essential to political survival. However, in the context of present electoral campaigns, these strategies become more elaborate and have a greater impact. The media influence on political campaigns move the stakes of the political game well beyond the media field, therefore campaign strategies become increasingly likely to have a great real-world impact. The ever-increasing level of budgets invested by candidates make some of the political specialists wonder "why the participants continue to invest when decades of research into the effects of media-based political campaigns purports to demonstrate that exposure to campaigns mainly reinforces voters; preexisting loyalties" (Iyengar & Simon, 2000: 150). Political specialists yet routinely assign electoral influence to structural variables, ignoring the impact of campaign events. Despite some current empirical research, some authors believe that campaigns are pivotal and that their consequences are far from minimal (Iyengar & Simon, 2009).

Research has traditionally investigated mostly persuasion processes (i.e. the impact of the campaign on voting preference). From this perspective, empirical data seem to support the minimal effects hypothesis; empirical evidence indicating that exposure to campaigns rein-