Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

Letter from the Editor[1]

Curd Knüpfer, University of Southern Denmark

As noted in our previous issue, 2024 was hailed as a super election year. It was also marked by rapid transformations in the foundational institutions, communication structures, and technologies that govern political communication flows. We live in tumultuous, disruptive, and destabilizing times. While the burden of these changes is distributed unequally within and across political systems, no part of the world seems untouched by the rapid transformations societies are currently witnessing.

Considering all this flux, it seems timely to ask where our own foundations lie. What are the normative principles on which we rely in our research and theorizing? What needs to change? What needs to remain the same? What norms and principles should we either revive or discard? The current issue of the *Political Communication Report* invited contributors to engage with these questions, summarized under the title *"What Does PolComm Stand For?"*

The goal was not to provide exhaustive or definitive answers to these questions but rather to offer various perspectives that could spark further conversations within our field, professional organizations, publications, classrooms, and personal reflections. I hope you will agree that the pieces introduced below are well-equipped to do just that:

- **Václav Štětka and Sabina Mihelj** analyze contemporary illiberal politics and argue that the field's normative positions are no longer adequate to address democratic disruptions. Drawing on research focused on Central and Eastern European media

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Curd Knüpfer). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

systems, they introduce a framework centered on the rise of "illiberal public spheres," highlighting the main characteristics and stages of these power dynamics.

- **Thomas J Billard** channels Sandra Ball-Rokeach in questioning the normative assumptions underlying contemporary theorizing. They argue that the field's focus on topics such as polarization or civility is implicitly rooted in a narrow set of values, concluding that "the field normalizes hegemonic standards while delegitimizing forms of political communication that challenge systemic oppression."

- **Nathan Kalmoe** offers a similar critique, reflecting on recent failings of liberal institutions to address the mounting threats posed by illiberal disruptions. He contends that political communication has often treated the consumption of mainstream news as normatively desirable, despite growing evidence that many aspects of it may harm pluralistic democracy and reflects on how news could be "better for democracy."

- **Dan Lane and Stewart Coles** add to this critique, by emphasizing what is lost when we define "the political" too narrowly. They advocate for a group-centric perspective on Political Communication, accounting for collective viewpoints and decision-making processes.

- **Marília Gehrke and Olga Pasitselska** also highlight the importance of group-based perspectives in studying contemporary information flows and actor dynamics, particularly those spreading disinformation. They propose focusing on three key dynamics: identity propaganda, logics of exclusion, and gendered disinformation.

- **Manuel Alejandro Guerrero and Giselle Kuri Carrasco** provide an even wider lens in offering an overview of what political communication, understood in a too narrow sense and from the perspective of the Global North might be missing. Their piece on "PolComm from a Global South perspective" draws in a variety of perspectives that would note how limiting the contemporary field's focus and reification of a specific form of liberal democracy can be.

- **Cherian George** starts from a similar vantage point in critiquing the Western-centric status quo of PolComm. At the same time, he also cautions against how the de-Westernization mantle can be co-opted by autocracies. His essay ultimately rounds this issue off, by proposing a concrete course of action and articulating a new normative mission for our increasingly global field, "grounded in Human Rights principles."

- Beyond these essays, this issue features a report by **Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Saima Saeed, and Suruchi Mazumdar**, organizers of the inaugural ICA Political Communication Workshop in Delhi, India. This workshop provided space for more

diverse perspectives within the field, marking an important step toward institutionalizing global inclusivity in political communication research.

- Lastly, this issue's focus on the awardee interviews section provides insights into award-winning contributions to our field, highlighting the authors' work processes and future plans.

This will be the last issue of the *Political Communication Report* under my editorship. It has been an absolute pleasure to steer this format over the past two years and four issues. My initial task was to reactivate the PCR after it had been dormant since 2016. The goal was to create a space for collective reflection on our field. Over these issues, we explored new methods and challenges, the state and process of de-Westernizing the field, new developments in the study of elections, and lastly the current reevaluation of normative positions shaping our field.

Beyond the content, the most rewarding aspect of pulling these issues together were the back-and-forth interactions I got to have with colleagues as part of the editorial function. Practically everyone I reached out to was willing to contribute to this project – the few exceptions citing very good reasons for not being available. More importantly, every single one of our contributors took the task extremely seriously, contributing substantive thoughts rooted in their own research, experiences, or theorizing. This made my life as an editor incredibly easy (as I kept writing in responses) and I am incredibly grateful to everyone who helped in re-activating this deliberative space.

So, what does Political Communication stand for? To some degree, the answer will depend on your own positionality. However, based on my experience as PCR editor, I would say that the PolComm community embodies a willingness to self-reflect, engage respectfully, deliberate thoughtfully, and learn alongside one another – while remaining collegial and kind. Whatever challenges the world may bring, let's strive to keep these values intact. I hope to see many more issues of the PCR in this same spirit!

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

The Illiberal Challenge: (Re)Conceptualizing Political Communication in Times of Normative Instability[1]

Václav Štětka, Loughborough University
Sabina Mihelj, Loughborough University

Political communication scholarship has always had a normative orientation; from its very beginnings as a distinct field, it was closely tied to the political ideals and norms of democratic politics, and its research agenda was guided by the normative challenges faced by modern democracies, ranging from political participation to disinformation and polarization (cf. Knüpfer et al., 2024). For a long time, these normative underpinnings were taken for granted; while scholars may have disagreed over the relative merits of different models of democratic communication, or questioned the extent to which specific communication actors, structures and processes fulfilled democratic obligations, they shared a belief in democratic ideals as something worth defending.

Importantly, most political communication scholars – and certainly those who shaped the mainstream debates in the field – could also safely assume that the societies they worked in largely shared this broad normative orientation. This is no longer the case. Along with gender studies specialists and critical race theorists, political communication researchers are increasingly becoming targets of politically motivated attacks that question the very rationale of the field.

As the normative assumptions of the field are being questioned, it is also becoming clear that the prevailing conceptual frameworks are of limited use when seeking to understand the role of media in contemporary attacks on democracy. This is not only because these

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Václav Štětka & Sabina Mihelj). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

concepts were developed to make sense of political communication in societies committed to democracy, but also because they were mostly applied to a rather narrow range of countries concentrated in the Global North (for a recent discussion of efforts to 'de-westernize' political communication research see e.g., Badr, 2023; Mitchelstein, 2023; Neyazi, 2023). For a while, the successive waves of democratization that swept through Southern and then Eastern Europe, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East, made it seem as if the very same conceptual frameworks could be extended globally, with the normative ideals of democratic communication developed in the West serving as yardsticks to measure the relative progress of countries from around the globe on the path of democratization.

The political developments of the past decade, however, have challenged the tacit teleological, west-centered assumptions that envisaged a global convergence towards models and ideals of media and politics prevailing in Western democracies. Several reports have documented the declining quality of democracy world-wide, detailing a global surge of extremism and authoritarianism, curbing of minority rights, attacks on media and free speech, and weakening of the rule of law (see e.g., Nord et al., 2024; Freedom House, 2024; EIU, 2023). The much-anticipated "super-election year" of 2024 deepened these trends, bringing the historic victories of far-right parties such as the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in the Austrian Parliamentary Election or the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in regional elections in Thuringia, and culminating in the triumphant return of Donald Trump into the White House.

While political communication scholarship studying the contemporary challenges to democracy has flourished, we argue that its dominant theoretical apparatus remains ill-equipped to grasp the nature and depth of recent transformations. By and large, scholars have sought to make sense of contemporary developments either by reversing the democratization theory framework and focusing on developments variously described as democratic "erosion", "backsliding", "deterioration" or "deconsolidation" (e.g. Bennett and Kneuer, 2024; Wright et al., 2024) or by turning to theories of populism, typically conceptualized as a distinct political style, ideology, discourse, or a type of political communication centered on the opposition between "the people" and "the elite" (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2018).

Although very valuable in their own right, neither of these conceptual perspectives can offer an integrated framework that can capture the full range of ideological and institutional dimensions of contemporary challenges faced by many democratic societies and their media, as well as account for the dynamic, unstable character of societies and media affected by these challenges. To help build such a framework, we turn instead to debates on illiberalism and develop the concept of the illiberal public sphere, drawing on arguments and empirical research presented in our recent book (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024).

From Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation to Illiberalism

It is important to acknowledge that both conceptual approaches centered on populism and those focused on democratic deconsolidation tackle important weaknesses of earlier frameworks. Research that foregrounds democratic deconsolidation dispenses with the teleological assumptions of democratization theory, and instead acknowledges that the trajectory of progression of public communication from authoritarian to democratic models is neither linear nor unidirectional. Work anchored in theories of populism, on the other hand, breaks with the habit of reducing threats to democracy to external actors, and instead acknowledges the internal contradictions of (liberal) democracy that can fuel disenchantment with political participation and representative democracy.

However, as instrumental as these concepts have undoubtedly been for the development of the field, helping illuminate the seismic shifts in political and media systems and discourses in Western democracies over the previous two decades, we believe that they are no longer sufficient to account for the full range of challenges and the extent of changes evident in political communication processes and structures. To put it differently, while populism and democratic deconsolidation may have offered adequate ways for theorizing the early stages of disrupted relations between media, citizens, and democratic institutions, these changes have – at least in some countries – opened doors for developments that present a more palpable and more urgent threat for democracy. We therefore need a more elaborated conceptual framework, which can capture what comes *after* (certain kinds of) populist politicians rise to positions of power, and specifically after they start using their leverage to undermine democratic institutions, including independent media. A key building block of such a framework, we argue, is the concept of illiberalism.

The rise of illiberalism has recently started attracting attention in political sciences, but also sociology and international relations, among others (Sajó et al., 2021; Laruelle, 2022; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023; Laruelle, 2024; Enyedi, 2024). Described as a "backlash against today's liberalism" and promoting a model of society governed by majority rule and underpinned by ethno-nationalist ideals and traditional cultural hierarchies (Laruelle 2022: 305), illiberalism is clearly distinguished from populism in its explicitly antagonistic stance towards the liberal foundations of modern democracy. Illiberal leaders often proudly advocate for the gradual decoupling of democracy from constitutional liberalism – and for the establishment of what the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán called "illiberal democracy" (Orbán, 2014). While nominally still professing commitment to democracy, and even referring to liberal democratic values – such as freedom of speech – illiberal actors seek to advance this decoupling by introducing a set of practices and institutional arrangements that can ultimately open doors to authoritarianism, with democratic institutions reduced to a mere façade for an autocratic regime.

Contrary to that, populism does not *inherently* present a danger to democracy; as various authors pointed out, the relationship between populism and democracy is ambiguous, with populist movements potentially having a corrective effect on democracy (Ruth-Lovell &

Grahn, 2023; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012), for example by mobilizing marginalized groups and encouraging debates on taboo topics (cf. Laclau, 2005). As Larry Diamond argues, while populist politics "is always dancing with the devil", not all populism is necessarily "bad"; it starts becoming a threat to democracy only when it becomes culturally exclusionary, anti-pluralistic, or when it displays an appetite for restricting minority rights and civic freedoms (Diamond, 2017).

There are three distinctive features that make illiberalism particularly well suited to advance current theorizing on the role of media and communication in the crisis of liberal democracy Štětka & Mihelj, 2024, 27-30). First, illiberalism is not a direct opposite of liberalism; rather, it is paradoxically both dependent on, and fundamentally opposed to it – it erodes the foundations of democratic institutions and values by relying on the very institutions and values it seeks to undermine. In many ways, then, illiberalism feeds on the internal contradictions of liberal democracy, including the tension between popular rule and the protection of individual right and liberties; and between inequalities generated by a liberal market economy and the commitment to the equality of votes and rights of citizens. Second, illiberalism is both an ideology – characterized, as noted earlier, by support for majority rule, ethno-nationalism, and cultural traditionalism – and a set of practices and institutional arrangements guided by this ideology. Third, illiberalism is never static; it is dynamic and persistently challenges the liberal status quo.

Apart from conceptual reasons, there is also a normative argument against conflating populism and illiberalism, and for prioritizing the latter when it comes to research analyzing the crisis of democracy, particularly from far-right movements and actors. As Brown and Mondon (2021) observed in their analysis of *The Guardian*'s investigative series "New populism" in 2018, the indiscriminate use of the concept of populism might end up euphemizing and trivializing much more problematic phenomena such as racism, islamophobia, or the far right in general, and ultimately contributes to their mainstreaming. In a similar vein, labelling unequivocally illiberal actors as merely populist – even if they utilize populist communication strategies, as many indeed do – might not only lead to missing some of the key aspects of their ideological convictions and governance practices, but potentially also risks downplaying the level of danger they represent for liberal democracy.

The Illiberal Public Sphere: A Communication Perspective on the Rise of Illiberalism

To grasp the communicative aspects of illiberalism and establish an original and comprehensive framework for analyzing its dual nature in the communication domain – namely, as an ideology as well as a set of practices and systemic arrangements affecting media and journalism at the institutional level – we introduce the concept of *the illiberal public sphere*. The concept builds on the works of various scholars who have challenged the notion of the "classical" Habermasian model of the liberal, bourgeois public sphere (Habermas,

1962/1989) being the only public sphere possible, pointing out that it is overtly hegemonic and oblivious to the existence of alternative types of publics, especially from subordinated social groups (Negt & Kluge, 1972/1993; Fraser, 1990), though not necessarily liberal or progressive ones (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Korstenbroek, 2022). Further inspiration comes from authors who have described the existence of a public sphere beyond the perimeters of a democratic political system, including in authoritarian countries (Dukalskis, 2017; Lei, 2017; Finkel, 2007).

Following these lines of thought, we define the illiberal public sphere (hereafter IPS) as "a communicative space comprising both traditional and new media that promote and amplify illiberal actors, views, and attitudes" (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024: 31). The IPS is explicitly positioned against the liberal public sphere, and gradually colonizes institutions that have previously served as its cornerstones (such as public service media), which the IPS seeks to displace. There is a diverse range of actors which the IPS relies upon – far-right and ethno-nationalist political leaders, parties and movements; corporate and religious figures and organizations; legacy news media (which are often controlled by oligarchs or government's cronies) pursuing illiberal agendas; conspiracy news websites, social media channels, and other 'alternative' outlets spreading illiberal narratives.

Most importantly, we envisage the IPS as dynamic, and progressively changing its scope and relative strength vis-à-vis its liberal counterpart. In order to capture this fluidity, we identify three ideal-typical stages in the evolution of the IPS, which are distinguished from each other by several main features, including the media forms and outlets that support it; the key political and cultural actors involved in it; the nature of media policies and regulation; and the nature of media ownership and independence.

In the first, *incipient* stage, the IPS is fragmented, limited in its scope and reach, and found mainly on the fringes of both the political and media systems. Among the key actors in this stage are minor oppositional parties, fringe political and social movements, organizations & NGOs; with regards to allied media as active instruments of the IPS, these consist mainly of "alternative" or hyper-partisan and conspiracy outlets without mass range. The incipient stage of IPS is currently present in most Western democracies, where it often overlaps with far-right political and information scene.

During the second, *ascendant* stage, the illiberal political actors have managed to grab power, even if only temporarily, and the IPS has colonized some mainstream channels (typically including public service media, wherever the illiberal parties managed to get a hold of the government). This phase is further characterized by changes to legislative system enabling government capture of media regulatory bodies, as well as by mainstreaming of illiberal narratives and normalization of illiberal values, which takes place simultaneously with active undermining of liberal values and increasing hostility towards journalists and free media. A country with an ascendant IPS is strongly polarized along the liberal/illiberal axis, with only

few – if any – relevant news media to be found in or close to the political centre of the media landscape, which is being hollowed out. This is a situation that we observe perhaps most vividly in the contemporary U.S., but it is also present in other countries where liberal and illiberal forces have been locked in a seesaw battle through consecutive election cycles, including Poland, Slovenia, or Brazil.

In the final, *hegemonic* stage, the IPS dominates, while the liberal public sphere is in retreat, and its media operate mostly online. Illiberal actors are entrenched in positions of power, usually exceeding one election cycle. Majority of mainstream media as well as many cultural institutions (museums, educational system, or even the academia) are colonized and subject to illiberal policies. Illiberal narratives prevail in the public domain, without being effectively challenged. As examples of this stage might serve India under Narendra Modi (2014-) or Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić (2014-); Hungary under Viktor Orbán (2010-) comes close as well, although the recent rise of the opposition movement, challenging the government party's seemingly unshakable position, suggests that the liberal public sphere is perhaps stronger than what would appear just a few years ago.

Drawing on empirical research, we also show that these three stages coincide with important differences in audience attitudes and habits, including different patterns of news consumption, different political and cultural attitudes, different perceptions of media trust and trustworthiness, differences in the extent of mainstreaming of illiberal values and narratives, and in the extent of exposure to mis- and disinformation

Implications for Political Communication Research

We believe that the conceptual framework outlined here offers significant benefits for political communication research in times of normative instability. First, it forces the field to acknowledge the existence of diverse normative models of public communication and, specifically, diverse normative models of the public sphere, of which only some are compatible with democratic politics. Second, it offers a framework for empirical analysis of actual articulations of these different normative models in specific socio-cultural contexts. Third, it helps move the debate beyond the exclusive focus on digital media – indeed, as we show in our empirical investigation, social media can act both as vectors of illiberalism and as sources of resistance, depending on how advanced the illiberal public sphere is in a particular context (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024, 153-179). Fourth, it enables us to capture both systemic and cultural aspects of communication and investigate how systemic changes at the level of institutional structures and policies interact with shifts in audience practices, attitudes, and cultural values and narratives. Fifth, it allows for a longitudinal perspective on the changes in media and political systems, offering a tool for analyzing changes over time, without prejudging the direction or final destination of these changes. And finally, it provides a conceptual tool for assessing and comparing the relative development of the illiberal public sphere in different

countries, thereby also offering a basis for identifying key factors that can accelerate, obstruct, or reverse the rise of the illiberal public sphere.

In sum, the kind of research that the IPS framework enables can help put the field of political communication in a better position to respond to the challenge of normative instability – not simply by taking a normative stance, but rather by conducting research that puts our own normative assumptions to test, examines them side by side with competing normative ideals, and gathers empirical evidence of the key drivers, manifestations and consequences of the declining appeal of liberal democracy in the sphere of communication.

References

Badr, H. (2023) It is epistemic, folks! Why our knowledge from WEIRD contexts is limited and what we can learn from Arab contexts. *Political Communication Report*, Fall 2023 - Issue 28. "De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions". http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41237

Bennett, W. L., & Kneuer, M. (2024). Communication and democratic erosion: The rise of illiberal public spheres. *European Journal of Communication*, *39*(2), 177-196.

Brown, K., & Mondon, A. (2021). Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study. *Politics, 41*(3), 279–295. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720955036

Diamond, L. (2017). When does populism become a threat to democracy? FSI Conference on Global Populisms, Stanford University, November 3-4, 2017, *https://diamond-democracy.stanford.edu/speaking/speeches/when-does-populism-become-threat-democracy*

De Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective. *The international journal of press/politics*, *23*(4), 423-438.

Downey, J., & Fenton, N. (2003). New media, counter publicity and the public sphere. New Media & Society, 5(2), 185–202.

Dukalskis, A. (2017). *The authoritarian public sphere: Legitimation and autocratic power in North Korea, Burma, and China*. Taylor & Francis.

EIU. (2021). *Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict*. The Economist Intelligence Unit. https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/

Finkel, S. (2007). *On the ideological front: The Russian intelligentsia and the making of the Soviet public sphere*. Yale University Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.

Freedom House (2024). Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict

Guasti, P., & Bustikova, L. (2023). Varieties of illiberal backlash in Central Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *70*(2), 130–142.

Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European journal of political research*, *46*(3), 319-345.

Knüpfer, C., Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2024). Political Communication Research is Unprepared for the Far Right. *Political Communication*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2414268

Korstenbroek, T. (2022). Rethinking the public sphere in an age of radical-right populism: A case for building an empathetic public sphere. *Communication Theory*, 32(1), 68–87.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.

Laruelle, M. (2022). Illiberalism: A conceptual introduction. *East European Politics*, *38*(2), 303–327.

Laruelle, M. (Ed.). (2024). *The Oxford handbook of illiberalism*. Oxford Academic. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.001.0001

Lei, Y.-W. (2017). *The contentious public sphere: Law, media, and authoritarian rule in China*. Princeton University Press.

Mitchelstein, E. (2023) Imagined Academic Communities: Three Observations about the De-westernization of Political Communication. *Political Communication Report*, Fall 2023

- Issue 28. “De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions”. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41234

Mudde, C. (2018). How populism became the concept that defines our age. *The Guardian*, 22 November 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/populism-concept-defines-our-age

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (Eds.). (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?* Cambridge University Press.

Negt, O., & Kluge, A. (1993). Public sphere and experience: Toward an analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian public sphere. University of Minnesota Press.

Neyazi, T. A. (2023) Moving Beyond Western Dominance: Rethinking Political Communication Scholarship. *Political Communication Report*, Fall 2023 - Issue 28. “De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions”. http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41235

Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Borella, C., Fernandes, T., Gastaldi, L., God, A.G., Natsika, N., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Democracy report 2024: Democracy winning and losing at the ballot. *University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute*. https://www.v-dem.net/documents/44/v-dem_dr2024_highres.pdf

Orbán, V. (2014, July 26). Full text of Viktor Orbán’ speech at Băile Tuşnad (Tusnáfürdő) of 26 July 2014, *The Budapest Beacon*. https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/

Ruth-Lovell, S. P., & Grahn, S. (2023). Threat or corrective to democracy? The relationship between populism and different models of democracy. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(3), 677-698.

Sajó, A., Uitz, R., & Holmes, S. (Eds.). (2021). *Routledge handbook of illiberalism*. Routledge.

Štětka, V., Mihelj, S. (2024). *The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies*. Palgrave.

Wright, K., Scott, M., Bunce, M., & Bunce, M. (2024). *Capturing News, Capturing Democracy: Trump and the Voice of America*. Oxford University Press.

Václav Štětka is Reader in Comparative Political Communication at Loughborough University, where he has been working since 2016. His research interests encompass political communication in the digital environment, the impact of mis/disinformation, or the relationship between media and democracy. He was Principal Investigator of the ESCR-funded project The Illiberal Turn: News Consumption, Polarization and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (2019–2022, with Sabina Mihelj as Co-I), and of the project PANCOPOP – Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism (2022-2024, with Sabina Mihelj as Lead Principal Investigator). His latest book is titled *The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies* (Palgrave, 2024, with Sabina Mihelj).

Sabina Mihelj is Professor of Media and Cultural Analysis at Loughborough University. Her research examines the interaction between media, politics and culture, especially in the context of semi-democratic, authoritarian and post-authoritarian countries. She was Lead Principal Investigator on the project PANCOPOP – Pandemic Communication in Times of Populism, funded through the Transatlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities (2022-2024), and has recently started a new project that investigates how disinformation travels across cultural and linguistic boundaries, funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council. Her latest book is titled *The Illiberal Public Sphere. Media in Polarized Societies* (Palgrave, 2024, with Václav Štětka).

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

Theory and/as Normative Assumptions in Political Communication Research[1]

Thomas J Billard, Northwestern University

The eminent communication theorist and media sociologist Sandra Ball-Rokeach always began her graduate theory seminars by asking students to write down their answers to three questions:

1. What is the nature of human nature?
2. What is the proper social order?
3. Is "equality" possible?

Students didn't submit their answers for grading and they didn't discuss them in class; that wasn't the point of the exercise. As she explained, the answers to these questions reveal, in a general sense, the unstated worldviews that shape how we understand the *social* as we endeavor to produce *social science*. They also reveal, in a more focused sense, the normative commitments our work makes. We should ask these questions not only of ourselves, but also of the theories we read and cite, because what we perceive as disagreements over *theories* are often actually disagreements over *normative foundations*.

Historically, Ball-Rokeach argued, communication research has been informed by very clear answers to these questions—answers that reflect a Christian view of humans as inherently prone to vice and vulnerable to influence, and in need of moral guidance from more enlightened minds. This is, in many ways, the normative basis of much media effects research, perhaps most visible in historic debates over media violence and pornography (e.g., Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Gross, 1996), but resurgent in domains such as misinformation studies (e.g., Anderson,

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Thomas J Billard). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

2021). Unfortunately, most scholars do not ask themselves these questions, nor do they ask these questions of others, making us blind to the assumptions that are shaping our theorizing.

When reading research published within the field of political communication, I often find myself thinking about these three questions. I first attempt to provide my own assessment of what the implicit answers to these questions are within the text. Similar to Ball-Rokeach's characterization of the media effects literature, I would characterize the political communication literature as tending toward a paternalistic view of "the public" that views them as irrational and apathetic and identitarian, and in need of education and enticement from those who are more rational and engaged. In the paternalistic view of many political communication scholars, the public are like children who want the ice cream of (often disinforming) entertainment media, but who must be spoon-fed the broccoli of (ostensibly informing) news media. I then attempt to discern how the author(s) would answer these questions if asked of them. If metatheoretical reflections on the purpose and value of scholarship published in the field are any indication (Lake, 2011; Phelan and Maeseele, 2023), it seems many authors would reply that the answers to those questions are irrelevant, because they approach their research as "neutral" observers who bracket their personal opinions.

The problem is, of course, that it is not possible to ignore the answers to these questions. Even when scholars present their work in the common language of an artificial scientific neutrality, the "neutrality" of their work is what leads us to the answers to Ball-Rokeach's three questions. That is, "neutrality" *assumes* certain norms and it places unflinching faith in those norms as objectively given reality (Harding, 1992; Horowitz, 1962). So, while many political communication scholars maintain that they are neutral observers of political processes, they actually, in fact, seek to uphold or maintain certain normative ideals about what politics is and how it ought to function (Blumler, 2015; Peters, 2001; Phelan and Maeseele, 2023). And as the system that seeks to direct human nature, to structure the social order, and to define "equality," politics is inherently a normative project.

Take for example the study of "polarization" in political communication. Particularly in studies of the United States, political communication research maintains a detached "neutrality" that frets over a supposed bidirectional flee from an ideological "middle ground" that is assumed (in an almost Aristotelian sense) to be inherently superior to "left" or "right" perspectives (e.g., Bail, 2021). Per this line of argument, American democracy is under threat from a refusal, if not an inability, for citizens of different ideological orientations to deliberate, reach consensus (somewhere in "the middle," which is presumed not to be a political position in its own right, but to be "neutral"), and go about daily life content that "democracy" has happened. Of course, this line of argument ignores the unfortunate reality that there is not, in fact, "polarization" occurring in contemporary democracies, but rather *radicalization* (e.g., Knüpfer et al., 2024; Kreiss & McGregor, 2024).

Specifically, there has been an unchecked ascendence of far-right ideologies that are not only profoundly anti-democratic, but anti-*social*. Assaults—both physical and via policy, both by the state and by radicalized citizens—on racial and ethnic minorities (Nacos et al., 2024), religious minorities (Riedl et al., 2024), and sexual and gender minorities (Billard, 2024) threaten the basic rights and human dignity of countless citizens. When these targeted citizens experience mistrust and dislike for compatriots who support the laws and policies that oppress them, this is taken as evidence of "affective polarization," and their social distance from far-right citizens is normatively equated with the prejudice and hatred toward them among those on the right. These kinds of analytic and evaluative asymmetries, driven by a fetish for scientific neutrality and a "normative" disavowal of norms, fail to rebuke truly anti-democratic politics. Instead they uphold a version of social reality in which racist and cisheteropatriarchal hierarchies are normalized and in which equality is a prize to be won through persuasion and not a right due to all people.

Beyond the fetish for neutrality that plagues political communication research, the field's un(der)examined normative assumptions about democracy play a major role in shaping its theories. Specifically, deliberative democracy serves as a normative assumption in political communication research, which accordingly assumes that democracy is practiced in very specific ways. Building on normative assumptions about the proper roles of citizens and the press in the operation of mass democracy, political communication scholars assume that citizens should engage in "critical-rational" debate based on information sourced from reputable professional news outlets (e.g., Habermas, 2006; Schudson, 2014). Participation in political discourse then leads to civic engagement in the form of voting and communication with elected representatives, who enact the will of their electors, and—*voila!*—democracy (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). This vision of the democratic process and the communicative practices that enable it are built on particular US-centric political values, such as "free speech," (which is far from a universal democratic value), a Tocquevillian model of civic participation, and a particular scholarly canon based on European Enlightenment ideals (e.g., Badr, 2023; George, 2022; Neyazi, 2023; Phelan & Maeseele, 2023; Waisbord, 2023).

These foundations, in turn, shape what the field cares about. They shape the field's recurrent panic over "low" levels of news media consumption, since the field's normative perspective upholds news media as the primary avenue to an informed public. They shape the field's concerns over declining levels of civic engagement, which is necessarily understood as participation in institutional politics via voting, public communication (e.g., protests and writing letters to the editors of newspapers), and personal appeals to elected representatives. They even shape our narrow focus on the role of (mis)informational media as the primary forms of communication that drive public opinion and political action, rather than considering the role of arts and entertainment media as primary drivers of citizens' political socialization (cf. Delli Carpini, 2013).

The unlikely combination of a Habermasian prioritization of deliberative democracy and a Lippmannian pessimism about the public and investment in the role of elites produces a particular vision of democracy as a system of governance that, in and of itself, is ideal if only the press and the public would play their proper parts. However, were the field of political communication built upon different normative foundations, we might envision democracy differently. We might, for example, reject Lippmann's (1922) diagnosis of the problem with publics and instead accept Dewey's (1927) understanding of democracy as not merely a system of government, but as a process of communal life. Similarly, we might abandon what James Carey (1989) called a "transmission" model of communication that focuses on information and persuasion for a "ritual" model that focuses on cultivating intersubjectivity and cultural (re)production. From that perspective, we might concern ourselves less with communication as a means of *informing* the public, and more with communication as a means of arriving at *shared understanding*. We might concern ourselves less with voting and appealing to elected officials to enact our will, and more with participating in collective life within our local communities. We might even concern ourselves less with the press and other informational media that ostensibly drive public opinion, and more with the artistic productions and creative expressions that shape our understandings of one another and of society. In short, were political communication research built on different normative foundations, we might care less about the participation of citizens in the exercise of power by states and care more about how people experience collective life and produce social cohesion.

My point here is not simply that we could imagine political communication otherwise if we so wanted. I intend to push further to say that our present normative assumptions reify oppressive systems and we therefore ought to seek out new normative foundations. Our field and the journals that shepherd it have been critiqued for their narrow range of scholarly interests, their upholding of Euro-American ideals, and their disavowal of issues of power and inequality (e.g., Chakravartty & Jackson, 2020; Coles & Lane, 2023; Freelon, 2023; George, 2022; Ma, 2024). These are fundamentally issues of norms. It is often assumed that research challenging hegemonic understandings of political communication are "biased" and therefore unscientific. For example, former President of the American Political Science Association David A. Lake (2011) has argued that the "isms" of feminism, anti-racism, and other intellectual challenges to hegemony are "evil" because they lead us into *dogma* instead of *theory*. While his screed is unusually direct in its loathing for challenges to the status quo, he is far from alone in his thinking. Typically, it shows up in subtler ways, such as in theorizing communication processes in ways that assume, if not actively normalize hegemonic standards.

For example, take the literature on "incivility" in political communication. While ostensibly a neutral concept aimed at fostering respectful and productive discourse based on Habermasian principles of critical-rational discourse (Bormann et al., 2021), incivility is often defined through racialized, classed, and gendered norms that privilege dominant cultural behaviors. These norms dismiss forms of political expression rooted in anger, outrage, or confrontation, which are seen as inappropriate, disruptive, or even anti-democratic. Dictionaries used to detect

incivility automatically equate negativity with incivility, even when those negative expressions are negative *about oppression*, and they equate swearing with cruelty, as though telling someone to "fuck off" is more damaging to civic life than using less vulgar terminology to advocate excluding trans people from public life (Rossini, 2019). In short, our field's conceptions of "incivility" prioritize *politeness* over *humanity*. By normatively upholding "civility" as a standard of political discourse, the field normalizes hegemonic standards while delegitimizing forms of political communication that challenge systemic oppression, ultimately upholding the very inequalities it often claims to study.

This then raises a fundamental question about the purpose of theory in political communication. From the positivist perspective dominant within the field, political communication seeks to uncover objective truths about the mechanisms and effects of political communication, viewing theory as a means to explain, predict, and potentially control political behavior through the study of media and communication processes. As Max Horkheimer (1937) famously critiqued, however, positivism fails to recognize that social facts are not objective representations of the world "out there," but are constructed by analysts whose visions of reality are socially and historically situated. By producing theories that represent how things presently appear to the analyst as how things categorically *are*, positivism inherently produces representations of social reality that are politically conservative, maintaining, rather than challenging, dominant norms and practices.

From an alternative, pragmatist perspective, we might view theory as more functional. In contrast to positivism's assumption of an objectively given reality, pragmatism maintains that reality exists merely in the form of "patterns and structures" and theory, rather than describing reality, seeks to summarize those patterns and structures to make them more legible (Swedberg, 2014). That is, pragmatism sees society as unordered and not governed by universal laws, and views scientific theories as practical tools for explaining and predicting phenomena, emphasizing their *usefulness* over their capital-T Truth. The dominance of positivist approaches to theory within the field of political communication entails an invisibilization of our normative assumptions under the rubric of "objectivity." Accordingly, our theories are so shot through with normative assumptions that it's hard to see where they cease to be models for explaining the dynamics of social phenomena and where they begin to be means of measuring reality against our normative ideals of how politics "should" be. And when our normative ideals are rooted (as they are) in the hegemonic assumptions of a white cisheteropatriarchal status quo, our theories become means of measuring the maintenance of oppressive systems.

In short, our field has very clear answers to the questions what is the nature of human nature; what is the proper social order; and is "equality" possible? Those answers are, respectively, humans are intellectually lazy and prone to passivity; that power should be exercised by the informed and the engaged; and that equality is attainable if the majority wants it to be. Personally, I don't agree with those answers, but dominant approaches to political

communication allow little space for theoretical perspectives that don't align with them. It is imperative, I feel, that this changes.

References

Anderson, C. W. (2021). Fake news is not a virus: On platforms and their effects. *Communication Theory*, *31*(1), 42–61. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa008

Badr, H. (2023). It is epistemic, folks! Why our knowledge from WEIRD contexts is limited and what we can learn from Arab contexts. *Political Communication Report* (28). http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41237.

Bail, C. (2021). *Breaking the social media prism: How to make our platforms less polarizing*. Princeton University Press.

Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2001). The politics of studying media violence: Reflections 30 years after the Violence Commission. *Mass Communication and Society, 4*(1), 3–18.

Billard, T. J. (2024). The politics of transgender health misinformation. *Political Communication*, *41*(2), 344–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2303148

Blumler, J. G. (2015). Core theories of political communication: Foundational and freshly minted. *Communication Theory, 25*(4), 426–438. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12077

Bormann, M., Tranow, U., Vowe, G., & Ziegele, M. (2021). Incivility as a violation of communication norms: A typology based on normative expectations toward political communication. *Communication Theory, 32*(3), 332–362. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtab018

Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture*. Unwin Hyman.

Chakravartty, P., & Jackson, S. J. (2020). The disavowal of race in communication theory. *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies, 17*(2), 210–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1771743

Coles, S. M., & Lane, D. (2023). Race and ethnicity as foundational forces in political communication: Special issue introduction. *Political Communication, 40*(4), 367–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2229780

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2013). Breaking boundaries: Can we bridge the quantitative versus qualitative divide through the study of entertainment and politics? *International Journal of Communication, 7*, 531–551.

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. Swallow Press.

Freelon, D., Pruden, M. L., & Malmer, D. (2023). #politicalcommunicationsowhite: Race and politics in nine communication journals, 1991–2021. *Political Communication, 40*(4), 377–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2192187

George, C. (2022, May 27). *If political communication is Western in all but name, why not just rename it? The case for provincializing the field.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Paris, France. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4127203

Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' Social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 17*(3), 319–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/j. 1083-6101.2012.01574.x

Gross, L. (1996). Marginal texts, marginal audiences. In J. Hay, L. Grossberg, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *The audience and its landscapes* (pp. 161–176). Routledge.

Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory, 16*(4), 411–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

Harding, S. (1992). After the neutrality ideal: Science, politics, and "strong objectivity." *Social Research, 59*(3), 567–587.

Horkheimer, M. (1937). Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung, 6*(1), 4–53.

Horowitz, I. L. (1962). Social science objectivity and value neutrality: Historical problems and projections. *Diogenes*, *10*(39), 17–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/039219216201003902

Knüpfer, C., Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2024). Political communication research is unprepared for the far right. *Political Communication, 41*(6) 1009–1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2414268

Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2024). A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms. *New Media & Society*, *26*(1), 556–579. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880

Lake, D. A. (2011). Why "isms" are evil: Theory, epistemology, and academic sects as impediments to understanding and progress. *International Studies Quarterly, 55*(2), 465–480. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00661.x

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Ma, C. (2024). Overcoming far-right respectability: The case for systemic approaches to studying white supremacy. *Political Communication, 41*(6), 1035–1040. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2424923

Nacos, B. L., Bloch-Elkon, Y., & Shapitor, R. Y. (2024). *Hate speech and political violence: Far-right rhetoric from the tea party to the insurrection*. Columbia University Press.

Neyazi, T. A. (2023). Moving beyond western dominance: Rethinking political communication scholarship. *Political Communication Report* (28). http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41235.

Peters, J. D. (2001). "The only proper scale of representation": The politics of statistics and stories. *Political Communication, 18*(4), 433–449. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600152647137

Phelan, S., & Maeseele, P. (2023). Where is 'the political' in the journal *Political Communication*? On the hegemonic articulation of a disciplinary identity. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 47*(2), 202–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2169951

Riedl, M. J., Joseff, K., Soorholtz, S., & Woolley, S. (2022). Platformed antisemitism on Twitter: Anti-Jewish rhetoric in political discourse surrounding the 2018 US midterm election. *New Media & Society, 26*(4), 2213–2233. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221082122

Rossini, P. (2019). Disentangling uncivil and intolerant discourse in online political talk. In R. G. Boatright, T. J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, & D. G. Young (Eds.), *A crisis of civility: Political discourse and its discontents* (pp. 142–158). Routledge.

Schudson, M. (2014). How to think normatively about news and democracy. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political communication* (pp. 95–108). Oxford University Press.

Swedberg, R. (2014). *The art of social theory*. Princeton University Press.

Waisbord, S. (2023). De-westernizing political communication: Why? How? *Political Communication Report* (28). http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41232.

TJ Billard is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication and, by courtesy, the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. They are also the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies—the leading academic organization dedicated to scholarship on the social, cultural, and political conditions of transgender life—and Editor-in-Chief of the Center's flagship journal, the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*. Dr Billard is the author of *Voices for Transgender Equality: Making Change in the Networked Public Sphere* (Oxford University Press, 2024) and editor (with Silvio Waisbord) of *Public Scholarship in Communication Studies* (University of Illinois Press, 2024). They currently serve as the Vice Chair of Political Communication Section of the American Political Science Association.

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

Making News That's Better for Democracy[1]

Nathan P. Kalmoe, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Our field prescribes communicative ideals for democracy, but following our advice often harms more than it helps. Touting U.S. mainstream news is one case.[2] We downplay harms, overstate benefits, and, along the way, misrepresent what democracy is and what it needs. We should 1) stop uncritically prescribing mainstream news, 2) recognize that that news model is fundamentally broken, and 3) develop better news and scholarly paradigms for democracy.

Democracy distributes *equal power* to all, and democratic governments guarantee *equitable treatment* for all. But the U.S. federal government gives some voters 70x more influence, producing routine minority rule; some state legislatures award (super)majority power to minority parties; millions of U.S. adults are disenfranchised; administrative barriers block millions more would-be voters; and U.S. governments at all levels systematically discriminate against marginalized groups by race, class, sex, and religion. America is more democratic than some countries and better than before. But *full* democracy? No.

Many scholars who regard America as a democratic model also claim democracy requires mainstream news. Free, reliable information *is* vital for political action, and journalists endorse democratically-aligned ethics: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (SPJ 2014).

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Nathan P. Kalmoe). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.
[2] By "mainstream," I mean profit-oriented mass-audience news with centrist norms, including local TV & newspapers, national broadcast news, CNN, national newspapers (e.g. NYT, WaPo, USA Today), and many web news outlets, aggregators, and magazines.

But mainstream news routinely produces harmful, misleading content, compromised by source-dependency and hidden pressures. Too often, news violates professed ethics and erodes democracy, because it replicates and reinforces democratic failures in other institutions.

In fact, public trust in mainstream news is a clear barrier to U.S. democratization today, along with our trust in other system-justifying institutions. Democracy might even be better off with no mainstream news at all.

Failing news business models provide space to reimagine sustainable pro-democracy news, which will change our research and journalism curricula too. The task is to identify what practices center core professional values (e.g. truth, democracy) and expel corrosive myths and inequalities from news practices and our field.

I don't have all the answers, but I hope this provocation (joining others) spurs us to do better.[3] I'll start by synthesizing familiar critiques, then map some paths forward.

What's Undemocratic About Mainstream News?[4]

"Neutrality" Harms & Misleads

Mainstream news is founded on the objectivity myth (Wallace 2019), which is implemented in professed neutrality and "both sides" practices like balancing quotes and "polarization" framing (Kreiss & McGregor 2024). But sides rarely deserve equal treatment because some are more factual and democratic than others. "Both sides" harms by not distinguishing victims and perpetrators, and it misleads by equating truth with lies.

Peter Baker, Chief White House Correspondent at the *New York Times*, epitomizes bad news neutrality: "I try hard not to take strong positions on public issues even in private, much to the frustration of friends and family. For me, it's easier to stay out of the fray if I never make up my mind, even in the privacy of the kitchen or the voting booth…that one side is right and the other wrong" (Wilson & Takenaga 2020).

Baker's *NYT* politics colleague, Maggie Astor, provides a healthier view, centering ethics over false equivalence: "the goal is fairness and truthfulness. My opinions on, say, economic policy should not influence my reporting in any way. But while 'climate change is real' is technically a 'side,' it's also the truth. 'Racism and misogyny are wrong' is a 'side,' but also a basic element of human decency. So it's important to me to remember the difference" (Wilson &

[3] News outlets obviously vary widely by form and outlet. Many are already doing less bad and more good.
[4] Note: the news norms and practices discussion above benefits from Perloff's (2022) treatment of those subjects. I leave out a few big ones, like Rosen's stakes vs. odds coverage and Fiorina's work on news about activists.

Takenaga 2020). I'd add: economic policy causes racial and misogynistic harms (among others), and liars defend those harms, so economic news needs more decency and truth too.

(Perhaps relevant, Astor – a woman – needed substantial financial aid for college.[5] Baker's parents were wealthy, and his wife's too.[6])

False "balance" supports unequal *status quos*, but it also facilitates democratic backsliding too. That includes double standards that treat minor Democratic infractions as equivalently newsworthy as Republican obliteration of hard-won representation and rights.

But mainstream news *isn't* neutral – it vainly fights bad-faith "liberal" accusations by over-representing harmful, misleading right-wing voices (e.g. anti-immigrant hysteria). Some also adopts overt bigotry, like *New York Times'* anti-transgender coverage.

Worse, when "both sides" means both parties, and when *both* fail to support democracy in practice – on racial justice, economic democracy, gender equality, religious pluralism, and more – news "indexing" (Bennett 1990) provides little space for justice. Wealthy white owners, shareholders, and unrepresentative journalists and editors also reinforce their own identity-based privileges.

We *do* see some examples of news valuing truth and pluralistic democracy over traditional neutrality. Those exceptions repudiate old norms, pointing to what news *should* become.

Official Sources Harm & Mislead

Government sources dominate news, and journalists usually cite them uncritically because they lack resources for constant verification. But governments systematically reproduce social, economic, and political inequality. Thus, news dependence on officials favors inequality and betrays independence ideals.

Colbert's 2006 roast of White House correspondents during the Bush II Administration put it well, amidst a racist, Islamophobic, lawless "global war on terror": "The President makes decisions…The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down…Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again…Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!" (Colbert 2006).

[5] https://www.montclairscholarshipfund.org/maggie-astor
[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/10/style/weddings-susan-glasser-peter-baker.html

American government officials are also disproportionately white, male, and Christian due to systemic biases. News-official co-dependence thus reinforces unequal leader archetypes (Bos et al. 2024).

Negativity Harms & Misleads

News is relentlessly negative, using fear to draw attention. News exaggerations and omissions mislead audiences (Gramlich & Eddy 2024). Frightening news boosts fear-mongers who attack marginalized groups with false scapegoating. Fear arises from powerlessness and inefficacy perceptions. News that frightens without offering solutions therefore also disempowers.

Even "watchdog" journalism sometimes involves knee-jerk antagonism toward government, which misleads and promotes undue cynicism (in those cases).

Conflict news provides more discouraging negativity. Politics inherently involves conflict, but conflict news implies overwhelming hostility and rare cooperation that repels conflict-averse people (Sydnor 2019). Amidst gridlock, conflict news dispirits people by suggesting nothing can be done. And to paraphrase J.S. Mill, 'The only thing evil needs to win is for good people to do nothing.'

Beyond that, political news is driving us into an early grave. None of us need *daily* politics. The constant solution-less anxiety from our news habits hurts our health and well-being.

Obviously, news *must* include negativity – we have many problems to fix. But fixing requires moving beyond problems to solutions and actions.

Paywalls Are Poll Taxes

If news is essential to democracy, then access should be free. But news is often paywalled, which means affluent (disproportionately white) people get better informed. Professional news obviously requires revenue, but it should come from elsewhere (more below).

What's Undemocratic About* Local *News?

Scholars revere local newspapers, treating their business failure as a democratic crisis. It's true that people need local political information, but scholars overestimate how much and underestimate inegalitarian harms. Thankfully, the field is slowly moving toward better recognition (e.g. Usher et al. 2024).

Local news problems mirror those above in print and especially TV news. But, by far, its biggest harm is distinct: individual crime news, focused on petty crime and violence.

Crime News is Misleading

Crime news doesn't correspond with crime rates – it's omnipresent and misleads people into assuming more crime than there is, while convincing them humanity is worse than it is (Gramlich & Eddy 2024).

Cops routinely lie in their reports (Gershowitz & Lewis 2023), yet news usually cites them uncritically because news depends on police for popular content (Shenkman & Slade 2021).

Crime news simply isn't functional – there's rarely anything people can *do* with it to be safer (Gramlich & Eddy 2024).

Crime News is Classist

News focuses on petty crime and violence by economically disadvantaged people. Yet news ignores corporate crimes, white collar crimes, and *legal* harms by economic elites that hurt hundreds, thousands, and millions more.

Crime News is Racist

Crime news misrepresents police and courts as trustworthy, noble institutions, rather than violent racial control forces (e.g. Farris & Holman 2024; Kaba 2021; Phelps 2024; Seligman & Nam-Sonenstein 2024; Shenkman & Slade 2021; Weaver & Prowse 2020).

White news outlets have mobilized, rationalized, and hidden white supremacist violence for centuries, enacted by governments (especially police), mobs, and individuals (Francis 2020; Pierre-Louis 2020). A major frame inciting anti-Black violence is a false narrative of pervasive physical threat to white people, especially women (Wright & Watts 2022).

Misperceptions fueled by news lead many people to support giving cops more money and power, especially because news equates police with public safety, even though "police departments don't solve serious or violent crimes with any regularity, and in fact, spend very little time on crime control" (Kanu 2022).

Imagining Pro-Democracy News

Democratization begins with imagination (Kaba 2021). That organizing groundwork is essential for systemic change, even when pathways are initially undefined. We need the same imagination for democratizing news.

What does "better" look like? Ending local crime news entirely would be a huge step forward. More broadly, some promising ideas are old models that never entirely disappeared, like the Black and progressive presses and newer social justice journalism (Fayne & Richardson 2023). News should:

1. Stop harming people/democracy (described above) – no small feat
2. Promote democratic values
3. Promote collective action
4. Provide essential political information (less than you think)

Promote Democratic Values

In place of "neutrality" and officials, news must center egalitarian democracy in story selection, sourcing, and framing, as Jang and McGregor (2024) argue. Beyond institutional egalitarianism, democratic news recognizes the common humanity of all people and is especially attentive to the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable among us. Journalists have long endorsed progressive aims of helping "the people against the powerful," but that self-conception is rarely actualized.

News can play an important *supplemental* socializing role for advancing egalitarian democracy, behind families, schools, religious institutions, and local political cultures. This must go beyond slogans. In 2016, *The Washington Post* unveiled its "Democracy Dies in Darkness" slogan, and that heralded some changes in their editorial approaches. However, plenty of their content on news and opinion pages still shivs democracy in broad daylight. Billionaire-owner Jeff Bezos' decision to kill the *Post's* 2024 presidential endorsement – and non-endorsements from the *LA Times* and *USA Today* – bodes ill for news' future.

Promote Collective Action

News should highlight society's biggest problems (inequality), identify culprits (dominant groups & institutions), identify solutions, and provide guides for enacting them, in collaboration with activists. News should focus on what ordinary people can do to make meaningful change. News should also report collective successes to show civic efficacy. Even small increases in collective action by lots more people could drive powerful change.

Meeting Critical Information Needs

My colleague Lew Friedland (2023) conveys a common view of civic information needs: "citizens need to know who is running for what and what policies they stand for – info that requires a robust local info system down to the ward/district level."

But most voters do fine leveraging longstanding partisan loyalties and trusted group endorsements. They aren't policy voters and don't care who's running (Kalmoe 2020). Instead, they vote based on which groups each party helps/harms, so voters just need to know party-group realignments every few *decades*. Opinion leaders and trusted groups are more useful than news, especially for "non-partisan" local elections. That works for direct democracy too (Lupia 1994). Most voters may not need news at all, and few act politically beyond voting.

Activists and leaders need more information, but they're a small share of news audiences. And *governments* should be the primary conduit for citizens to learn what programs they can access and how. Political hobbyists may use news daily for entertaining conversations (Hersh 2020), but news rarely informs their political *action*. News is *niche*, at least for politics.

Sustainable News

Pro-democracy news still needs to draw audiences and revenue. Good news doesn't work if audiences don't see it. Meanwhile, collapsing subscriber and ad-based revenue, especially for local newspapers, requires new funding models – probably forgoing profit.

News needs backers who are willing to lose money. So who will pay? Some answers: government subsidies (e.g. BBC, state-level), partisans & ideologues (e.g. 19th century U.S.), and private subsidies (e.g. Knight Foundation, wealthy donors).

For a century, partisans and movements funded news to advance political goals, with profits as an afterthought. Most disappeared with modern mainstream news. A resurgence of pro-democracy/progressive news may be most promising. Civic foundations may also fund non-partisan outlets, but those should still center democracy.

Partisan news sometimes dissembled to improve their election chances. But those outlets were run locally, not by the national party, and factional newspapers weren't shy about criticizing party leaders and each other.

Historically, neither party consistently championed equal rights and representation. Today, Democrats are more democratic than Republicans, but Democrats fail in many ways, too, adopting Republican-lite positions on policing, immigration, foreign policy, racial and economic justice, and more. A Democratic press would criticize many of those moral failures – and would help prevent those failures in the first place.

Most plausibly, we need 1) mainstream news to become much more pro-democracy, or 2) citizens to recognize mainstream news isn't good enough and switch to better news, or just drop news for healthier information sources.

Some good examples: *Bolts* is a national outlet focused on local and state democracy. *Capital B News* continues the Black press tradition as the vanguard of democracy. And *Wisconsin Examiner* is a state-focused progressive non-profit outlet.

Moving Forward

Mainstream news routinely fails egalitarian democracy. Exceptions break the old model and point to what news should become.

The same forces degrading news cause our field's normative failures too: political and financial pressures pushing false "neutrality," inegalitarian pipelines select unrepresentative scholars, and more. In turn, we mislead journalism students and the public on news and democracy.

Changing news means remaking journalism programs, research programs, *and* making our schools representative of the public. Our journalism students should understand and center inequality and its democratic solutions, not just gain impeccable technical skills. And stop telling students who want a real American democracy to hide it with "neutrality."

Academia and journalism are under great threat at a moment of immense uncertainty and change. But dangerous times open incomparable opportunities for democratization, too.

References

Bennett, L.W. (1990). Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations. *Journal of Communication 40*(2),103–125.

Bos, A.L., Greenlee, J.S., Holman, M.R., Oxley, Z.M., & Lay, J.C. (2022). This One's for the Boys: How Gendered Political Socialization Limits Girls' Political Ambition and Interest. *American Political Science Review*, *116*(2), 484–501. doi:10.1017/S0003055421001027

Colbert, S. (2006). White House Correspondents' Dinner Speech. White House Correspondents Association.

Dunaway, J. (2008). Markets, Ownership, and the Quality of Campaign News Coverage. *Journal of Politics, 70*(4), 1193-1202.

Fayne, M.W., & Richardson, A.V. (2023). Reporting on Black Lives Matter in 2020: How Digital Black Press Outlets Covered the Racial Uprisings. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1-24.

Francis, M.M. (June 15, 2020). The White Press Has a History of Endangering Black Lives Going Back a Century. *Washington Post*. Monkey Cage Blog.

Fiorina, M., Abrams, S.J., & Pope, J. (2010). *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. (3rd ed.). Longman.

Friedland, L.A. (2023). Taking It to the States: The Origins of Critical Information Needs. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 707*(1), 21-28.

Gershowitz, A.M., & Lewis, C.E. (2023). Laundering Police Lies. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 1187-1246.

Gramlich, J., & Eddy, K. (Aug. 29, 2024). The Link Between Local News Coverage and Americans' Perceptions of Crime. Pew Research Center.

Hersh, E. (2020). *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*. Simon & Schuster.

Farris, E. & Holman, M. (2024). *The Power of the Badge: Sheriffs and Inequality in the United States*. University of Chicago Press.

Jang, H., & McGregor, S.C. (2024). Normative Needs in the Study of Elections and Campaigns. *Political Communication Report*, *Spring 2024*(29), 1-7.

Kaba, M. (2021). *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Haymarket Books.

Kalmoe, N.P. (2020), Uses and Abuses of Ideology in Political Psychology. *Political Psychology, 41*, 771-793.

Kanu, H. (Nov. 2, 2022). Police are not primarily crime fighters, according to the data. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/police-are-not-primarily-crime-fighters-according-data-2022-11-02/

Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S.C. (2024). A Review and Provocation: On Polarization and Platforms. *new media & society, 26*(1) 556 –579.

Lupia, A. (1994). Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections. *American Political Science Review, 88*(1), 63-76.

Perloff, R.M. (2022). *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media & Politics in a Digital Age*. 3rd Edition. Routledge Press.

Phelps, M.S. (2024). *The Minneapolis Reckoning: Race, Violence, and the Politics of Policing in America*. Princeton University Press.

Pierre-Louis, K. (June 24, 2020). It's time to change the way the media reports on protests. Here are some ideas. Nieman Lab.

Schenkman, D., & Slade, K. (Jan. 22, 2021). Police Reports Shouldn't Set the News Agenda: A Guide to Avoiding Systemic Racism in Reporting. American Bar Association. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/communications_law/publications/communications_lawyer/fall2020/police-reports-shouldnt-set-news-agenda-guide-avoiding-systemic-racism-reporting/

Seligman, E., & Nam-Sonenstein, B. (Aug. 27, 2024). 10 ways that mass incarceration is an engine of economic injustice. Prison Policy Initiative.

Society for Professional Journalists. (2014). SPJ Code of Ethics. https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp

Sydnor, E. (2019). *Disrespectful Democracy: The Psychology of Political Incivility*. Columbia University Press.

Torres, J., & Watson, C. (2023). Repairing Journalism's History of Anti-Black Harm. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 707*(1), 208-227.

Usher, N., Darr, J.P., Napoli, P.M., & Miller, M.L. (2023). Media Policy for an Informed Citizenry: Revisiting Critical Information Needs of Communities for Democracy in Crisis. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 707*(1), 8-20.

Wallace, L.R. (2019). *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*. University of Chicago Press.

Weaver, V., & Prowse, G. (2020). Racial Authoritarianism in U.S. Democracy. *Science, 369*(6508), 1176-1178.

Wilson, C.A., & Takenaga, L. (March 2, 2020). No Politics Till the 7th Date? How Journalists Try to Stay Impartial. *New York Times*.

Wright, L. E., & Watts, S. J. (2022). Black, White, and Read all Over: Exploring Racial Bias in Print media Coverage of Serial Rape Cases. *Criminal Justice Review*, *47*(4), 434-444.

Nathan Kalmoe is executive administrative director of the Center for Communication and Civic Renewal at UW-Madison. His research focuses on the role of communication in shaping mass political behavior and American democracy. He is co-author of *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, & What It Means for Democracy* with Lilliana Mason and author of *With Ballots & Bullets: Partisanship & Violence in the American Civil War*. His current book project (with University of Chicago Press) is *How We Make American Democracy: A Practical Guide to Building a Free & Fair Future Together* (expected 2026). He should be writing that instead of this.

PolComm

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION REPORT

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

P Stands for Politics, But What Does Politics Stand For? Locating "The Political" in Political Communication[1]

Daniel S. Lane, UC Santa Barbara
Stewart M. Coles, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

What political communication stands for depends on how we define what counts as "political." More specifically, our theories, topics of study, and disciplinary debates make implicit assumptions about the nature and origins of "the political" that form the normative backdrop of our field (Phelan & Maeseele, 2023). In doing so, we expand or limit the relevance of our work to different groups who exist in different sociopolitical realities (Kreiss et al., 2024). As we reflect upon what "PolComm stands for" in this issue, we argue for studying the political as it is enacted by groups as they exist in the real world. Specifically, we advocate for understanding political communication as it unfolds in societies that are increasingly diverse in terms of groups and identities (Coles & Lane, 2023b).

In this essay, we interrogate how our field approaches the political, particularly in the current context of multiracial democracies in periods of acute crisis. We summarize a way of thinking about what "counts" as political that places groups at the center. This helps to reinforce existing research foci (e.g., electoral politics), while also making space for topics and ideas that have received relatively less attention from the subfield (e.g., entertainment; Coles, 2024; Delli Carpini, 2014; Harbin, 2023). Our framework offers normative grounding for which forms of communication are "politically meaningful" and thus what we stand for as a scholarly community.

From its early days, the field of political communication has been principally focused on the relationship between citizens and political institutions as understood through the mechanisms

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Daniel S. Lane & Stewart M. Coles). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

of voting/elections, public opinion, and political participation (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Another tradition positions *deliberation* as a key mechanism through which citizens reach informed opinions and seek consensus or middle ground with others. The normative story here is that political communication and media systems are functioning well when they provide high quality information and productive deliberation for citizens so they can develop informed opinions, then vote and participate in ways that align with their interests (Chambers, 2003; Ferree et al., 2002). This is well captured in the image of the "dutiful citizen," whose worth is measured in active participation in the electoral process (Dalton, 2008). To be very clear, our field remains *obligated* to study these traditional modes of politics. Public opinion matters. Deliberation matters. Voting matters. However, it is increasingly obvious that there are other ways of understanding politics that demand our attention.

Here, it is important to recognize that this argument has been made many times before. The subfield of political communication has often reached beyond electoral politics as the locus of the political, to identify rich ways that politics is communicatively constituted. For example, literatures on participatory politics and "third spaces" illustrate that politics and political sensemaking unfolds in non-political spaces such as fan discussion groups and video game chats (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015; Wright, 2012). Perhaps more prominently, work on networked counter-publics has argued that marginalized communities engage in vital political work within ingroup networks (Jackson et al., 2020). In all of these cases, the notion of "the political" is expanded beyond formation of opinions or engagement in elections. Normatively, this has been theorized as a shift from dutiful citizenship to other, more personalized modes of citizenship (e.g., engaged, self-actualizing, or expressive citizenship; Lane, 2020). These forms of citizenship can be also characterized as *constructionist* in nature, conceptualizing the political as a means of seeking recognition and inclusion (Ferree et al., 2002). Political communication research has increasingly adopted these wider understandings of politics.

Yet, in some ways there has also been a scholarly backlash to a broader definition of politics. For example, politically expressive behavior on social media has been conceptualized as unproductive political hobbyism, moral grandstanding, or senseless outrage (Crockett, 2017; Hersh, 2020; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022). Incivility and polarization research similarly places value-neutral normative requirements on political communication (Freelon, 2015; Kreiss & McGregor, 2024). This work ignores the reality that politics is interwoven with pleasure and entertainment (Holbert et al., 2014), is fundamentally *about* signaling moral positions (Skitka et al., 2021), may result in polarization as marginalized groups battle reactionary forces in order to secure fundamental rights (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024), and may sometimes even benefit from hostility or incivility (Coles & Lane, 2023a).

The danger of these narrower views of the political (i.e., as limited to dutiful modes of citizenship) is that they leave us unable to understand powerful forces shaping contemporary politics. Take for example the rise of the alt-right and populist movements, which have disrupted democratic politics globally. As we watch these movements manifest in electoral

politics, it is easy to forget that many have their roots in online message boards and other digital spaces, where the politics is happening amidst everyday talk and culture (Ma, 2021; Phillips, 2016). The far-right's rise in democracies around the world can be helpfully understood as resulting from a set of identities and ideologies nurtured by communication that is seemingly distant from electoral politics (Knüpfer et al., 2024).

Similarly, the 2024 U.S. presidential election highlighted the political implications of podcasts as an understudied medium for specific groups to speak to each other (Klinger, 2024). Take for example the decision of Vice President Kamala Harris to sit down for an interview with *Call Her Daddy*, a podcast popular among young women (e.g., Quah, 2024). Political candidates have long hit the talk and late-night comedy show circuit to reach potential voters, particularly those who may not pay attention to news and politics (Baum, 2005). Yet rather than these media being irrelevant to politics—unless and until a candidate makes an appearance—they are frequently spaces in which people discuss the political as it manifests in their daily lives (Coles, 2024). In each of these cases, we are witnessing the transformation of political forces that have roots in communicative phenomena that our subfield *may not even consider as politics*.

As we have outlined in past (Coles & Lane, 2023b) and ongoing (Coles et al., 2024) work, one fruitful approach for addressing this issue lies in a group-centric perspective on the political. It is not simply that, as the old saying goes, all politics is identity politics. Instead, this perspective argues that group identification and categorization are actually endogenous to the political. Groups are formed as a result of asking political questions: those related to collective concerns, for which collective decisions could be made, that may bear collective consequences (Coles, 2024; Coles et al., 2024). This core argument provides two benefits for how we study political communication. First, it allows for a recognition for how communication and politics themselves shape group identity and categorization, rather than these being exogenous variables that can be "controlled" for or, at best, used as moderating variables. Second, we can attend to the various political questions that a) lead to group formation or, b) that existing groups ask as they make claims to power. Doing so allows us to identify the political in places that might otherwise be dismissed as "not really about politics."

We are encouraged by a blossoming of work in political communication that has expanded "the political" from a group-centric perspective (Clark, 2024; Grover & Kuo, 2023; Harbin, 2021; Kreiss et al., 2024). Importantly, this research has moved beyond thinking about identity as something that only affects the political communication of marginalized groups (e.g., via "counter-publics"), to consider how dominant groups also engage in political communication to preserve their status and power (e.g., "defensive-publics"; Jackson & Kreiss, 2023). Yet, the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 and the rise of authoritarian and right-wing populists around the world should prompt further reflection of what counts as political in our scholarship. We may be missing the kind of politics that matter because we are inevitably viewing the world through the political questions that accompany *our own* groups and social identities (e.g., as

Americans, as academics, as members of privileged social groups), without acknowledging their implicit influence. Or perhaps it is that our training as social scientists prevents us from saying what we know to be true: that the political work of groups is not value-neutral or equivalent.

The political communication of some groups has the goal of dominance and exclusion and is contributing to the erosion of Democracy. Here, our traditional objects of analysis (e.g., news consumption, political participation) are failing in helping us understand the political order in which we live. Our simple argument is that if we trace politics upstream, from the questions that are asked during group life, we may more clearly see the role of communication as a tool of dominance or resistance, exclusion or emancipation. In the end, how we individually and collectively imagine what counts as "political" will answer the question of what we stand for.

References

Baum, M. A. (2005). Talking the vote: Why presidential candidates hit the talk show circuit. *American Journal of Political Science*, *49*(2), 213–234. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2005.t01-1-00119.x

Chambers, S. (2003). Deliberative Democratic Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *6*(1), 307–326. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.6.121901.085538

Clark, M. D. (2024). Refuse to say just what you mean: Anti-"woke" rhetoric as an exercise in destructive abstraction. *Political Communication*, *41*(5), 839–844. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2341645

Coles, S. M. (2024). Conceptualizing evaluations of the political relevance of media texts: The Politically Relevant Media Model. *Communication Theory*, *34*(2), 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtae004

Coles, S. M., Kreiss, D., Lane, D. S., & McGregor, S. C. (2024, September). Toward a group theory of political communication. Paper presented at the 120th American Political Science Association annual meeting, Philadelphia, PA.

Coles, S. M., & Lane, D. S. (2023a). Making the impossible possible? Framing confrontations of racism on social media as norm-setting. *New Media & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231208707

Coles, S. M., & Lane, D. (2023b). Race and ethnicity as foundational forces in political communication: Special issue introduction. *Political Communication*, *40*(4), 367–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2229780

Crockett, M. J. (2017). Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *1*(11), 769–771. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3

Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies*, *56*(1), 76–98. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2014). The political effects of entertainment media. In K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.30

Ferree, M. M., Gamson, W. A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and Society*, *31*(3), 289–324. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016284431021

Freelon, D. (2015). Discourse architecture, ideology, and democratic norms in online political discussion. *New Media & Society*, *17*(5), 772–791. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813513259

Grover, R., & Kuo, R. (2023). Destabilizing race in political communication: Social movements as sites of political imagination. *Political Communication*, *40*(4), 484–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2198986

Harbin, M. B. (2021). Who's able to do political science work? My experience with exit polling and what it reveals about issues of race and equity. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *54*(1), 144–146. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520001080

Harbin, M. B. (2023). Don't make my entertainment political! Social media responses to narratives of racial duty on competitive reality television series. *Political Communication*, *40*(4), 464–483. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2195365

Hersh, E. (2020). *Politics Is for Power: How to Move Beyond Political Hobbyism, Take Action, and Make Real Change*. Simon and Schuster.

Holbert, R. L., Hill, M., & Lee, J. (2014). The political relevance of entertainment media. In C. Reinemann (Ed.), *Handbook of Communication Science: Political Communication* (pp. 427–446). de Gruyter.

Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Welles, B. F. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*. MIT Press.

Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2023). Recentering power: Conceptualizing counterpublics and defensive publics. *Communication Theory*, *33*(2-3), 102-111. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad004

Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2015). Qualitative political communication| From wizards and house-elves to real-world issues: Political talk in fan spaces. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 2027-2046.

Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2024). Trump goes to Tulsa on Juneteenth: Placing the study of identity, social groups, and power at the center of political communication research. *Political Communication*, *41*(5), 845–856. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2343757

Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2024). A review and provocation: On polarization and platforms. *New Media & Society*, *26*(1), 556–579. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231161880

Klinger, U. (2024). Political communication in challenging times. *Political Communication*, *41*(5), 866–869. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2395084

Knüpfer, C., Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2024). Political communication research is unprepared for the far right. *Political Communication*, *41*(6), 1009–1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2414268

Krupnikov, Y., & Ryan, J. B. (2022). *The Other Divide*. Cambridge University Press.

Lane, D. S. (2020). In search of the expressive citizen: Citizenship norms and youth political expression on social media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *84*(S1), 257–283. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaa018

Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. Columbia University Press.

Ma, C. (2021). What is the "lite" in "alt-lite?" The discourse of white vulnerability and dominance among YouTube's reactionaries. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211036385

Phelan, S., & Maeseele, P. (2023). Where is 'the political' in the journal Political Communication? On the hegemonic articulation of a disciplinary identity. *Annals of the*

International Communication Association, *47*(2), 202–221. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2169951

Phillips, W. (2016). *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Illustrated edition). The MIT Press.

Quah, N. (2024, October 9). 'Good' interviews don't matter like they used to. Vulture. https://www.vulture.com/article/kamala-harris-call-her-daddy-trump-theo-von-analysis.html

Skitka, L. J., Hanson, B. E., Morgan, G. S., & Wisneski, D. C. (2021). The psychology of moral conviction. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *72*(1), 347–366. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-063020-030612

Wright, S. (2012). From "third place" to "third space": Everyday political talk in non-political online spaces. *Javnost - The Public*, *19*(3), 5–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2012.11009088

Daniel S. Lane (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, UC Santa Barbara, where he studies how individuals and groups use communication technology to create social and political change.

Stewart M. Coles (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research examines how individuals' identities and media use, and the identities of mediated subjects, influence people's political attitudes and behaviors.

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

Disinformation and Identity(-based Features) in Political Communication Research[1]

Marília Gehrke, University of Groningen
Olga Pasitselska, University of Groningen

Introduction: Why identity-based disinformation matters and what the political communication field is doing about it

Over the past ten years, the politics of *identity* has become prominent in polarized and contested media environments (Fukuyama, 2018). Political actors strategically exploit identity narratives to construct a shared understanding of political reality grounded in animosity towards "the other" (Reddi et al., 2023). False and misleading content, produced to delegitimize women and people of color (or the intersection of both), contributes to the exclusion of social groups historically left behind in the political decision-making process (Gehrke, 2023; Sobieraj, 2020). On the side of media use, the persistence of ideologically loaded identity categories in (social) media discourses deepens societal divides and leads to affective polarization (Pasitselska, 2022).

While the concept of identity seems to lie at the core of the current information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda (Klinger et al., 2024), political communication research does not pay sufficient attention to the role of social identities and groups in political communication and politics generally (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2023a; 2023b; Knüpfer et al., 2024; Grover & Kuo, 2023). In addition, scholars from the Global South would rarely receive international visibility in the field had they stayed in their home countries; their voices are often heard because they are affiliated with Global North universities (Rossini, 2023). In this short essay, we aim to draw the attention of the political

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Marília Gehrke and Olga Pasitselska). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

communication community to the emerging strings of research that require further cultivation, given their potential to address *the* most pressing problem of political communication in the years to come.

Despite the recent plea to diversify the field of mis- and disinformation studies and political communication (Knüpfer, Jackson & Kreiss, 2024) by accounting for historical inequalities (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Thakur & Hankerson, 2021) and expanding the scholarly work toward gender (Camargo & Simon, 2022; Veritasia et al., 2024) and race (Coles & Lane, 2023), scholars have yet to keep up with these fundamental debates. Whereas a few researchers have engaged in how to conceptualize *gendered disinformation* (see Bardall, 2023), the phenomenon remains understudied, mainly in traditional spaces such as academic peer-reviewed journals. In contrast, reports produced by researchers either connected with university-level centers or non-profit organizations have gained traction (see Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Scott, n.d.). When it comes to communicating findings broadly, non-academic organizations are also at the lead of relevant discussions in webinars (e.g., EU DisinfoLab), commentaries (see Di Meco & Wilfore, 2021), and news (Eisele, 2024). Finally, the political communication community still struggles to address the overwhelming presence of white men in academic citations (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Freelon et al., 2023a; 2023b).

To substantiate our claim that political communication research does not pay sufficient attention to identity-based disruptive communication, we have counted identity-related keywords of the Political Communication divisions' panels of the two major conferences – the International Communication Association (ICA) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). We have manually searched the programs of 2024 ICA and ECREA for keywords that could indicate identity-based topics, such as "gender", "race", "identity", and "diversity" in the titles. Words that could work as a proxy for one of those topics were also taken into account (e.g., "white" as a proxy for "race" and "misogyny" as a proxy for articles related to "gender"). We recognize the limitations of this simplistic approach, but we nevertheless believe that there is merit in a keyword overview of the flagship scholarship of our field.

The ECREA Political Communication division had 28 sessions with three to five papers each, totaling 135 contributions. Among these, only 10 (7.4%) covered gender, race, identity, and minority issues explicitly in their titles. Whereas gender and race are usually covered in demographics in research designs, particularly the ones with surveys or experiments related to predicting behavior, diversity was not really central (or something that mattered enough to be highlighted in the titles). Even when scholars were studying negative campaigning online or hate speech, it did not translate into more focus on gender and racial issues – at least not in the title.

The ICA Political Communication division had 42 sessions of various lengths, including joint panels with other divisions, and special sessions and workshops (184 contributions in total).

Interestingly, the identity-based issues were addressed mainly in specially allocated sessions. In this way, there was one session devoted to "Analyzing Race Talk in Institutional Settings," one session discussing "Gender and Political Communication," and another session about "Elections: Identity, Framing, and Media." Otherwise, these issues were scarcely mentioned in the titles (three mentions of identity and two of diversity, no mentions of gender, and one mention of race beyond the specially allocated sessions). Overall, this accounts for 13 (7%) contributions covering gender, race, identity, and minority issues in their titles.

While this "high density" approach of grouping together presentations on race and gender provides visibility to these problems, it also might convey an impression that identity-based issues should be addressed within the dedicated scholarly enclaves such as "gender studies" rather than by the field as a whole. Different types of information disorder (mis- and disinformation, polarization) were often associated with partisanship in the titles (16% of contributions in information disorder panels were devoted to partisanship), and it would be interesting to explore whether partisanship is indeed representative of a "meta-identity" that subsumes other social identities (Klinger et al., 2024) and is used for production and negotiation of "othering" in societies.

Literature review: Three important concepts to keep in mind

Recent reviews of political communication scholarship that studies propaganda and disinformation point to two persistent problems in how the field understands these phenomena. First, much of the existing literature remains primarily concerned with epistemological aspects of disinformation production and reception (Kreiss, 2021). Second, political communication in general, and engagement with disinformation more specifically, is seen as an individual process, discounting the importance of social identities and social negotiation of shared meanings (Grover & Kuo, 2023). To add to the political communication scholarship into the debate that accounts for the relationship between power, inequality, race, gender, and other identities, several conceptual frameworks have been developed recently (Gehrke, 2023; Pasitselska, 2022; Reddi et al., 2023). In this short review, we want to highlight three useful concepts that should be further applied in empirical research to adequately analyze the strategies employed by political actors to underline social divisions as well as audiences' negotiation and reception of ideologically loaded messages. These are the following:

1. Identity Propaganda
2. Logics of Exclusion
3. Gendered Disinformation

Identity Propaganda

We want to start with the concept of ***identity propaganda***, defined as strategic narratives that target and exploit identity-based differences to maintain existing hegemonic social orders

and/or undermine challenges to extant political power (Reddi et al., 2023). Successful deployment of identity propaganda is tightly linked to the view of politics through the lens of resentment and victimhood (Cramer, 2016). It counterposes an information-based understanding of democracy (e.g., Schudson, 1999) to an identity-based view that emphasizes the importance of perceived group membership over political attitudes and beliefs, and policy preferences. So, instead of seeing citizens as seeking out information about candidates and making informed decisions, this "group theory of democracy" places social identity and attachments at the core of democratic processes and conceptualizes partisanship as a meta-identity.

There is a clear link between this scholarship and previous studies on the discursive construction of national identity (Wodak et al., 2009) that relies on Benedict Anderson's and Stuart Hall's conceptualizations of national identity as the product of discourse. Much of this emerging work builds from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which details how social and cognitive processes and intergroup relations produce group formation and cohesion (Bar-Tal, 2013). The research on identity propaganda has looked into the construction of narratives over shared grievances and collective traumas (Sharafutdinova, 2022) that can constitute a powerful rhetorical device, recasting certain groups as enemies, or supporting inclusive unifying categorizations in the so-called populist rhetoric (Pasitselska & Baden, 2020). Applying this conceptualization, further empirical research can help understand the spread and persistence of strategic narratives that are based on social identity and partisan division.

Logics of Exclusion

The next concept we underscore here is ***logics of exclusion***, defined as the dynamics of selection and exclusion of claims that set the stage for clarification of meanings and construction of identities and social hierarchies during meaning negotiation (Pasitselska, 2022). This concept can aid the research dealing with reception of identity propaganda. By empirically tracing logics of inclusion and exclusion of claims, we can understand how media frames are retained or challenged and renegotiated in the discussion. Drawing on conversation analysis and deliberation studies, further empirical research can expand our knowledge of how interpersonal interaction facilitates the spread of propagandistic narratives, or limits their power, depending on the characteristics of the social environment. By studying the meaning of negotiation in different contexts, we can further learn how particular interpretations of political content "stick" or resonate with certain audiences (Baden & David, 2018). One promising direction is the research on social corrections in online debates (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022) from a socio-technological perspective. Logics of exclusion can explain how claims are selected as valid or discarded in the process of social negotiation in chat groups, threads, or comment sections. Combining this with the inquiry into the affordances of online environments can permit a more holistic understanding of user-driven correction of mis- and disinformation, while keeping an eye on algorithmic curation and platform architecture.

Gendered Disinformation

The third concept we highlight here is ***gendered disinformation***. Jankowicz et al. (2021, p. 1) define it as "a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination". Similarly, Bardall (2023) describes it as a subset of violence against women in politics with the underlying goal that women should be removed from public spaces and any opportunities to reach societal power. Nevertheless, even though gender and race are socially constructed categories, the intersection of such attributes should be considered in further analyses. For instance, when examining the disinformation narratives that had Brazilian female politics as the main target, Gehrke (2023) identified that race and ethnicity played a role in the type of attacks intended for minoritized women, namely their alleged links with criminality or different moral expectations.

Conclusion, follow-up questions, and reflection on our own biases

"The field of Political Communication is presently unprepared to meet the threats of illiberalism and the far right" is the diagnosis presented by Knüpfer et al. (2024, p. 1). Based on the white and male homogeneity of voices in the political communication field, which has revolved around the U.S. and European scholars' normative concerns, the authors argue that the field is not sufficiently equipped to deal with the advances of far-right movements and its rejection of pluralistic democratic societies. The far-right politicians construct "others" to be blamed, and these "others" – an attempt to outsource societal and economic issues – are usually based on identity aspects such as gender, race, and ethnicity. This includes far-right politicians evoking rhetorical strategies related, for instance, to "reverse racism" (Ma, 2024).

"Othering" is a key rhetorical move of identity propaganda that can be studied both in the top-down elite communication, and the bottom-up users' discourse and negotiation of strategic narratives. Constructing the "other" by the activation of gender and race stereotypes often elicited by far-right movements in fabricated narratives has been observed among those who study gendered disinformation. Thus, the theoretical framework employed by decolonial feminists such as Gonzalez (2020) and Vergès (2021) has been helpful to account for inequalities once they acknowledge that not all women face the same struggles. While the so-called Global North was concerned about granting voting rights to women, women in countries with a colonial history still struggle with the basics: having access to work and income, thus freedom without violence.

Given the field's preoccupation with "partisan" polarization, we pose the question of whether partisanship is a meta-identity beyond the US context. We argue that gender, race, and other

social identities should be taken more seriously when analyzing current political communication. Based on our analysis of the ECREA and ICA Political Communication divisions, we observed that even though there is an attempt to keep up with these challenges by creating specific panels to discuss identity-based topics in relation to the field, this practice binds these discussions to the pre-existing research enclaves. In other words, scholars who were already concerned with diversity are those who discuss these issues with peers sharing the same concerns. Therefore, it becomes a challenge to expand the debate to shift the direction of the field as a whole. In this respect, our own methodological choice is a fair blind spot: We only considered the English-speaking divisions of two major associations, but what are we missing in other countries and contexts?

References

Baden, C., & David, Y. (2018). On resonance: a study of culture-dependent reinterpretations of extremist violence in Israeli media discourse. *Media, Culture & Society, 40*(4), 514-534.

Bar-Tal, D. (2013). *Intractable conflicts: Socio-psychological foundations and dynamics.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bardall, G. (2023). Nasty, fake, and online: Distinguishing gendered disinformation and violence against women in politics. In: G. Haciyakupoglu & Y. Wong (2023). *Gender and security in digital space: Navigating access, harassment, and disinformation* (pp. 109-123). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Camargo, C. Q., & Simon, F. M. (2022). Mis- and disinformation studies are too big to fail: Six suggestions for the field's future. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, *3*(5).

Chakravartty, P., Kuo, R., Grubbs, V., & McIlwain, C. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, *68*(2), 254–266. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy003

Coles, S. M., & Lane, D. (2023). Race and Ethnicity as Foundational Forces in Political Communication: Special Issue Introduction. *Political Communication*, *40*(4), 367–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2229780

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.

Di Meco, L. & Wilfore, K.(2021, March 8). Gendered disinformation is a national security problem. *Brookings*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/

Eisele, I. (2024, July 8). Hate speech targets Kamala Harris on social media. *DW*. https://www.dw.com/en/kamala-harris-battles-hate-speech-and-false-claims-online/a-69872700

EU DisinfoLab. (2023). Monetizing misogyny: How does media spread gender-based disinformation and hate online in Italy and Hungary? https://www.disinfo.eu/outreach/our-webinars/monetizing-misogyny-how-does-media-spread-gender-based-disinformation-in-italy-and-hungary/

Freelon, D., Pruden, M. L., & Malmer, D. (2023a). #politicalcommunicationsowhite: Race and Politics in Nine Communication Journals, 1991-2021. *Political Communication, 40*(4), 377–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2192187.

Freelon, D., Pruden, M. L., Eddy, K. A., & Kuo, R. (2023b). Inequities of race, place, and gender among the communication citation elite, 2000–2019. Journal of Communication, 73(4), 356–367. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqad002

Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*. Profile books.

Gehrke, M. (2023). A decolonial feminism approach to gendered disinformation. *5th Multidisciplinary International Symposium on Disinformation in Open Online Media (Misdoom)*. November 21-22, CWI, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Gonzalez, L. (2020). *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano*. Zahar.

Grover, R., & Kuo, R. (2023). Destabilizing race in political communication: Social movements as sites of political imagination. *Political Communication, 40*(4), 484-503.

Jankowicz, N. Hunchack, J. Pavliuc, A. Davies, C. Pierson, S. Kaufmann, Z. (2021). *Malign creativity: How gender, sex, and lies are weaponized against women online.* Wilson Center – Science and Technology Innovation Program.

Judson, E., Atay, A., Krasodomski-Jones, A., Lasko-Skinner, R. & Smith, J. (2020). *Engendering hate: The counters of state-aligned gendered disinformation online.* London: Demos.

Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2022). Collective social correction: addressing misinformation through group practices of information verification on WhatsApp. *Digital Journalism, 10*(2), 300-318.

Klinger, U., Kreiss, D., & Mutsvairo, B. (2024). *Platforms, power, and politics: an introduction to political communication in the digital age*. Polity.

Knüpfer, C., Jackson, S. J., & Kreiss, D. (2024). Political Communication Research is Unprepared for the Far Right. *Political Communication*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2414268

Kreiss, D. (2021). Social media and democracy: the State of the Field, prospects for reform, edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker. *The International Journal of Press/ Politics 26*(2), 505–512.

Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021). Critical disinformation studies: History, power, and politics. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, *2*(4).

Ma, C. (2024). Overcoming Far-Right Respectability: The Case for Systemic Approaches to Studying White Supremacy. *Political Communication*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2424923

Pasitselska, O. (2022). Logics of exclusion: How Ukrainian audiences renegotiate propagandistic narratives in times of conflict. *Political Communication, 39*(4), 475-499.

Pasitselska, O., & Baden, C. (2020). Who are ‘the people’? Uses of empty signifiers in propagandistic news discourse. *Journal of Language and Politics, 19*(4), 666-690.

Reddi, M., Kuo, R., & Kreiss, D. (2023). Identity propaganda: Racial narratives and disinformation. *New Media & Society, 25*(8), 2201-2218.

Rossini, P. (2023). Reassessing the Role of Inclusion in Political Communication Research. *Political Communicat*ion, *40*(5), 676–680. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2220666

Scott, V. (n.d.) Understanding the gender dimensions of disinformation. *Countering Disinformation*. https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/gender/complete-document-gender-dimensions

Schudson, M. (1999). *The good citizen: A history of American civic life*. Harvard University Press.

Sharafutdinova, G. (2022). Public Opinion Formation and Group Identity: The Politics of National Identity Salience in Post-Crimea Russia. *Problems of Post-Communism, 69*(3), 219–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1829975

Sobieraj, S. (2020). *Credible threat: Attacks against women online and the future of democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behaviour. In Worchel S. and Austin, W. G. (Eds.) *Psychology of intergroup relations.* Chicago: Nelson Hall.

Thakur, D., & Hankerson, D. L. (2021). *Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender.* Center for Democracy & Technology.

Vergès, F. (2021). *A decolonial feminism*. London: Pluto Press.

Veritasia, M.E., Muthmainnahb, A.N., & de-Lima-Santos, M.F. (2024). Gendered disinformation: a pernicious threat to equality in the Asia Pacific. *Media Asia*, 1-9. Doi: 10.1080/01296612.2024.2367859

Wodak, R. (2009). *Discursive construction of national identity*. Edinburgh University Press.

Marília Gehrke is an Assistant Professor of Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and a fellow at the Digital Democracy Centre (DDC), University of Southern Denmark, Denmark. She holds a Ph.D. in Communication and Information at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Brazil. Her main research interests are (gendered) disinformation and (data) journalism. Email: m.gehrke@rug.nl.

Olga Pasitselska is an Assistant Professor of Social Media and Politics at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. She has obtained her PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. Her research focuses on reception of propaganda in conflicting environments, media trust, and grassroots civic engagement. Email: o.pasitselska@rug.nl.

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

What Does Political Communication Stand for from a Global South Perspective?[1]

Manuel Alejandro Guerrero, Universidad Iberoamericana
Giselle Kuri Carrasco, ASHOKA

Political communication developed around studying liberal democratic processes, such as voting, campaigning, and governmental and public communication, primarily in the U.S. and Western Europe. Until the 1980s, the field focused on elections, participation, and accountability within democratic frameworks, resulting in theories and predominantly quantitative methodologies based on Western democratic models. By the end of the 1980s, these theories and methods were ripe to be tested in other parts of the world.

In most cases in the Global South, political communication appeared first as a practice. After the Soviet Union's collapse and the different transitions from authoritarian rule in the 1980s and 1990s (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), Western political marketing and public relations consulting agencies, sometimes through local partners, began to explore these "new potentially democratic markets"—many of them, at least, electorally competitive. This exploration coincided with the consolidation of TV as the most important battlefield for political disputes (Keane, 1991; Kavanagh, 1995; Maarek, 1995). Thus, despite the differences in party and electoral systems and civic and political culture, political communication in democracies worldwide became more Americanized (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996, 2007).

Soon after, political communication started to be analyzed in the Global South through theories and methodologies developed in Western contexts and adapted to fit into the models. In 2001, Pippa Norris defined political communication as "an interactive process concerning the

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Manuel Alejandro Guerrero & Giselle Kuri). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public [operating] downward from governing institutions toward citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upward from public opinion toward authorities" (2001: 11631). Procedurally, this definition is still useful, mainly in studying liberal democratic political arenas through Western theoretical and methodological approaches. But can it cope with the diversity and complexity of other contexts and polities where political life is not so clearly top-down?

The region's unique political, economic, and social contexts influence political communication in the Global South. While it adopts strategies and platforms developed in the U.S., the infrastructure, technology, media literacy, and political dynamics blend traditional and innovative forms. Authors have called for studying these processes from broader and diversified academic viewpoints to foster a more thorough and inclusive understanding of global political communication (Vaccari, 2021; Neyazi, 2023). In most relevant forums and academic spaces, there is a firm claim for the need to de-center (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014), de-Westernize (Curran & Park, 2000; Mutsvairo et al., 2023; Waisbord, 2023), or de-colonize (Gunaratne, 2010; Magallanes-Blanco, 2022) communication and political communication studies. One example is the special edition, number 28, of this *Political Communication Report* (2023), dedicated to "De-westernizing political communication." Waisbord (2022) argues that this de-Westernization should be both an academic and intellectual stance that "interrogates the provenance and the positionality of academic knowledge" and a political movement that calls "to curiosity about and engagement with ideas produced in various corners of the world."

Thus, it is pertinent to ask: What does political communication mean for the Global South? The sheer size and diversity of the regions that make up the Global South, with their complex political, religious, linguistic, and cultural landscapes, makes it nearly impossible to provide a single answer to this question. At a broad level, political communication still focuses on exchanging information between political actors, the "media-platforms-social media," and the public. However, what requires careful revision is the way we have theorized and tested their (inter)relations through theoretical and methodological approaches mainly designed to explain Global North realities in places referred to with labels such as "underdeveloped," "developing," "unconsolidated," or "hybrid." This is a consequence of constant comparison to liberal democratic political environments of a few Northern nations with the desire to "bring others to their level."

Without any intention to justify the diverse problematic aspects of the political communication practices and contexts in the Global South, authors have argued in favor of developing and using original theoretical frameworks emerging directly from these territories (Santander, 2010). By prioritizing locally-designed frameworks (Badr, 2023), academic production and reflection on political communication has adopted a more diverse and contextualized understanding of realities in the Global South (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2019; Cabas-Mijares & Omotoso, 2024; Karam & Mutsvairo, 2021; Marques & Miola, 2021; Mutua et al.,

2022; Porto, 2016; Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019; Torrico-Villanueva, 2019; Wasserman, 2021; Zhang & Neyazi, 2020).

The focus has been—and should continue to be—oriented toward generating new questions and new ways to look at reality as it is in these regions. Nevertheless, more efforts are required to complement and strengthen the relatively limited diversity in predominant political communication theoretical approaches (Phelan & Maeseele, 2023) that still show how political communication in the Global South does not fit the established models. An inductive approach may help adopt a new gaze. Some advantages of the inductive approach are its flexibility and adaptability, which enable researchers to modify their inquiries based on what they find through observations and data. Inductive reasoning may also be particularly effective for hypothesis generation from empirical evidence, uncovering unexpected relationships, and opening new avenues for research.

However, one should maintain a critical stance to avoid the temptation to replace one "truth" for another and beware of not romanticizing—or worse, justifying—forms of political communication that may serve instrumental purposes in the Global South. Chakravartty and Roy (2023) show how, in the case of India, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has led the call for de-westernization, with a clear political agenda based on a right-wing interpretation of ethnicity and an authoritarian limitation of pluralism. As these authors rightly say, de-westernizing should not mean replacing one "locational certitude with another. Rather, de-westernizing means we change our questions and frameworks, not our answers."

Some defining aspects of political communication from the Global South

The considerable differences in cultures labeled under the imperfect term "Global South" offer innovative and stimulating political communication methods and practices and often share transversal patterns that require innovative forms of theorizing and researching to understand. In broad terms, political communication implies information flow processes among political actors, news content providers, and the public, now in contexts where digital technologies and platforms have different penetration and reach. In the Global South, we require new questions about how these elements (inter-)relate to elucidate the nuance in the information transmission processes, the autonomy, role, and weight of the stakeholders in generating, shaping, and transmitting information, the degree of independence, plurality, and accessibility of information content providers, and the role of digital technologies and platforms in these three previous aspects. Without being exclusive, the following elements highlight some conditions in which these questions should be posed since they reflect unique challenges and opportunities regarding how the Global South's political communication landscape intersects with evolving technology, inequalities, and power struggles.

Technology Access, Infrastructure, and Appropriation

Internet access is crucial yet uneven in the Global South, where socioeconomic disparities shape digital divides (ITU/UNESCO, 2024). This means political communication relies on a mix of digital tools like mobile phones (GSMA, 2024) and traditional media such as radio. This fosters grassroots activism and change-making (South Africa -- Akpojivi, 2023-- and Nigeria -- Uwalaka, 2023—are two interesting cases) and may accelerate challenges like misinformation and state control. This highlights the hybrid nature of the media environment in the Global South, where both old and new media continue to play critical roles.

Critical Views on Liberal Democracy Are Important

In the Global South, critical perspectives on liberal democracy are often shaped by historical experiences of colonialism, economic exploitation, and foreign intervention (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). For many, liberal democracy is seen as a vehicle for continuing these power dynamics rather than a genuine system of self-governance (Forjwuor, 2023). This skepticism has fueled the rise of alternative political models and communication strategies that emphasize nationalism, cultural identity, ethnicity, economic sovereignty, and resistance to Western influence. In some cases, anti-liberal rhetoric may resonate with populations that have experienced the negative consequences of neoliberal economic policies with consequential increases in inequalities and injustice (McEwan, 2009; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021). In others, local elites may fuel such rhetoric to preserve their power and reduce accountability and pluralism.

Changemaking and Civic Engagement

Based on the previously stated critical views on liberal democracy, it is particularly important to consider the role and the weight of non-governmental political actors, such as social entrepreneurs, who, in some regions, are helping to shape collective paradigms regarding contribution, empathy, and agency in the Global South. For instance, as the Solutions Journalism Africa Initiative (SJN, 2024) shows, the more political communication integrates and amplifies some of these voices, the more civic engagement can be seen as a success metric. Moreover, beyond uplifting the work of individuals, learning from change-making networks that gather interdependent communities around a shared vision and values has proven to have effects that can "outpace and outsmart systemic social problems" (Ghosh, 2023). These considerations invite a reflection regarding who is seen and valued as a political actor, news content provider, and general public in the Global South, where processes do not tend to be as clearly top-down, linear, and transactional.

Media Literacy and the Challenge of Misinformation

Media literacy is essential for political communication (UNESCO, 2021). Populations where education systems have prioritized only a few at the expense of the many are vulnerable to

misinformation, which internal and external political actors use to destabilize political life (Chibás-Ortiz & Novomisky, 2023) and foster religious tensions, as seen in countries like Myanmar, Nigeria, and Lebanon. However, misinformation in the Global South has been, in many ways, a prevalent feature of information ecosystems where some degree of distrust has always accompanied the way people consider information and their political actors. In this respect, Global North's idealizations of a "pre-information disorder" time defined by an informational approach characterized by truthful information presented by impartial media reporting on trustworthy politicians for rational citizens have always been contested and problematic. Notions of truth and falsehoods and their impacts and forms of weaponization work and are perceived differently (Lenoir & Anderson, 2022). The role of the state, the nature of the media (corporate, state, public, community, and alternative), the social role of journalism and its cultures, the news consumption culture, the penetration of technology, and the role of Western media and their narratives all should be contextualized to understand the meaning and challenge of misinformation.

Artificial Intelligence and its Implications

In the Global South, AI poses several potential risks for political communication (Simon et al., 2024), largely stemming from existing inequalities and limited regulatory frameworks. Technology can be exploited to amplify falsities, manipulate public opinion, and even interfere with electoral processes through microtargeting and disinformation campaigns that prey on the populations, especially where religious, ethnic, regional, or social cleavages are deep (Hasan, 06/06/2024). Whoever has power and intent can influence political narratives. Additionally, AI-driven surveillance tools may strengthen authoritarian control, limiting dissent and invading citizens' privacy, reinforcing the influence of those already in power (Chennupati, 2024). With limited data privacy regulations, AI often prioritizes powerful political and corporate interests, potentially deepening social divides. Finally, reliance on AI algorithms designed in the Global North can mean that local cultural, linguistic, and social nuances are often misrepresented, leading to biases that may distort political narratives and deepen the marginalization of certain groups.

Final Remarks

Political communication in the Global South requires a nuanced examination of how information flows, how stakeholders shape messages, and how media channels maintain openness and independence in contexts where technology may deepen existing power imbalances or open new avenues for participation. Given the region's diversity and unique challenges, an inductive approach, grounded in local realities and the examples of changemakers, offers valuable insights alternative to Global Northern frameworks. However, avoiding romanticizing or justifying practices that may serve narrow political interests is essential. Instead, this widening of perspectives aims to foster a critical yet context-sensitive

approach to political communication in the Global South and also to benefit those studying the Global North, as they might highlight some processes and information flows that are usually overlooked, disregarded, or under-researched.

References

Adler-Nissen, R. & Zarakol, A. (2021). “Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents.” *International Organization*, 75(2): 611-634. https://doi:10.1017/S0020818320000454

Akpojivi, U. (2023). *Social Movements and Digital Activism in Africa*. London: Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-30207-7

Badr, H. (2023). It is epistemic, folks!: Why our knowledge from WEIRD contexts is limited and what we can learn from Arab contexts. Political Communication Report, Fall (2023)(28). https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41237

Boczkowski, P. J., & Mitchelstein, E. (2019). “The politics of contextualization in the contextualization of political communication research.” In: *Political Communication*, 36(4): 676-679.

Cabas-Mijares, A. & Omotoso, S.A. (2024). “Feminist political communication in the Global South—an introduction to the special issue.” In: *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 17 (2): 81–83, https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcae017

Casarões, G. S. P. & Barros Leal Farias, D. (2021). “Brazilian foreign policy under Jair Bolsonaro: far-right populism and the rejection of the liberal international order.” In: *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *35*(5), 741–761. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2021.1981248

Chakravartty, p. & Roy, S. (2023). “Questioning ‘De-Westernization’.” In: *Political Communication Report*, Issue 28, Knüpfer, C. (Ed.). “De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions,” Fall, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41239

Chennupati, A. (2024). “The threat of artificial intelligence to elections worldwide: A review of the 2024 landscape.” In: *World Journal of Advanced Engineering Technology and Sciences*. 12: 29-34. https://doi.org/10.30574/wjaets.2024.12.1.0177

Chibás Ortiz, F. & Novomisky, S. (2023). *Navigating the Infodemic with MIL*. UNESCO. Retrieved from: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/navigating-infodemic-mil?hub=750

Curran, J., & Park, M. J. (Ed.). (2000). *De-westernizing media studies*. London: Routledge.

Forjwuor, B. (2023). "Critique of Liberal Democracy: When the Sacred Is Violated." In: *Critique of Political Decolonization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198871842.003.0005

Ghosh, S. (2023). *Changemaking Network Effects. A playbook for social entrepreneurs*. NotionPress.

Gil de Zúñiga, H., Ardèvol-Abreu, A., & Casero-Ripollés, A. (2021). "WhatsApp political discussion, conventional participation and activism: exploring direct, indirect and generational effects." In: *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(2), 201-218.

GSMA (2024). The Mobile Economy Report. Retrieved from: https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/

Gunaratne, S. A. (2010). "De-westernizing communication/social science research: Opportunities and limitations." In: *Media, Culture & Society*, *32*(3): 473-500.

Hasan, S. (06/06/2024). The Effect of AI on Elections Around the World and What to Do About It. Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved from: https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/effect-ai-elections-around-world-and-what-do-about-it

ITU/UNESCO (2024). The State of Broadband. International Telecommunications Union-UNESCO, Broadband Commission. Retrieved from: https://www.broadbandcommission.org/publication/state-of-broadband-2024/

Karam, B., & Mutsvairo, B. (2021). *Decolonising Political Communication in Africa*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111962

Kavanagh, D. (1995). *Election Campaigning. The New Marketing of Politics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Keane, J. (1991). *Media & Democracy*. London: Polity Press.

Knüpfer, C. (2023). "De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions." In: *Political Communication Report*. Fall (28). Retrieved from: https://politicalcommunication.org/issue/fall-2023-issue-28/

Lenoir, T., & Anderson, C. (2023). "Introduction Essay: What Comes After Disinformation Studies." *Center for Information, Technology, & Public Life* (CITAP), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved from https://citap.pubpub.org/pub/oijfl3sv

Maarek, P. J. (1995). *Political Marketing and Communication*. London: John Libbey & Co.

Magallanes-Blanco, C. (2022). "Media and Communication Studies. What is there to Decolonize?" In: *Communication Theory*, 32(2): 267-272.

Marques, F., & Miola, E. (2021). "Key concepts, dilemmas, and trends in political communication: a literature review considering the Brazilian landscape." In: *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45, 95-112.

McEwan, C. (2009). *Postcolonialism and Development*. London: Routledge.

Mignolo, W. D. & Walsh, C. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Mutsvairo, B., Ortiz dos Santos, F., & Chitanana, T. (2023). "Chapter 2: De-Westernizing digital politics: A Global South viewpoint". In Colman, S. & Sorensen, L. (eds). *Handbook of Digital Politics*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800377585.00010

Mutua, E., Musa, B.A., & Okigbo, C.C. (2022). "(Re)visiting African communication scholarship: critical perspectives on research and theory." In: *Review of Communication, 22*, 76 - 92. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.2025413

Negrine, R., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (1996). "The "Americanization" of Political Communication: A Critique." In: *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(2): 45–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X96001002005

Negrine, R. & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2007). "The 'Americanization' of Political Communication: A critique." In: Negrine, R., & Stanyer, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The Political Communication Reader*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003416654

Neyazi, T.A. (2023). "Moving Beyond Western Dominance: Rethinking Political Communication Scholarship." In: *Political Communication Report*, Issue 28, Knüpfer, C. (Ed.). "De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions," Fall, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41235

Norris, P. (2001). Political Communication. In: Smelser, N.J. & Baltes,P.B. (eds.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Pergamon, pp. 11631–11640. https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/04364-3

O'Donnell, G. & Schmitter, P. (1986). *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies,* Vol.4., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Phelan, S., & Maeseele, P. (2023). "Where is 'the political' in the journal Political Communication? On the hegemonic articulation of a disciplinary identity." *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 47(2): 202-221.

Porto, M.P. (2016). Political Communication Research in Latin America. In: *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*. Wiley Online Library. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc219

Rojas, H., & Valenzuela, S. (2019). "A call to contextualize public opinion-based research in political communication." In: *Political Communication*, 36(4), 652-659

Santander, P. (2010). "Latin America: political communication and media discourse in contexts of social and revolutionary transformations." In: *Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 5*, 227 - 237. https://doi.org/10.1080/17447141003602304

Simon, F.M., McBride, K. & Altay, S. (2024). AI's Impact on Elections is Being Overblown. MIT Technology Review, September 3rd. Retrieved from: https://www.technologyreview.com/2024/09/03/1103464/ai-impact-elections-overblown/

SJN (2024). Solutions Journalism Africa Initiative. Solutions Journalism Network. Retrieved from: https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/initiative/africa-initiative

UNESCO (2021). *Think Critically. Click Wisely! Media and Information Literate Citizens*. UNESCO. Updated 2024. Retrieved from: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/media-and-information-literate-citizens?hub=750

Uwalaka, T. (2023). "Mobile Internet and Contentious Politics in Nigeria: Using the Organisational Tools of Mobile Social Networking Applications to Sustain Protest Movements." In: *Journalism and Media*. 4. 396–412. http://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4010026

Vaccari, C. (2022). "The International and Post-disciplinary Journey of Political Communication: Reflections on "Media-centric and Politics-centric Views of Media and Democracy: A Longitudinal Analysis of Political Communication and the International

Journal of Press/Politics." In: *Political Communication*, 39 (2): 286-290, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1966599

Torrico-Villanueva, E. (2019). "La comunicación desde los enfoques latinoamericanos." In: *Comunicación*. N.41, Jul-Dec. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1237-9241

Waisbord, S., & Mellado, C. (2014). "De-westernizing communication studies: A reassessment." In: *Communication Theory*, 24(4), 361-372.

Waisbord, S. (2022). "What is next for de-westernizing communication studies?" In: *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, *17*(1): 26–33.

Waisbord. S. (2023) "De-westernizing Political Communication." In: Political Communication Report, Issue 28, Knüpfer, C. (Ed.). "De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions," Fall, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41232

Wasserman, H. (2021). Political journalism by other means: An African perspective. In: Morrison, J., Birks, J. & Berry M. (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Political Journalism*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429284571

Zhang, W., & Neyazi, T.A. (2020). "Communication and technology theories from the South: the cases of China and India." In: *Annals of the International Communication Association, 44*, 34 - 49. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2019.1667852

Manuel Alejandro Guerrero is an academic and researcher at the Universidad Iberoamericana, member of the National System of Researchers, the Mexican Academy of Sciences, and the Academic Council on the United Nations System. He is also president of ORBICOM, the global network for UNESCO Chairs in Communication. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the European University Institute of Florence, Italy, and an MA in Latin American Studies from the University of Cambridge.

Giselle Kuri-Carrasco holds a B.A. in Communication from Iberoamericana University in Mexico and an M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University (Washington, DC). She is currently the Narrative Change Leader for ASHOKA, the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs, focusing on social impact and storytelling. Additionally, she is a dialogue facilitator and host of the ALIVE! Podcast. For four years, she developed the communication and marketing department at Fondo Unido – United Way

México and served as the Latin America Representative on the Board of Up with People International Alumni Association. Giselle has participated in several local and grassroots initiatives for social change in more than 15 countries.

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

It's Time to Articulate a Mission Grounded in Human Rights Principles[1]

Cherian George, Hong Kong Baptist University

American-dominated Political Communication's inability to globalise has been so chronic that I've argued elsewhere that its networks and publications should rebrand themselves as doing "Western" Political Communication. They should own their persistent provinciality to spare the field further confusion. Colleagues committed to global perspectives can then invest in other networks that have proven more hospitable to non-Western and comparative studies of communication and politics (George, 2022).

I know that this opinion, which I expressed at the 2022 ICA Annual Conference, is easily misinterpreted as a call to decouple the field from what are often called "Western" political values. I welcome this chance to explain why this normative issue is quite separate. Just because liberal democracy as a political system fails to describe most countries outside of the West does not mean liberal democracy, as a set of values, has limited applicability.

A discussion about the field's normative paradigm is timely. I already see academics using decolonisation discourse to object to journal manuscripts or conference presentations critical of the human rights records of China and India, for example. Having lived most of my life under illiberal governments (in Singapore and Hong Kong), I can smell such apologias for authoritarianism a mile off. I started my working life as a journalist when officials in Singapore and neighbouring countries were championing "Asian Values" to defend their (objectively autocratic) regimes against (objectively annoying) American triumphalism at the end of the Cold War. The Asian Values campaign lost steam after the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, and when South Korea and Taiwan — two culturally Confucian societies — confounded its advocates by enthusiastically embracing liberal democratic values.

[1] Copyright © 2024 Cherian George. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

Today, we see a resurgence of counter-democratic rhetoric. China, India, and other emerging powers are challenging the West's status as the oracle of universal values. To this end, there is plenty of bad-faith citation of decolonisation tropes. Chakravartty and Roy (2023) sounded the alarm, noting that calls for de-Westernisation map "seamlessly onto the spaces of right-wing ethno-majoritarian or authoritarian populist politics in many parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa". This trend has penetrated academia, with Global South academics triggering charges of Western intellectual imperialism against incoming criticism of their states. Many Western peers sensitised to diversity and inclusion are not sure what to make of all this. Some, conscious of their white privilege, are trying to keep an open mind, which is always a good idea if coupled with healthy scepticism. The challenge for Political Communication, as I see it, is how to throw out the bathwater of Western ignorance and arrogance while keeping the liberal democratic baby.

It may help to think of the globalisation of scholarship at three levels: what we study; how we study it; and why. I, of course, want to see our field diversifying what we study. A scholar should be entitled to write about an election campaign in Indonesia, for example, without being told by a journal to justify this choice or to explain its wider relevance if the editors do not expect the same from someone studying the American case. I'm even more excited by the prospect of diversification in how we study the subject. Political communication's frameworks, concepts, and methods were developed and refined in the exceptional context of liberal democracy. In many ways, they are ill suited for studying the non-West (Mitchelstein 2023; Waisbord 2023). For example, religious authority has played a much bigger political role in much of Asia and Latin America than in the US and Western Europe, so scholars of the former are more illuminating on this subject than contemporary Political Communication is. Respect for methodological diversity is also a must. Political communication's bias for sophisticated quantitative methods helps generate strong conclusions about very narrow questions, which may be apt in a crowded American field where much is already known; but most of the rest of the world needs answers to much bigger questions than fine-grained quantitative analysis can address.

It's on the "why" question — why we should study Political Communication — that I am wary of diversification. This is where I part company with peers advocating normative diversity in political studies as part of a de-Westernisation agenda. I fear that freeing the field from common normative moorings will leave political critique floundering in the zero-gravity emptiness of moral relativism. I favour the search for core, universal standards that allow us to make value judgments about the quality of political institutions and practices around the world.

I can understand why the academic establishment may find it tempting to suspend moral judgments. We are in an age of unprecedented domestic and global polarisation. Interconnectivity and interdependence have outpaced the cultivation of common ground. Many elite universities in the United States, tired of being pulled this way and that in highly divisive

debates, are adopting a position of institutional restraint. They will try not to make statements on controversial public policy issues. However, absolute neutrality is a nonstarter. They would have to make exceptions for situations where they are directly impacted. In practice, this might mean universities as such take no position on a distant war, but still speak up against threats to their freedom to conduct independent research or their ability to keep a diverse student body safe, for instance. Drawing such lines is a contentious exercise, but unavoidable. If the institution does not articulate its core values, others will do it for them.

Similarly, academic disciplines must think about what they stand for. These values could have been left implicit when most relevant stakeholders were on the same wavelength, but they need to be articulated (and possibly refined) in a more diverse and contentious intellectual environment. Some sub-fields would find this quite straightforward. In health communication, for example, I doubt anyone would object to a values statement about empowering people to improve their health (as opposed to, say, serving the corporate interests of big pharma). In journalism studies, I can think of no colleague anywhere who would dispute that journalism is normatively distinguished from public relations and marketing by an ethos of public service that is best expressed when it has some autonomy from power, or words to that effect. Journalism studies could adopt this as an article of faith.

As for Political Communication, the field should have no qualms dedicating itself to the development of political communities based on the “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”, the recognition of which is the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. These are words enshrined in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948) and which have inspired human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (which all but 18 states have signed; China is among its signatories). They hold up freedom and equality — the twin pillars of democracy — as fundamental political rights for all.

It’s easy to be cynical about these principles, which are honoured more in the breach than the observance. But let’s not underestimate their revolutionary elevation over the past century as globally relevant norms. I like how economist and moral philosopher Amartya Sen (1999) puts it in an essay on democracy as a universal right. It’s not that everyone everywhere accepts it, but that everyone everywhere has good reason to accept it. The core idea, that nobody is “perfect enough to rule unaccountably over their fellows” and that everyone needs to be able to respond to the harms of abusive power, is “wisdom of global value”, says professor of politics John Keane (2022: 201) in his history of democracy. He notes how this principle proliferated after 1945, making it “no longer a white-skinned, Western affair”; it underwent remarkable “indigenisation… in environments radically different to the earlier parent electoral democracies of Western Europe, Spanish American and the United States” (Keane 2022, 158–9).

Even in controlled societies such as China where citizens are indoctrinated from childhood to accept autocratic rule, I doubt many individuals would say "no" if asked: do you think you should be free to decide how to live your life, and if your society should treat you justly? It's when people are asked if they think *others* should be free and equal that they demur. People easily embrace democratic values for themselves; reciprocal recognition of rights is the hard part. This of course why authoritarian populists get mileage from attacking minorities and why surveys and election results show that not all citizens of even liberal democracies are fans of democratic government. But whether you call it the third person effect or plain hypocrisy, such doublespeak is no basis for collective life, nor defensible as normative guideposts for scholarship.

Democratic principles have achieved paradigmatic status, and Political Communication and its parent disciplines need not be apologetic about treating them as default, commonsense normative grounds for scholarship to build on. This does not mean that they cannot be questioned, of course. Any discipline should remain radically open to challenge. But, following Sen (1999), those who agree with democratic principles need not waste their breath explaining why. The onus is on writers who disagree to justify their position.

My suggestion that universal human rights principles provide strong normative foundations for the field has important caveats. Applying such values to a large and complex society through various institutions of representative government has always been an exercise fraught with contradictions. There are also on-going debates about how to balance rights. Even among liberal democracies there are disagreements about how different political rights — free speech, privacy, freedom from discrimination and hate, and so on — should be prioritised. We should not assume that any existing constitutional order has already settled these issues, or that the US, for example, is the benchmark against which other democracies should be measured.

Even granting such caveats, colleagues championing the Global South may have misgivings about elevating human rights values to the commanding heights of the field. It would tend to place countries they care about at a competitive disadvantage compared with most Western democracies. I can only shrug and question whether national prestige has any place in this discussion. Besides, as I have said about and to my own government in Singapore, they can't have it both ways. Either liberal democracy is an alien, un-Asian idea, in which case they should not get prickly about their democracy ratings — it should matter as little as where they stand in an American Football league table. Or their democratic performance is something they and their citizens care about, in which case they should try harder if they are falling short.

Provincialising democracy as Western does a disservice to the many local human rights defenders I have met across Asia who work in extremely challenging and sometimes dangerous contexts. Their job is difficult enough without academics echoing government propaganda that they are serving a foreign agenda. The theory is also somewhat offensive because it is reminiscent of arguments once deployed by European imperialists against restive native

populations — you are culturally and developmentally unsuited for democracy so don't ask for our liberté, egalité, fraternité. Fortunately, a succession of peoples outside the West, starting with Haitians and including my forefathers in India, chose to embrace democratic values as universal rights, using these appropriated principles as ideological weapons in their struggles against colonial oppression. Some contemporary citizens of these now-independent countries seem willing to give up ownership of these universal rights their ancestors fought hard for, trading that tradition for nothing more than the vainglory of having a retort of some kind when their states are criticised as undemocratic.

Another major reason why some colleagues may resist the adoption of the normative position I advocate has less to do with democracy as such than the toxic baggage in the West's democracy promotion efforts. It reeks of hypocrisy. It's a tragic coincidence that some of the societies with the strongest domestic civil and political rights protections and the biggest voice to promote such values on the global academic stage are also states with histories of imperialism, discrimination against people of colour, and shocking contempt for non-white lives abroad.

After the election of Donald Trump as their 47th President, most of our American peers probably have fewer illusions about their moral authority as champions of democracy. However, even if Democrats had succeeded in defeating Trump, the American democracy they were trying to save was hardly an advertisement for universal values. The rest of the world cannot unsee American complicity in Israel's year-long genocidal war on Gaza. Nor is it possible to take the liberalism of American academia seriously as a moral enterprise after watching how university administrators have treated students and faculty when they try to use their precious freedoms to speak for the weakest and most vulnerable.

This is the ideological landscape on which Political Communication will need to find its normative footing. Perhaps the contentiousness of these times may provoke more rigorous thinking about what the field is for and why it matters. What should be clear is that Western scholarship cannot claim moral or intellectual leadership merely by virtue of operating out of a liberal democracy. It can try to lead, but few scholars of the Global South will follow. But, as I've tried to argue, dismantling Western hegemony shouldn't entail diluting core human rights values. A decolonised Political Communication can meet the needs of our times and grow global relevance if anchored in universal democratic ideals.

References

Chakravartty, P. and S. Roy (2023). Questioning "De-Westernization". Political Communication Report Fall (2003)(28). http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41239

George, C. (2022, May 27). *If Political Communication is Western in all but name, why not just rename it? The case for provincialising the field* [Roundtable Presentation]. International Communication Association Annual Conference 2022, Paris. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4127203

Keane, J. (2022). *The Shortest History of Democracy* (Collingwood, Australia: Black Inc.).

Sen, A. K. (1999). Democracy as a Universal Value. *Journal of Democracy*, *10*(3), 3-17. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1999.0055

Mitchelstein, E. (2023). Imagined Academic Communities: Three Observations about the De-westernization of Political Communication. *Political Communication Report*, Fall (2023)(28), Article 28. https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41234

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

Waisbord, S. (2023). De-westernizing Political Communication: Why? How? *Political Communication Report*, Fall (2023)(28). https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41232

Cherian George is Professor at Hong Kong Baptist University's School of Communication. He researches media freedom and censorship, intolerance, polarisation and hate.

Political Communication Report
Fall 2024 - Issue 30
"What does PolComm Stand for? Normative Dimensions of Political Communication Research & Theorizing"

Global Perspectives in Political Communication: Insights from the 2024 ICA Political Communication Workshop in Delhi[1]

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, National University of Singapore
Saima Saeed, Jamia Millia Islamia
Suruchi Mazumdar, O. P. Jindal Global University

Introduction

It has been an honor to serve as the International Liaison for the Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association (ICA) from May 2022 to June 2024. Throughout my two-year tenure, I have been dedicated to fostering global connections and encouraging the engagement of scholars from regions traditionally underrepresented within our division. This commitment has been instrumental in the design and execution of the workshop aimed at spotlighting and advancing political communication research in the Global South, particularly within South and Southeast Asia.

I am privileged to co-author this report with Saima Saeed from Jamia Millia Islamia and Suruchi Mazumdar from O. P. Jindal Global University (JGU), whose invaluable contributions have been instrumental in ensuring its overall success. Saima Saeed facilitated the hosting of our workshop sessions at Jamia Millia Islamia, providing an academically rich environment. Suruchi Mazumdar's efforts were pivotal in organizing the inaugural keynote at the JGU International Academy, Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi, setting a high scholarly tone that resonated throughout the event. Their expertise not only facilitated the logistical aspects

[1] Copyright © 2024 (Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Saima Saeed, Suruchi Mazumdar). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at http://politicalcommunication.org.

of these sessions but also enriched the intellectual content by suggesting panelists and mentors for the workshop.

Rationale for the Workshop

The imperative to convene this workshop stems from a multifaceted understanding of the evolving dynamics within the field of political communication. The development of political communication into a distinct academic field has historically been intertwined with the examination of democratic mechanisms like elections, campaigns, and persuasion, primarily within the Western context, particularly the United States (Karpf et al., 2015; Neyazi, 2023). As such, the academic narrative has predominantly been shaped by Western methodologies and frameworks, often overlooking the rich tapestry of political discourse manifest in the Global South (George, 2022; Rossini, 2023).

In contemporary discourse, political communication serves not only as a reflection of geopolitical realities but also as a formative influence on public opinion and policy-making. As such, the depth and breadth of political communication research must transcend parochial boundaries to embrace a truly global perspective. This workshop was strategically envisioned to recalibrate this imbalance by foregrounding voices and perspectives from South and Southeast Asia. The selection of Delhi as a venue underscores our commitment to enhancing the visibility of research emanating from these regions, which are often marginalized in mainstream academic discourse.

Further intellectual impetus for this workshop is derived from the pressing need to facilitate and foster opportunities for cross-national comparative research. Such endeavors are crucial for understanding the nuanced ways in which political communication research and their impacts vary across different cultural and political environments. Specifically, the workshop aims to catalyze collaborative studies involving countries in the European Union, North America, and South America alongside their counterparts in the Global South. By doing so, we aspire to develop a more comprehensive schema that seeks to understand the nuances of diverse political systems, examining their impacts on voter behavior, campaigns, democratic processes, and policymaking. This comparative understanding will enable us to draw more informed conclusions and facilitate meaningful dialogues between scholars in the Global North and Global South.

Moreover, the workshop seeks to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical applications, encouraging participants to engage in methodological innovation and interdisciplinary approaches. This convergence is expected to offer insights that are both academically rigorous and practically relevant, particularly in the era of digital media where the velocity and volume of information create complex new paradigms for political engagement and governance.

In summary, the workshop's rationale is rooted in the intellectual endeavor to expand the horizons of political communication research. By integrating and prioritizing research from underrepresented regions and fostering comparative studies, we aim to enrich the academic dialogue and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of global political dynamics.

Workshop Overview

The workshop was held in Delhi, chosen for its strategic relevance to our mission of expanding the geographical focus of political communication studies. The initiative draws inspiration from the long-standing Milan Summer School on Political Communication and seeks to extend its ethos by focusing on non-Western perspectives, which are crucial for a holistic understanding of the field. The workshop was attended by 29 selected participants, comprising 14 graduate students and 15 faculty members, research fellows, and early career researchers, from across 24 different universities and institutes. While the majority of the participants were from India (23 in total), there were six international attendees. The gender distribution was balanced, with 14 female participants and 15 male participants.

Over the course of two days, the workshop featured a series of presentations, keynotes, and panel discussions, all aimed at exploring cutting-edge research and methodologies within the field. The sessions were designed not only to enlighten but also to inspire our audience, particularly targeting graduate students and early-career scholars. The presentation included detailed examinations of research emerging from varied geopolitical landscapes, highlighting how different contexts shape political communication strategies and outcomes. These sessions provided valuable insights into the adaptability of methodologies across non-Western settings, and discussions focused on the challenges of conducting research that considers these diverse environments, facilitating a contextual understanding of the complex dynamics at play in global political communication landscapes.

The workshop included three key keynote addresses, each offering diverse perspectives and insights into the evolving field of political communication. The first, delivered by Kate Kenski, titled “Digital Communication and Conflict: How Internet Discourse Shapes Perceptions of the Political World,” highlighted the transformative impact of digital communication on political engagement and public perceptions of incivility, drawing on evidence from the American context. Cherian George emphasised the contextual dynamics of media politics in Asian settings with his talk, “Unique or Universalisable? Studying Media Politics in Asia,” challenging participants to consider the global applicability of locally observed phenomena. Finally, Rasmus K. Nielsen presented “A post-American field of political communication research: why we need it, how we might get there, what it might help us achieve,” advocating for a more inclusive and varied academic inquiry that extends beyond traditional Western-centric views. Each keynote not only provided substantial food for thought but also set the stage for rigorous scholarly discussions, emphasizing the need for a broader scope in political communication research.

The workshop concluded with a thought-provoking panel discussion titled “Redefining Political Communication in the Global South: Challenges and Opportunities.” This session brought together scholars to explore the specific challenges faced by researchers in the Global South and the unique opportunities these challenges present for the field of political communication. Panelists delved into topics such as the need for local case studies to inform global theories, the impact of regional political dynamics on communication strategies, and the pivotal role of emerging technologies in transforming political engagement within these diverse contexts. The discussion underscored the necessity of developing a nuanced understanding of political communication that respects and reflects the unique socio-political landscapes of the Global South. Overall, the workshop provided a unique platform for mentorship, fostering academic growth and preparing participants for future contributions, including submissions to the ICA annual conference.

Impact and Future Directions

The workshop not only served as a platform for knowledge exchange but also as a catalyst for future collaborative research initiatives. Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction, with many highlighting the opportunity to gain insights into diverse research paradigms and methodologies as particularly beneficial. Recognizing the potential for further development, the workshop concluded with a consensus on the need for methodological training sessions. Responding to this feedback, the organizing committee agreed to incorporate such sessions into future editions of the workshop. Building on the success of this event, plans are already underway to not only continue emphasizing inclusivity and diversity in political communication research but also to enhance the interactive nature of the workshop. Future editions aim to expand the geographical scope, potentially including more countries from the Global South, thereby enriching the workshop’s impact and reach.

Acknowledgements

This workshop has been made possible with the generous sponsorship of the Political Communication division of the ICA, and the support of the executive committee members, especially our former Chair, Frank Esser, and our current Chair, Kate Kenski. Their unwavering support has been instrumental in making this event possible and underscores the shared commitment to advancing the study of political communication in the Global South.

References

George, C. (2022). If Political Communication is Western in all but name, why not just rename it? The case for provincialising the field. *The case for provincialising the field* (May 27, 2022).

Karpf, D., Kreiss, D., Nielsen, R. K., & Powers, M. (2015). The Role of Qualitative Methods in Political Communication Research: Past, Present, and Future Introduction. *International journal of communication* (Online), 1888-1907.

Neyazi, T. A. (2023). Moving Beyond Western Dominance: Rethinking Political Communication Scholarship. *Political Communication Report*, Fall (2023)(28), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-41235

Rossini, P. (2023). Reassessing the role of inclusion in political communication research. *Political Communication*, *40*(5), 676-680.