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Bridging the Disciplinary Divide

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Bridging the Disciplinary Divide

Abstract

Academic disciplines see research questions through the biases created by their presuppositions and preferred methods. Political science and communication are no different. In the past, political scientists more often focused on outcomes and the social and economic judgments that seemed to shape them while communication researchers have focused more intensely on the structure and content of the messages that make up campaigns. To understand the role of communication campaigns on political outcomes (and vice versa) requires information on both message content and effects

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Bridging the Disciplinary Divide

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Academic disciplines see research questions through the biases created by their presuppositions and preferred methods. Political science and communication are no different. In the past, political scientists more often focused on outcomes and the social and economic judgments that seemed to shape them while communication researchers have focused more intensely on the structure and content of the messages that make up campaigns. To understand the role of communication campaigns on political outcomes (and vice versa) requires information on both message content and effects.

In this essay, we explore this general issue and give specific attention to the validity of experimental tests of the relationship between messages and their effects. We argue that establishing what some call representational validity is important if one is to understand the relationship between messages and effects.

Disciplinary Boundaries and Disciplinary Dispositions

On campuses, the scholars probing "communication" in and about politics are housed in departments

of political science or government, departments of mass communication, radio-television, or journalism, and departments of speech communication, communication, or occasionally, rhetoric. For decades these disciplines coexisted with each often unaware of complementary and occasionally contradictory conclusions being generated by the others.

Even when the disciplines have asked comparable questions, they have not necessarily turned to each other to determine the range of existing answers. Occasionally this has meant that scholars have independently arrived at similar conclu-

sions published within months of each other but uninformed by the thinking that went into the other work. This occurred with the publication of four works—two documenting the increase in presidential speechmaking, Kernell's *Going Public* (1986) and Hart's *The Sound of Leadership* (1987), and two, Jamieson's *Dirty Politics* (1992) and Patterson's *Out of Order* (1993), arguing that the issue and strategy structures of press coverage of elections had become dominant schemas through which the electorate was invited to see the process of electing.

True to the notion that scholars in the various fields are separated by a Maginot Line, when those in rhetoric cite the fact that presidential speechmaking has increased dramatically in recent times, they cite Hart. Political scientists bow to Kernell when making the same claim. Hidden in their syllabi, is however, evidence of common ancestry. Each discipline has found riches in the work of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. But where political scientists cite Aristotle's *Politics*, speech communication scholars are more likely to turn to his *Rhetoric*.

The facet of the communication process on which each field traditionally focused differed as well. Where rhetoric scholars prized the message, mass communication scholars probed the medium, and political scientists, the audience. Those relying on the National Election Studies (NES) for primary material analyzed outcomes without being able to tie them to the substance of messages, whether ads, speeches, debates, or news. Those focused on the campaigns' messages lacked the data to determine their possible effects on the electorate.

The methodological dispositions of the fields have been different, too. When focusing on messages, political scientists and scholars of mass communication were disposed to content analysis as a tool, while speech scholars were more inclined to rhetorical-critical analysis. In trying to understand presidential elections in general, the data provided by the University of Michi-

gan's Survey Research Center since 1952 has invited scholars of political science to study what could be known through the survey; by contrast, mass communication scholars are inclined toward the survey or the experiment, and those studying politics in speech communication lean toward the rhetorical critical analysis of the text. So, from those in government departments have poured provocative studies based on analysis of the NES materials. From scholars of mass communication have come survey-based, agenda-setting studies pioneered by McCombs and Shaw (1977) and experimental analyses with titles such as "Effects of Issue-Image Strategies, Attack and Support Appeals, Music, and Visual Content in Political Commercials" (Thorson et al. 1991). Rhetoric scholars pen books with titles such as *Verbal Style and the Presidency* (Hart 1984) and *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (Jamieson 1984).

In decades past, political scientists such as Edelman (1988) and Bennett (1977), have explicated contemporary political texts. However, political scientist Lance Bennett's early textual analysis (1977) appeared not in a political science journal but in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. One is more likely to find Edelman cited in a speech journal than in the *American Political Science Review*.

Propelling those in the three fields together was evidence calling the limited effects model of mass media into question. A turning point in communication scholarship occurred in 1975 with the publication of a volume of essays edited by Chaffee:

At least since the publication in 1960 of Klapper's major synthesis of the Columbia University findings of only limited political effects of the mass media . . . it has been typical in academic circles to assume that communication campaigns can make only minor dents in the political edifice. Citizens' processing of media information has been thought to be highly selective, conditioned by partisan predispositions, and subordinate to interpersonal influences (the

'two-step flow'). Almost any message received, so it has seemed, would stand a good chance of having at most the net effect of reinforcing the person's existing cognitive state. . . . This limited-effects model is simply not believed by the authors of the chapters that follow (Chaffee 1975, 19).

Disciplinary Convergence

The simultaneous founding of divisions of political communication in the International Communication Association and the American Political Science Association and the joint publication of *Political Communication* signalled a formal dismantling of the Maginot Line. It corresponded with an awareness in political science that medium and message might matter. Where the third edition of Polsby and Wildavsky's *Presidential Elections* (1971) contains sections on presentation of self, the television debates, and getting a good press, the eighth edition (1991) adds headings on "Television in the Campaign," including television advertising, targeting, and the sound bite, and "The Other Media," including radio, newspapers, video cassettes, computer telemarketing, and satellites.

At the same time, there are efforts in the works to increase scholarly access to campaign messages. The first comprehensive archive of extant messages from general election presidential campaigns from 1952–96 is being assembled at the Annenberg School for Communication of the University of Pennsylvania by scholars trained in rhetoric. Symptomatic of the links now existing between the disciplines, that archive is being organized to be compatible with the NES materials. And those responsible for the design of the NES questions are working with both scholars of communication and political science to develop better measures of the possible influence of ads, debates, news, and talk radio.

Limits of Content Analysis

Those who studied texts, whether of news reports or candi-

dates' speeches, have been inclined to hint, when they did not state outright, that they could divine audience effects. In *Out of Order* (1994) Patterson documents changes in news coverage of presidential politics in the past 30 years. He is usually careful to avoid moving from description of content to assumed effects. But why study changes in the nature of the media's coverage of politics if such changes do not produce effects? Indeed, Patterson assumes they do: the game schema "directs attention toward certain activities and away from others but also affects the significance attached to these activities" (63) and

when voters encounter game-centered stories, they behave more like spectators than participants in the election, responding, if at all, to the status of the race, not to what the candidates represent. On the other hand stories about issues and the candidates' qualifications . . . cultivate more involvement. . . . (89)

In the final paragraph of his chapter on horse race coverage, the claim that the news media's focus on strategic coverage creates cynicism in the electorate is clear:

By emphasizing the game dimension day after day, the press forces it to the forefront, strengthening the voters' mistrust of the candidates and reducing their sense of involvement (1993, 93).

Jamieson (1992, 187) does the same thing when she writes that "the strategy schema is problematic because it disengages the electorate from the election." Similarly, Entman (1993) argues that if the news environment is dominated by a particular frame of reference to the exclusion of all others, receivers are "clearly affected" (54) because no other interpretations or frames are available to them. This view ignores people's ability to think through the issues using their own knowledge or that gleaned from other sources. It assumes what is to be proven. Until subject to experimental test, these are simply suppositions. Content differences are not effects.

Limits of Content Analysis Tied to Surveys

Those who have tried to tie content analysis to survey data have also run into problems. Michael Robinson's (1976) analysis of 1968 Survey Research Center data found that those who reported relying solely on television for news content were 23% more likely to hold that members of Congress quickly lose touch with their constituents than those who relied on media other than television for their news (420–21). What Robinson could not know was whether those who were more cynical to begin with were more likely consumers of television news. Those reliant on television for news were distinguished from those reliant on newspapers, but the study could not know what those likely watchers of television news were actually watching or what they were gaining from network newscasts.

In an attempt to overcome some of these methodological obstacles, Miller (1979) and his colleagues tied the self-reports contained in a survey to analysis of the content the respondents reported focusing on. Their analysis of the 1974 American National Election Study data and the front-page content of 94 newspapers found that "readers of highly critical papers were more distrustful of government; but the impact of criticism on the more stable attitude of political efficacy was modest." To draw the conclusion, the researchers matched respondents with the paper they actually reported reading. The model they offered posited that "media criticism serves as a 'mediator' of political realities which eventually, although indirectly, affects political malaise" (70).

But, again, it is difficult to posit causality. Perhaps cynics were drawn to the more critical coverage. Nor could the researchers actually know that it was the front pages of these papers that these readers were actually reading. Symptomatic of the differences between disciplines, Miller and his colleagues offer highly sophisticated interpretations of survey data but fail to discuss coding reliability.

Establishing causality requires knowing the cynicism level respondents brought to the study and being able to accurately characterize the content they actually read and watched. In short, the ideal method is a controlled field experiment.

Experiments on Message Effects

Another point of convergence is increasing interest in political science and communication in use of the controlled field experiment, a method able to tie message, medium, and audience in ways permitting inferences about cause. Of particular importance is the fact that it was the University of Michigan Press (Kinder and Palfrey 1993) that published a work calling for increasing use of the experimental method in political science research.

Validity Issues

In political science, Ansolabehere (1994), and Iyengar (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991) have pioneered this means of studying media efforts. Their solid studies work hard to minimize the usual problems with external validity. In the process, however, they do not establish representational validity (Folger and Poole 1982).

By establishing inter-coder reliability, they confirm that researchers and coders see their distinctions. But do consumers of news and ads recognize them? And, more importantly, do consumers see the distinction in ways that are similar to the researchers?

External. External validity refers to how representative and generalizable the results of an experiment are. Common issues include: How similar are the participants to the general population of voters or citizens? Do the tasks parallel ones in the real world? Are the activities carried out in realistic contexts? With regard to messages, external validity poses questions such as: Are these messages similar to ones encountered in the world of political advertising and news?

Representational. The question of the similarity between theoreticians' assumptions and a naive audience's perceptions is called representational validity. Some would argue that establishing representational validity for messages is unnecessary (Rogers and Millar, 1982). As long as the message types are distinct theoretically (that is, they are said to have construct and face validity) and produce the desired outcomes (that is, have predictive validity), then the types identified theoretically are assumed to produce meaningful distinctions for the audience.

The problem with this argument is that it ignores the reasons for the effects produced by a message. Certainly, if two types of news stories (say issue and strategy) produce differences in outcome for comparable groups, then, aside from explanations due to chance, some difference must exist between the types of messages in the eyes of the readers. But do the readers attribute the same characteristic differences to issue and strategy messages that the researchers do? If they do not, then the researchers may find themselves explaining their results in terms they assume to be true of the message types but which readers do not perceive to be the case.

Evaluating Representational Validity

In our work we assume that strategy stories will produce more cynical reactions than issue stories because, among other reasons, strategy stories emphasize winning. If the readers do not attribute such a difference to the news segments, but do find the strategy stories more difficult to understand, then their cynicism might be the result of frustration with the strategy stories. Unless researchers check their assumptions about the messages they are manipulating, they may falsely impute an explanation for an effect. So, the assumptions made about messages by researchers should be checked.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted several studies, but two groups of experiments used messages whose representational valid-

ity was not evaluated. One group manipulated vivid and pallid versions of the news finding no appreciable differences in attitude change or agenda setting. A second manipulated the way the news framed presidential responsibility for events. The audience's sense of presidential versus circumstantial responsibility was not evaluated.

Iyengar (1991) does evaluate whether the stories used "generally differ in their ability to trigger open-ended comments or arouse emotions" (23) finding that they do not differ in any serious way. This evidence is useful for showing similarities across their news stories (thematic and episodic) but does not assess whether the audience differentiated the stories in the ways that the author assumed they did.

Ansolabehere and his colleagues (1994) studied the effect of attack advertising versus positive advertising on the electorate's intention to vote. The positive and negative tone of the ads was manipulated by changing the voice-overs while the visuals remained the same. Negative ads depressed intention to vote. No data on whether the audiences believed the ads were actual ads or on their judgments of the ads were reported. Instead the authors suggest that "our experimental manipulations were professionally produced and could not (unless the viewer were a political consultant) be distinguished from the flurry of advertisements confronting the typical voter" (830). Perhaps. But to an historian of political advertising who is not a political consultant, the ads shown when the paper was presented at the APSA convention looked much more like those produced in the early seventies than the mid-nineties, a concern that could have been allayed had external validity been established.

As important are the questions: Were the negatively toned ads heard as attacks, as mean-spirited, as unfair, as politics-as-usual, as character assassination, as issue-based, or, most importantly, were they not heard as different in tone at all? Since the visuals were not changed, perhaps the voice-overs

of the negatively toned ads did not match the visuals appropriately and viewers were confused more by the negatively toned ads. Their desire to participate might be affected as a result. Admittedly, this suggestion stretches to find an alternative explanation. But the point is that experiments should check their fundamental manipulation—in this case the message tone—in order to find out if it is perceived by the audience in the way anticipated by the experimenter.

Summary

Representational validity can be seen as a third supportive leg in the content-effects dichotomy. Content analysis represents how experts see messages. Effects studies indicate the outcomes of messages on their audiences. Studies of audience representation provide information on how consumers understand messages. When audiences' representations differ in fundamental ways from experts' representations, an opportunity—and not just a problem in invalidity—exists.

It is as important to evaluate how audiences understand messages and their structures as it is to evaluate the accuracy of theorists' representations of them. Audiences' understandings may differ in significant ways from those of content analysts. When they do, such interpretations may serve as mediators of the effects. Failing to assess representational validity is both a threat to careful experimental design and a lost theoretical opportunity.

Among the rewards reaped from the alliance between scholars of political science and communication should be a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between messages and political effects.

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Bad News, Period

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What did Newt Gingrich do to deserve such awful coverage? Although the Contract With America moved at unprecedented speed through the House of Representatives, statements about Gingrich from national reporters and their sources during the first 100 days of the new Congress were more than 60% negative. And Gingrich was not the only one pilloried. All of the GOP's top congressional leaders, and the Republican congressional majority itself, received more negative than positive coverage (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1995).

Republicans attributed their lousy coverage to the press's knee-jerk liberalism, a charge that might have made sense had the Democrats in Congress received favorable coverage. But, in fact, they, too, were portrayed negatively.

The inadequacy of the liberal-bias theory is also apparent in news coverage of Bill Clinton's presidency. Although Clinton was the

first Democratic president in 12 years, he did not even get a honeymoon period; his coverage was nearly 60% negative during the first two months on the job. Two years into his presidency, Clinton's numbers were no better. Except for a month of positive news during the NAFTA debate, Clinton's coverage was unceasingly negative (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1993, 1994).

Ingrained cynicism rather than knee-jerk liberalism is the media's real bias. Reporters have a decidedly low opinion of politics and politicians, and it slants their coverage of Republicans and Democrats alike.

A New Standard: Staging the Negative

The notion that "bad news makes for good news" has long been a standard of American journalism, but the media have raised it to new

heights in recent decades. Negativity in the news increased sharply during the 1970s, jumped again during the 1980s, and continues to rise. Since the 1960s, bad news has increased by a factor of three and is now the dominant tone of news coverage of national politics (Patterson 1994; Lichter and Amundson 1994).

Underlying the change is a shift in the style of journalism. In the 1960s, reporters began to question their traditional approach to the news. The existing rules emphasized the words of the newsmakers: to a large extent, their statements defined their coverage. Most of what they had to say about themselves and their programs was positive in tone; as a result, most of their news coverage was favorable.

However, a growing list of government failures and a heightened sense of their own power led many journalists to conclude that they should no longer merely cover top leaders but should also critically