

The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features

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This article identifies key changes in society and the media that have shaped political communication in many democracies over the postwar period. Three distinct ages are described. In the first, much political communication was subordinate to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs. In the second, faced with a more mobile electorate, the parties increasingly "professionalized" and adapted their communications to the news values and formats of limited-channel television. In the third (still emerging) age of media abundance, political communication may be reshaped by five trends: intensified professionalizing imperatives, increased competitive pressures, anti-elitist populism, a process of "centrifugal diversification," and changes in how people receive politics. This system is full of tensions, sets new research priorities, and reopens long-standing issues of democratic theory.

Keywords infotainment, journalism, mass media, news media, political campaigns, political communication, political parties

Scholars increasingly are sensing that profound changes in both society and the media may be giving birth to a new form of political communication system that is qualitatively different from its predecessors (Cook, 1998; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999; Wyatt, 1998). Not only are the avenues of political communication multiplying in a process that is becoming more diverse, fragmented, and complex, but also, at a deeper level, power relations among key message providers and receivers are being rearranged; the culture of political journalism is being transformed; and conventional meanings of "democracy" and "citizenship" are being questioned and rethought (Brants, 1998; Buckingham, 1997). The research community is therefore challenged to keep up with the evolving trends and avoid overcommitment to superseded paradigms.

This article offers a structured reconnaissance of such developments. Although it deals with many still-to-be-worked-out trends and phenomena, it tries to provide a framework for thinking about the main forces that are in play, including some of their consequences, in order to sense better what may be over the horizon. Looking back over the postwar period, it characterizes the currently emerging state of affairs as a "third age of political communication." The advantages of this characterization are that

- it invites us to consider exactly how the present situation differs from what preceded it;
- it encourages us to consider whether the current situation, which is marked by

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conflicting developments of various kinds, is likely to sort itself out along any lines that can be predicted; and

- it offers an overarching focus within which interrelations among key tendencies can be contextualized and research needs can be prioritized.

The cross-national validity of our perspective is open to question. This article's line of sight is largely Anglo-American, reflecting our observations of British experience and our readings of the extensive U.S. literature. Whether they resonate in other democratic societies—and, if so, how far—can be established only by well-designed comparative research.

The Societal Environment for Political Communication: Recent Trends

The relations of social change to media change are complex and reciprocal. Over the postwar period, political communication has been responsive (though also contributory) to the following chain of exogenous change:

- *Modernization*—that is, increased social differentiation and specialization, fragmenting social organization, interests, and identities; proliferating diverse lifestyles and moral stances; and fueling identity politics (Luhmann, 1975; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). This complicates tasks of political aggregation and communication, supports markets for minority media, and may explain the appeal of talk-show explorations of divergent personal and sexual behaviors, conflicts, and aberrations.
- *Individualization*—embracing the elevation of personal aspirations, consumerism, and reduced conformity to the traditions and demands of established institutions, notably political parties, the nuclear family, mainstream religion, the workplace, and neighborhood and social-class groupings. In approaches to politics, citizens have become more like consumers (instrumental, oriented to immediate gratifications, and potentially fickle) than believers. Politicians must work harder to retain their interest and support.
- *Secularization*—involving the loss of institutional avenues to the sacred and the reduced status of official politics, reflected initially in weaker party identifications but spreading subsequently to most other facets of political authority. The diminished parties face increased competition for media and public attention from the rise of hard-lobbying interest and cause groups. Relations of elites to masses are transformed by the evaporation of deference and increased skepticism about the credentials, claims, and credibility of authority holders in many walks of life. This supports political and media populism.
- *Economization*—the increasing influence of economic factors and values on the political agenda and other areas of society, including culture, arts, and sports (Mårtensson, 1998). The subordination of formerly more autonomous spheres (e.g., higher education, publishing and journalism) to economic criteria of performance is encouraged.
- *Aestheticization*—in Ulrich Beck's (1994) sense of people's increased preoccupation with stylishness, image, presentation, and appropriate tastes, especially in fashion and music. This encourages closer associations of politics with popular culture (Cloonan & Street, 1997).

- Increasing *rationalization* of all facets of purposive organization and administration. This favors arguments backed by systematically gathered evidence in forums of relatively sustained policy debate (conferences, quality press, signed columns, specialist political programs, analytical journalism, weekly magazines of news and comment). Policymakers, think tanks, and pressure groups are encouraged to commission pragmatically oriented research, strengthening the hands of experts whose claims to be able to conduct and interpret it are widely accepted. But it also supports the emergence of “the instrumental rationalization of persuasion,” based on the techniques, values, and personnel of (a) advertising, (b) market research, and (c) public relations (Mayhew, 1997).
- “*Mediatization*”—the media moving toward the center of the social process. This promotes the concept and practices of a “media-constructed public sphere,”¹ elevating the communication function and the role of communication experts in a wide range of institutions. The “modernization” of such institutions is often equated with tooling them up for sophisticated public relations (as latterly in Britain with the Monarchy and even the Church of England!).

Many problems of government have been exacerbated by these trends. Higher social expectations demand more of authorities whose abilities to cope have been reduced. With societal consensus fragmenting, there are more disparate constituencies for politicians to try to satisfy. Overall, the political arena has become more turbulent, less predictable, less structured, and more difficult to control.

Amidst numerous changes and problems, however, the persistence of cultural support for democratic values (admittedly diffuse, uneven, and difficult to measure) should also be noted. Its influence can be exerted through expectations of politicians to articulate their case convincingly in the face of challenges, receptivity to substantive news agendas when relevant and accessible, dislike and criticism of communication practices by politicians or journalists that fall below certain standards, and broad acceptance of a notion of the citizen’s role as someone who aims to keep up with social and political affairs, to learn how proposed policies might affect his or her life, and to form a sense of what political leaders are really like.

The Phasing of Political Communication Systems

Political communication in many democracies appears to have passed through three successive (if overlapping) phases in the postwar period. Each has pivoted on a distinctive organizing principle, although other influences have prevailed as well, and each has been caught up in a characteristic paradox.

Age 1

The first two decades after World War II have been termed “the ‘golden age’ of parties” (Janda & Colman, 1998, p. 612). In this period, the political system was regarded as the prime source of initiatives and debate for social reform; the party system was closely articulated to entrenched cleavages of social structure; and many voters related to politics through more or less firm and long-lasting party identifications. At this time of “high modernism” (as it has also been called), “Consensus was accompanied by a high level of confidence in political institutions” (Hallin, 1992, p. 17),² and much political communication was subordinate to relatively strong and stable political institutions and beliefs.

Three features belonged to such a party-dominated communication system. First, many political messages were substantive. Political leaders tended to talk about the issues that mattered to them, especially the changes they wished to effect in government and the principles and policies that distinguished them from their opponents. Second, many such messages enjoyed fairly ready access to the mass media of the period. Political communication flows ran more with than against the partisan grain. Third, many voters responded accordingly—via selectivity and reinforcement.

But this system also pivoted on an intriguing paradox: Although it hosted substantive debate about alternative political directions and policies, few citizens appeared to sift the arguments concerned, tending to vote instead on group-based loyalties. Of course, there was also a body of floating voters whose prior political allegiances were not strong enough to conform to this reinforcement model of electoral behavior. But because they tended to be less interested in politics, they were also less likely to be reached by political messages.³

Age 2

A new era dawned in the 1960s when limited-channel nationwide television became the dominant medium of political communication, while the grip of party loyalty on voters was loosening. Four transformations resulted.

One was a reduction in the frequency of selective patterns of exposure to party propaganda, since a medium of even-handed news, several-sided discussion, and free slots for most parties (paid commercials in the United States) afforded less scope for viewers consistently to tune in to their own side of the argument. Selectivity was also undermined by a decline in newspapers, clubs, and other organizations attached to the parties, especially in continental Europe (Kirchheimer, 1966).

Second, a medium constitutionally mandated to such nonpartisan norms as fairness, impartiality, neutrality, and measured choice was now the central platform for political communication. This may have put staunch partisans on the defensive and legitimated the less certain attitudes of those who felt that a conditional and wary commitment was the outlook most appropriate to a model citizen.

Third, television enlarged the audience for political communication by penetrating a sector of the electorate that was previously more difficult to reach and less heavily exposed to message flows. For most viewers probably, and for the least interested ones undoubtedly, long-term influences on political outlook, such as party identification and early socialization, started to give way to more short-term ones, such as current news events, governments' immediate successes and failures, and their opponents' lines of attack.

Fourth, a crucial channel of such short-term influences was thought to be television news. Its values and formats therefore had an increasingly far-reaching impact on the scheduling of political events (coordinated with news bulletin timings), the language of politics (through the crafting of soundbites and cultivation of more intimate styles of address), and the personalization of its presentation (with a sharper focus on top leaders).

To cope with the demands of a new medium, its larger audience, and a more mobile electorate, the parties had to work harder and learn new tricks. They accordingly adopted an array of tactics to get into the news, shape the media agenda, and project a preplanned "line" in press conferences, briefings, interviews, and broadcast discussions. From this development, the core features of the professional model of modern campaigning emerged.⁴ This evolved into a highly positivistic, scientific, unsentimental approach to communication and persuasion based more on the established actualities

of opinion climates than on civic visions. Campaign themes had to be pretested, and politicians were discouraged from “speaking their minds” directly to the public; instead, experts often were called on to predict acceptability in advance (Mayhew, 1997).

Like its predecessor, this second-age political communication system also pivoted on a paradox: At a time when many citizens had become more open-minded and flexible and were prepared to entertain different approaches to the problems of the day,⁵ they were served an emptier and less nourishing communications diet.

Age 3

This still emerging phase is marked by the proliferation of the main means of communication, media abundance, ubiquity, reach, and celerity. Television in particular, once a concentrated communications outlet of only a few channels for politicians to court, has become or is becoming an extensively elaborated journalistic medium, hosting news flashes and inserts, formed bulletins, a wide range of public affairs formats, and 24-hour news services. Communication abundance not only embraces the multiplication of television channels and radio stations—made possible by cable and satellite technology and the ongoing digitization of all signals. It also reflects the proliferation of communication equipment in people’s homes—multiple television and radio sets, video recorders, compact disc players, video games, and camcorders. Beyond mass media, political news, information, and ideas can be circulated via the computer.

New patterns and adaptations ensue for all involved in the political communication process (some of which are dealt with more fully later). In gist, it changes how people receive politics in ways that have been little studied so far. To politicians, the third-age media system must loom like a hydra-headed beast, the many mouths of which are continually clamoring to be fed. When something happens, they are expected to tell the media what they are going to do about it well before they can be fully informed themselves. For journalists, the news cycle has accelerated, since more outlets combined with increased competition across them piles pressure on all involved to keep the story moving and to find fresh angles on it. Journalists’ “feeding frenzies” become yet more frantic. Time for political and journalistic reflection and judgment is squeezed.

This age is more complex than its predecessors, molded more by conflicting cross currents than by a dominant tendency. Political communication during it is likely to be reshaped by five main trends, not all in harmony with each other.

Intensified Professionalization of Political Advocacy. As the “third age” proceeds, the dependence of politicians on professional assistance is likely to increase further. In the past, skilled personnel have always attached themselves to political parties, offering their organizational know-how, policy expertise, or speech-writing talents. The new recruits have skills specific to the media and persuasive communications, and they have had ready access to Reagan, Clinton, and Blair. In many ways, they are the new elites of Anglo-American politics, the products of a media-saturated style of politics. They represent the politicians’ professional approach to managing the media and resisting pressure from them.

In a more abundant but fragmented communication system, specialists’ familiarity with the different news outlets and their (now more differentiated) audiences, an ability to plan campaigns in elaborate detail, and the organization of prompt responses to daily events, opinion trends recorded by opinion polls and focus groups, the charges of political opponents, and the news frames defined by journalists will be yet more indis-

pensable. At the same time, the focus of news management efforts will shift in this period—becoming more “shotgun-like” than narrowly concentrated on only a few mainstream outlets such as television news.

Recent developments in Britain illustrate the momentum behind such professionalization, its extension into previously less touched spheres, and its implications for politicians’ relations with journalists. Without wishing to use the concept of “Americanization,” we should acknowledge that many of the following features have transatlantic echoes. This should not surprise, because the party strategists have openly sought campaign lessons from the United States.

First, the major parties have thoroughly absorbed what may be termed the imperatives of the professionalization of political publicity. They hold that attending to communication through the media is not just an add-on to political decisions but is an integral part of the interrelated processes of campaigning, cultivation of public opinion, policy-making, and government itself. “How will it play in the media?” is a question asked at an early stage in decision making.

This entails a hard-nosed view of what seeking popular support in a competitive democracy involves. If publicity is fashioned in the ways prescribed, you stand a chance of success; ignore them, and you will almost certainly fail. This perspective trades, then, in absolutes—a notion of what political communication competition is really and inevitably like. It is further presumed that a well-judged publicity effort can make a difference. But mere reactivity to and counterpunching against what has already entered the public domain are insufficient. Being proactive and taking the news initiative so far as possible are essential. As Labour’s chief public opinion adviser, Philip Gould (1998, p. 294), has explained:

You must always seek to gain and keep momentum, or it will pass immediately to your opponent. Gaining momentum means dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle at the earliest possible time, and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives so that subsequent news coverage is set on your terms.

Success in this requires elaborate preparation and coordination, deciding on the appropriate publicity format and media outlets, and pre- and post-event spinning to reporters to ensure that your story is prominently covered and interpreted in a preferred manner. The objective is to get the media to report *your* agenda on *your* terms and to put critics and the opposition party on the back foot. It may also involve “rubbishing” or marginalizing internal party critics who are, in a telling phrase, “off-message.”

Second, the British case illustrates the transforming expansionism of this process. With adoption of the notion of “the permanent campaign,” it has been extending across political time. Without letup, routine events such as party conferences, press conferences, policy launches, the annual budget, and speeches are all accompanied by massive publicity arrangements.

Equally, the process has been extending across political space with an increasing professionalization of approaches to the media among pressure groups and corporate campaigners,⁶ injecting more “campaigns without candidates” (in a phrase coined by Clark, 1993) into the public sphere.

The professionalizing imperatives have spearheaded a virtual reinvention of Britain’s major parties.⁷ Party strategists believe that effective use of modern publicity methods requires the party to be centralized and leader friendly and to have short lines of

communication. It should have what Gould (1998) terms a “unitary command” system. Media advisers rank high in the pecking order and have ready access to the leader and a voice in political and policy decisions.

The imperatives have also invaded the domain of government policy-making itself. Illustrative of this last move is the Blair administration’s acceptance of radical proposals to transform the organization and workings of the United Kingdom Government Information Service (GIS), designed to modernize “the Government’s communications with the media to make them more effective and authoritative” (Mountfield, 1997). These included such changes as a more centralized coordination of government communications to the media through the prime minister’s press secretary, cultivation among civil service information officers of the skills and practices of proactive news management, and a greater integration of communication and policy considerations and personnel.

In 1998, the Blair government established the Strategic Communications Unit, with a mixed staff of journalists and government information officers to assist in the coordination of activity and publicity and to write newspaper articles for ministers. Part of the rationale for this development was recognition that the world of communication “is changing fast. In particular, the 24-hour nature of the media has far-reaching implications for the business of the GIS and for the individuals who work within it which must be addressed” (Mountfield, 1997, p. 14).

Third, reliance on attack campaigning has increased markedly in Britain. A content analysis of Conservative and Labour press releases during the 1997 election showed unprecedented levels of negativity (see Goddard, Scammell, & Semetko, 1998, p. 171, for details). Both major parties also established “rebuttal units” to react rapidly to each other’s claims and accusations with computer-based research, often presented at special rebuttal press conferences during the campaign.

Fourth, the communication priorities and values of British politicians and journalists appear more divergent than at any time since World War II. The intensified professionalization of the former has probably played a significant part in this. After all, the party publicity ideal is to shape the news environment so that journalists are driven to focus only on *such and such* an issue or theme, on *this* message about it, and on *that* spokesperson on it. For their part, however, journalists do not relish having their news choices severely narrowed by those whose activities they are supposed to cover. Their sense of their own professionalism—in which autonomy and independence figure prominently—leads them to seek ways to stamp their marks on political stories. As Hugo Young (1999, p. 18), a senior political columnist, has specified the connection, “Having come to power by news management, New Labour has created a breed of journalism heavily dominated by its desire not to be managed.”

Coverage of the 1997 election campaign showed several manifestations of this impulse. One was greater prominence for journalists than the campaigning politicians themselves. According to Harrison (1997, p. 190), for example, who carried out a detailed content analysis, television coverage was “heavily structured or ‘framed’ by journalists and experts,” with the result that only 17% of campaign news time was devoted to what politicians had said. Relative to 1992, the election also witnessed a modest increase in reporting the campaign as a tactical game at the expense of substance (Goddard et al., 1998, p. 156). And, according to Norris et al. (1999), correlations between the parties’ and media’s substantive agendas were considerably lower in 1997 than were found in a study of 1980s campaigns (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). Finally, the relatively reticent reporting style on British television in past elections was replaced in 1997 by a more judgmental—and often critical—one.

Thus, an increasing adversarial spirit does seem to pervade politician-journalist relations in the third age of political communication. On the one hand, British politicians and their advisers think of themselves as waging “a battle of the media” (Butler & Kavanagh, 1997, p. 28), loss of which risks political failure. On the other hand, much media coverage of the postelection scene has been shaped by strong journalistic preferences and biases for issues and stories that politicians are less able to control, stories about the machinery and specific instances of news management, and stories that cast doubt on politicians’ statements and motives or unmask their appearances. Such stories, putting politicians on the back foot, do seem to have proliferated in recent years—paralleling the increased negativity of U.S. political news as charted by Patterson (1993). A dramatic instance arose in December 1998 when a massive press campaign, wielding labels like “scandal” and “sleaze,” was directed at Peter Mandelson, Labour’s master spin doctor, for the trifling “offense” of having concealed his acceptance of a large loan from another government minister some years before either held office! The campaign was so relentless that Mandelson felt obliged to give up his Cabinet post as secretary of state for trade and industry, declaring in his letter of resignation that “I do not believe that I have done anything wrong or improper. . . . But we came to power promising to uphold the highest possible standards in public life. We have not just to do so, *but we must be seen to do so*” [italics added]. Of course, media “framing” often determines what is deemed “proper” in such cases.

Faced with all of this, politicians and their advisers may be driven to seek less mediated lines of access to the electorate. As television bulletins and front-page news become less congenial vehicles for conveying their objectives, they may look to other outlets for greater amenability to their messages. Future campaigns may therefore be based more than in the past on advertisements; billboards; articles under leaders’ names for the press, magazines, and even think tanks; satellite feeds with ad hoc distribution channels; “softer” media formats; and the creation of “must-see” political spectacles and events that defy media intervention, aiming to take them directly to the people, unmediated by editors, producers, and reporters. In fact, the Blair administration, complaining about what it perceives as the cynical obsession of Britain’s national press with trivia, scandal, and negativity, has recently signaled its intention to march down this road so far as possible—favoring outlets in the regional press, magazines, the foreign press, the ethnic press, in “live” media and on nonpolitical interview shows. The prime minister’s press secretary has also called on British broadcasting to counter the agenda of the written press by allowing politicians to speak more freely for themselves over the airwaves.

Nevertheless, the stamp of what Swanson (1992) has termed “the political-media complex” will often be imprinted on the top political stories of the day, and certain deeper problems for the democratic political system may arise from its sway.

- The danger of subordinating public policy to campaign imperatives and the immediate pressures of media demand. Most criteria for good policy-making include time for deliberation, causal analysis, examination of options, conduct of pilot studies, and perhaps even incremental decision making. In total, this may seem a counsel of perfection and a process that applies at best only partially and occasionally to policy. But it is clearly at odds with the media-driven school of “instant response.”
- The doubtful relevance of much political communication to the substantive tasks of government and the substantive concerns of citizens. This arises ultimately

from (a) politicians' involvement in image building and projection; (b) journalists' focus on process and dramatic incident, particularly scandals, internal party disputes, and politicians' mistakes; and (c) the struggle for tactical supremacy of both sides in their unceasing turf war.

- The related danger of fostering or reinforcing public indifference and skepticism because so much political communication seems too negative, too focused on infighting, too scripted, too repetitious, and lacking convincing credibility.

Low trust in political communication may in turn exert a "negative halo effect" over government attempts to inform people in specific policy areas (such as the environment, food safety, or the future of public services). The relentless scrutiny and "unmasking" of the manipulative strategies and devices of politicians and their advisers by skeptical journalists compromise the authority of the politician as spokesperson. This appears to be a source of increasing concern to serious journalists and politicians. It has prompted a sort of "politics of trust" among the latter, including projection of the leader as exceptionally trustworthy, vigorous defenses of the leader's integrity, and adoption of the language of the contract in campaigners' relations with the electorate.⁸ However, this approach may be vulnerable to the unforeseeable and uncontrollable hazards of political life, while the search for "catchy" promises may distort policy priorities.

But two counterweights to such an emphasis on short-term communication success should also be borne in mind. Governments may need deeper and more lasting public support to cope with certain problems that arise from the press of social change. Tackling issues of social security and welfare reform in the United States and Britain today will bring results only in the long term. Yet, even genuine attempts to cultivate an informed public opinion may be compromised by the wariness of journalists and citizens toward the manipulative face of the present-day publicity process. In addition, politicians may be held to account for the validity of their claims by media-based forums of informed analysis, commentary, interviews, and discussion. This raises the question of whether and how media abundance is affecting the organization of such forums.

Increased Competitive Pressures. As media abundance advances, politics intended to inform, reveal, or persuade must vie for the attention of editors, reporters, and audiences in a far more competitive environment. The sources of increased competitive pressure are formidably numerous. They include not only the availability of more television channels that people can view, pitting their news and current affairs vehicles against each other, but also the increased availability on them of entertainment, sport, and other more beguiling fare. In addition, there has been an upsurge of other forms of specialist journalism, which compete with political journalism for resources and appeal (e.g., business journalism, sports journalism, fashion journalism, celebrity journalism). At the same time, the once prestigious and relatively sheltered place of political journalism inside media organizations has been undermined by the stronger market orientation of commercially financed news suppliers, driven to base the news on what will hold costs down and keep advertisers sweet and what market research and focus groups, along with rule-of-thumb hunches about human interest appeals, tell them will attract bigger audiences. Moreover, the big players of political journalism no longer control the field they once commanded. They are now jostled (sometimes even jeered) by many new and less inhibited makers and breakers of news in talk shows, tabloids, and Internet Web sites. Even the still public-service minded BBC News (1998, p. 7) has stated in a recent paper that its news, current affairs, and political programs are entering "a period of

hyper-competition” in which “a ‘pick-and-choose’ news culture” prevails, “where attention is fickle and the decision to view a particular program is often based on subject matter, personal relevance and convenience rather than brand loyalty.”

The logic of this situation points to at least four consequences for political communication, for which there is also a certain amount of supporting evidence. First, political coverage continually comes under review and pressure to demonstrate its compatibility with media organizations’ goals. Thus, in Britain in 1998, the BBC undertook a far-reaching news and current affairs program strategy review, while the advertising-financed ITV network reviewed the entirety of its factual output. Neveu (1996) describes the many twists, turns, and tried and discarded options of “a crisis of political programming” with which the French television networks had to grapple in the changed media landscape of the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars should monitor the processes and outcomes of such reviews.

Second, “sacerdotal” approaches to politics⁹ tend to be regarded as not viable for reception by mass heterogeneous audiences. Typically, politics must fight for its place in reporting and scheduling on the basis of its news value or likely audience appeal. Recent signs of this situation include drastic reductions of party convention coverage by the U.S. networks, similar reductions in verbatim reporting of parliamentary debates by Britain’s broadsheet press, the near demise of long-form documentaries in many national broadcasting systems, and evidence from a BBC survey of many Britons’ disapproval of over-the-top coverage of political events (including the 1997 general election campaign). An exception is the continuing readiness of U.S. and many European broadcasters to present lengthy candidate debates during national election campaigns. This may be explained by the large audiences that debates still attract.¹⁰

Third, given that much of the increased competition stems from entertainment, “infotainment” approaches to politics are here to stay and may proliferate. This is reflected not only in the explosion of subgenres designed as hybrids—breakfast shows, news magazines, talk shows, crime watches, tabloid television, and so forth—but also in the further mixing of information with drama, excitement, color, and human interest in the topics, formats, and styles of most programs. Just et al. (1996) and Brants (1998) have documented the emergence of such a tendency in the United States and in public and private channels in the Netherlands, respectively.

Fourth, conventional norms of political journalism come under great pressure, and uncertainty, differences, and controversy over them abound. As Barringer and Firestone (1999) depict the competitive source of this situation, “Never homogeneous, the national press is divided in ever-smaller slivers, with smaller outlets on the Internet and cable television sometimes overwhelming the slower and more sober judgments of mainstream news organizations” (p. A16). Recent consequences have included breakdown of the public-private divide in covering politicians, who are now fair game for reporting “misdemeanors” that used to be ignored; the greater receptivity of “quality” media to stories initiated by tabloids; significant growth in the coverage of “scandals” (Thompson, 1997); the heavy reliance of British reporters since the mid-1990s on the term *sleaze* to frame many different political stories of varying gravity (Dunleavy, Weir, & Brahmanyam, 1995); sensational interventions by journalistic “outriders” in the development of big political stories; and downward pressure on journalistic ethics in the more hectic news-making environment (speculation portrayed as news, unconfirmed information as fact, rumors as evidence, as well as printing of undersourced stories; cf. Ricchiardi, 1998).

Democracies may differ, however, in the vulnerability of their media systems to

such pressures. In the United States, the impact of increased competition on some aspects of political communication appears to have been drastic. For example, the commercial networks almost closed up civic shop altogether during the 1996 campaign, reducing their coverage of both the primary and general election races by about 40% in comparison with 1992. Also favored was “a style of coverage that is driven by entertainment values and a desire not to be left behind by the tabloids in attracting the mass audience” (Swanson, 1997, p. 1269).

So far, European systems do not seem to have succumbed to the same degree. It is true that many television programming changes ascribable to increased competition have been introduced. In Britain, talk shows featuring abnormal and bizarre behavior, including even *Jerry Springer*, now litter the daytime schedules. Slice-of-life “docu-soaps” have displaced traditional documentaries. Magazine programs are more brisk, arts programs have been pushed out of prime time, and soap operas have become sexier. But television coverage of the 1997 campaign was as massively swamping (and nearly as substantive) as ever (Norris et al., 1999). BBC News’ recently renewed commitment “to ensure that political argument goes beyond the sound bite to enhance public understanding of the complexities that underlie” policy issues (1998, p. 17) is backed up by provision of a range of interview and discussion programs on television and radio. And after reviewing published content analyses of the public and private television news services of several other European countries, Kees Brants (1998, p. 321) concludes that traditional standards are still largely being upheld:

Contrary to what one might expect, news programs on the public channels did not move to the periphery of or outside prime-time in order to compete with popular drama on commercial television. On the contrary, most commercial channels have followed the public schedule and seem prepared to compete with public broadcasters more on their “home ground” than with different content and formats.

The influence of two systemic factors may lie behind this difference. Culturally, European publics may still be more receptive to news agendas led by serious politics than is the U.S. audience. Differences of broadcasting history have also ensured that much of Europe was exposed to the system-straddling, standards-setting, and expectations-forming role of public service television, which the United States never experienced. This suggests that the impact of multichannel competition in a fully privately owned and commercially run media system may differ from its impact in media systems shaped at an early stage by the establishment of large public service organizations. It remains to be seen, however, whether the latter can withstand the full ravages of competition over the longer term.

Anti-Elitist Popularization and Populism. As a result of a third major development, the public sphere appears differently peopled than in the past. However protean and inchoate, this trend may be transforming relationships between political communicators and their publics.

Until recently, much political communication was a top-down affair. The issues of the day were mainly defined and discussed by politicians, journalists, experts, and interest group leaders for reception and consideration by voters. Ordinary members of the public could reward or punish the authoritative communicators only by continuing to listen or tuning out. Except for occasional “vox pop” clips, they were mainly

represented in the communication process by surrogates, such as opinion poll results and questions put by interviewers to politicians on their behalf. Of course, evidence of broad electoral support mattered to all concerned, but on most questions this was presumed to emerge more from a "bystander" public responding to external initiatives and events (Lang & Lang, 1983) than from a proactive one.

Since the early 1990s, however, strong currents of populism have been suffusing the worlds of both politics and the media. They emanate from the expansion of media outlets, which "has created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter the political world" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1998, p. 23). But they also stem from the decline of ideology, leaving a sort of legitimacy gap that populism helps to fill; from the growth of political marketing as an adjunct to campaign strategy; and from the diminished standing of political, media, and many other elites in popular eyes.

In such conditions, paternalistic discourse is no longer an option. As BBC News (1998) concluded when reviewing the future of its news services: "As choice expands, there appears to be less tolerance of an imposed news agenda" (p. 11). "We need to build an audience-focused culture throughout BBC News" (p. 8). Communicators who wish to inform, persuade, or simply keep the attention of their auditors must therefore adapt more closely than in the past to what ordinary people find interesting, engaging, relevant, and accessible. Politicians are impelled to speak in a more popular idiom and to court popular support more assiduously. Media organizations are driven to seek ways of making politics more palatable and acceptable to audience members.

Many manifestations of this development have surfaced in recent years. Media organizations are putting more stress on the accessibility of the language in which the news is written and on covering issues that matter most to people. During the last U.S. and U.K. elections, more efforts were made to engage voters in news stories by featuring the comments of ordinary citizens (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998; Graber, 1998). The voiced opinions of men and women in the street are being tapped more often in a veritable explosion of populist formats and approaches: talk shows; phone-ins (with both even-handed and aggressively opinionated hosts); solicitation of calls, faxes, and e-mails for response by interviewed politicians; studio panels confronting party representatives; larger studio audiences putting questions to politicians through a moderator; and town meetings of the air, deliberative polling and televised People's Parliaments. The identities and styles of these efforts are extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the combative to the reflective and from the grossly voyeuristic to the ultra-Athenian. The U.S. civic journalism movement also reflects populist inspiration. In Britain, the governmental process itself has been influenced by it. Experiments in public consultation over national and local issues are being undertaken by several departments of state; in 1998, the government established a "People's Panel" to measure people's attitudes toward public services; referendums, once thought alien to British parliamentary democracy, are on the increase; and some leaders have even mused that representative democracy may be a declining force, given the rise of the new media that can facilitate a direct democracy.

At this stage, little more than speculation about the likely consequences of this development is possible. Since audiences are exposed to more examples of ordinary people expressing their views and concerns (Swanson, 1997), they may expect authority figures to show that they take such concerns seriously. Their sense of efficacy—that ordinary people can make a difference—could be strengthened. Emotional/affective responses to political problems may be upgraded at the expense of cognitive/rationalistic ones. Political and media agendas may shift toward issues considered important to and readily understood by a mass audience, particularly moral issues of personal conduct,

social relationships, and social order.¹¹ Correspondingly, the more structural bases of political problems and process-oriented political developments could be downplayed.

The populist upsurge has attracted polarized evaluations. European scholars influenced by Habermas (1989) have tended to welcome it, for promising to crack open the “refeudalized” public sphere (in which elite opinions were allegedly transmitted to a powerless public with little access to the media). So-called “talk-show democracy” was also hailed by many American scholars for having energized the 1992 presidential campaign (Graber, 1994; Patterson, 1993)—although less was heard about this after 1996. According to Delli Carpini and Williams (1998), the role of elites as arbiters of civic understanding is returning to the public “as they play a more active role in constructing social and political meaning out of the mix of mediated narratives” (p. 15). Other commentators have drawn attention to a number of possible downsides: the downgrading of expertise in some populist arenas (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994); increased pressures for short-term solutions to political problems; the danger that, with mass attention focused on sociopersonal agendas, much official politics will be left in the hands of better informed elites; and its vulnerability to manipulation by demagogic leadership.

But whether the populist groundswell will mainly be empowering or merely symbolic, mainly redemptive or corrosive for civic communication, could depend in the end on the aims of its producers and on how it is received by audiences—on both of which we badly need more and better research.

Centrifugal Diversification. A fourth area of potential consequence concerns the relationship of communication to community. In the heyday of Age 2, much political communication was centripetal. The most attractive mass medium offered relatively little choice. The news audience was near-universal. Politicians aimed predominantly to project a limited set of master images and priorities throughout most sectors of the electorate. Conformist pressures on journalism fostered standardized notions of what counted as the top political stories of the day. Much investigative journalism presumed society-wide norms of proper and improper political conduct. Consensual issue agendas prevailed even across diverse news outlets.¹² Minority communications supplemented without supplanting mass communications.

In the abundance of Age 3, however, there are more channels, chances, and incentives to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions, and tastes. This reduces the size of the mass audience, both generally and for news. It facilitates the diversification of political communication forms (i.e., mass mediated vs. computerized; “old” vs. “new” political journalism; nationwide vs. subcultural discourse). It creates openings for previously excluded voices to express their views and perhaps even be noticed by mainstream outlets. It creates opportunities for would-be persuaders to seek more efficient impact by selectively focusing their communications on preferred population sectors. Indeed, “a well-established industry, with a host of technical resources [now] exists to serve commercial . . . and political strategists in finding the right audience at the right price” (Gandy, 1998, p. 8; cf. Turow, 1997). In most modern societies, then, centripetal communication is to some extent retreating and centrifugal communication is advancing.

It is difficult to tell how far this process will extend and what its main political communication consequences could be. Its impact may vary cross nationally, depending on how far the societies concerned are themselves culturally segmented and polarized. For political communication research, however, the implications could be unsettling. The presumption of mass exposure to relatively uniform political content, which has

underpinned each of the three leading paradigms of political effect—agenda setting, the spiral of silence, and the cultivation hypothesis—can no longer be taken for granted. At present, the following tendencies seem most discernible.

1. *Restored prospects of selective exposure.* These occur via the individual's own attitudes and allegiances, provided that they are absorbed into his or her social identity and that they are shared sufficiently widely to encourage and sustain media outlets catering to them.
2. *Readier pursuit of identity politics.* Specialized media based in "ethnic, occupational, class, regional, religious and other 'special interest' segments of the society" have long been a feature of 20th-century communications (Carey, 1969, p. 25). But in recent times, subgroup identities have become more meaningful for many people, have thrown up prominent spokespersons, and have given rise to new political claims and conflicts. Media abundance plays a part in this by providing more channels through which such claims can be voiced and support for them mobilized. Examples from recent research include evidence of the impact of right-wing talk radio on Republicans' perceptions of their party's primary election candidates in 1996 (Pfau et al., 1997), as well as the influence of ultra-orthodox Jewish community media on voting in Israel's 1996 election (Liebes & Peri, 1998). But these cases also suggest that effective communication for identity politics is most likely among extremist or isolated groups alienated from moderate politics and mainstream media.
3. *Multiplication of political agendas.* In the past, journalists were often consonant in their selection and framing of major political events and issues (Noelle-Neumann & Mathes, 1987). Although this may still be largely true of their responses to the top stories of the day, such conformism is less characteristic of certain issue areas that have attracted the concerted political and media strategies of astute protest groups.¹³ Neglected problems have been brought to the fore, conventional policy assumptions have been challenged, and closed systems of decision making have been broken into by alternative voices (cf. Dudley & Richardson, 1998). Although this process has reflected the declining status of traditional elites and the problematization of scientific authority, case studies show that media coverage has often been vital to it as well ("Protest Politics," 1998). And the chances of attracting and exploiting such coverage—to reach dedicated supporters, potentially concerned target audiences, and mainstream journalists looking for fresh stories and angles—are probably enhanced by the increased number of arenas toward which such efforts can be directed.
4. *More cyber politics.* Until recently, most studies of the increased provision of on-line services by parties, news media, and others supported Delli Carpini's (1996) characterization of their political role as "embryonic." Tiny minorities accessed them in the 1996 U.S. campaign; such users were biased toward upper educational and income groups, and they were heavy consumers of traditional media as well. In Britain, too, their role in the 1997 campaign was "minimal" (Ward & Gibson, 1998).

This impression of marginality could be fast overtaken, however, by the dynamic increase in Internet subscriptions, patronage, and applications in many Western societies. In fact, a number of candidates in the U.S. congressional elections of 1998 experimented successfully with e-mail and Web sites to reach supporters and volunteers for funds, organizational help, and attendance at campaign

events. Some even delegated its organization to outside specialist agencies (bringing them under the “professionalized” umbrella of their other campaign activities). Beyond such election applications, magazines of political comment have been created specifically for Internet users (e.g., *Slate*, *Salon*, *The Drudge Report*) and have occasionally achieved mainstream recognition and impact. Single-issue campaigners have also been inventive in fashioning web sites to reach, reinforce, and galvanize like-minded citizens.¹⁴

Thus, cyber politics could develop significantly in at least three directions in the not too distant future. It could become a campaign medium in its own right, not necessarily displacing but supplementing more traditional ones. It could become an important vehicle of interest group solidification and mobilization within and across national boundaries. And it could diversify the exposure to political communication of those regular users who enjoy exploring the access to a wider range of views and perspectives that the Internet affords.

5. *Widening cultural gaps in society.* Bigger differences between those with access to ample stores of political material and the informationally deprived could arise from fragmentation of the news audience. Likely, according to Hallin (1992, p. 24), is

a division of the audience into one part, mostly wealthier and better educated that “consumes” news of perhaps a higher quality than we have yet seen, and a large part—poorer, less educated, and substantially drawn from minority ethnic groups—that consumes nothing but “A Current Affair” and a sort of soft tabloid style of local news. And this would mean not only a widening of cultural barriers, but also an intensification of the knowledge gap.

6. *Reduced influence of “the political-media complex.”* The combined inroads of populist programming, minority media, and cyber politics could gradually reduce the proportion of time and space for news events and opinions shaped by the political-media complex (Swanson, 1997). As Entman and Herbst (1998) have put it:

The traditional sources [of] . . . a mass media infrastructure that is crumbling around us, nightly tv news programs and daily newspapers, face growing competition from information genres like talk radio, online chat rooms, 24-hour satellite news channels and customized news reports delivered by e-mail and website. [These create] a much more complex flow of information and disrupt the media’s and elites’ ability to establish dominant frames. (p. 23)

Audience Reception of Politics. It was noted earlier that media abundance changes how political messages are received by audience members. A “pick and choose” culture emerges. Political communication often blends into a flow of diverse other materials. In such conditions, much audience exposure may be shaped by one or more of the following features.

- *Inadvertency*—since relevant material can crop up anywhere at any time and not always in genres or formats that are designated as “political.”
- *Dilution*—since politics is often permeated with other elements. As politicians appear in mass audience talk or comedy shows or sports coverage, they are likely

to take the opportunity to satisfy the human interest concerns of such programs. Politicians are likely to seek to demonstrate empathy or their “regular guy” qualities.

- *Fragmentation*—since political communication pops up as bits and pieces more often in more outlets of more diverse kinds and contexts.
- *Redundancy*—as the same message is carried in a multiplicity of outlets, repetition is built in.¹⁵
- *Flexibility*—for abundance multiplies and diversifies the possibilities of patronage across a very wide range of media and information sources, enabling some people to be “specialists,” spending extensive amounts of their time consuming favorite materials, and others to be “eclectics,” sampling broader varieties of media fare.

All of this appears a quite new “ballgame” in which three significant issues arise:

1. *Audience structure.* Katz (1987) foresees a radical segmentation of the political audience arising from multichannel abundance, increased competition, and the disintegration of public service broadcasting. Vertical and horizontal Balkanization will ensue, as the communication patterns of elites and masses, as well as of the members of different sub-cultures, will increasingly diverge from each other. Schulz (1997), however, finds little evidence of such segmentation in an analysis of the television channels patronized regularly and frequently by the members of a large German sample surveyed in 1995. Their viewing repertoires were more overlapping than segmented, often spanning both the public and private networks.
2. *Political effects.* Page and Shapiro (1992) associate media abundance with a sort of political abundance, facilitating information transfer and opportunities for people to make up their minds on basic political issues. Media expansion and differentiation allow a wide range of problems, viewpoints, and informed analyses to be expressed somewhere in the system. And so long as that openness exists, not everyone has to pay attention to the public debate all the time: Extensive amounts of information and reasonable conclusions from it will trickle out through opinion leaders and cue givers to ordinary citizens, who can deliberate about it in their own face-to-face groups of family, friends, and coworkers. Schulz (1997), however, drawing on associations between cynicism and several different measures of exposure to television in the earlier-mentioned sample, considers that the new system encourages a “fragmented and ‘peripheral’ style of information reception” in which people are exposed to “the more spectacular, sensational and negative aspects of politics” and pick up “bits and pieces from different programs without contextualizing and digesting the information properly” (p. 66). But Bennett (1998) argues that public cynicism is less a response to television than to governments’ inability to serve the needs of a less coherent and assured socioeconomic order.
3. *Popularization.* On the one side, there are what might be termed “critical traditionalists,” who apply terms such as *tabloidization* and *dumbing down* to recent developments in the news media (Franklin, 1997). On the other side, what might be termed “popular culturalists” look more positively on the same developments. From its inception, leading cultural studies scholars took popular culture seriously in both its ideological and pleasure-giving aspects. In the 1980s, they were increasingly inclined to celebrate popular culture as expressions of solidarity, authentic vigor, and even resistance (e.g., Fiske, 1989). It was therefore natural

for some members of this school to react positively to the populist thrust in broadcast programming, lauding it for inviting people “to rethink and possibly revalue” their stands on moral, social, and political issues (Hermes, 1997, p. 16) or for “provoking responses from viewers and stimulating talk and discussions among them” (Dahlgren, 1997, p. 94).

Conclusion

We end with (a) a restatement of one of our starting points, namely the conflictual and non-coinciding developments in political communication; (b) an awareness of the need and opportunities for fresh directions in research; and (c) a question about what impact changes in the political communication environment will have on conceptions of democratic citizenship.

We are impressed by the tensions that exist between the positive opportunities afforded for promoting civic awareness and the downsides in the rush to embrace infotainment and the sway of politics-smearing journalism. Another tension lies in politicians’ enhanced opportunities to promulgate their line and their vulnerability to the “framing” power of journalism. The quest for more control and pretesting in the court of public opinion is in part a symptom of that vulnerability. Still another pits “substance” against “perception,” with citizens’ concerns to hold governments accountable for their delivery of economic and social fundamentals ranged against the fevered frenzies of a publicity process in which politicians struggle to manage impressions and journalists continually tell us what they are up to (Zaller, 1998). At one and the same time, more “top-down” and more “bottom-up” impulses are stimulated by media abundance, intensified elite professionalization versus increased populism. Overall, the third age is seemingly home to both Machiavellian¹⁶ and discursive models of politics.

Such a situation is highly promising for research but demands imagination in tailoring it to these tensions and the new conditions. Without claiming to offer a full inquiry agenda, a few prospects and priorities occur to us.

1. More observational research is necessary to ascertain how political communicators and media organizations are navigating change, redefining their purposes, and resolving their conflicts.
2. Among the field’s master paradigms, agenda setting may be most worth pursuing. Are media agendas diversifying across the many different outlets of political communication, and, if so, how are they being received by the audiences of those outlets?
3. Key boundaries that previously shaped the political communication field seem to be dissolving—for example, between “political” and “nonpolitical” genres, between matters of “public” and “private” concern, between “quality” and “tabloid” approaches to politics, between journalists serving audiences as “informers” and as “entertainers,” and between “mass” and “specialist,” “general” and “attentive” audiences. What will take their place? A new set of boundaries or an altogether less structured state of affairs? The situation calls for imaginative tracking research on both media content and audiences.
4. We know quite a lot about how politicians, journalists, critics, and academics perceive the new-found political communication system, but what do ordinary citizens make of it? What impressions of how political communication is shaped nowadays are uppermost in their minds? How are those features evaluated, say,

for helpfulness in following politics or for getting in the way of what citizens would most like to know?

5. Commentators have associated many benefits and dangers with the mushrooming forms of populist communication. These cry out for systematic research exploration. For whom and in what ways, if any, are these populist approaches and programs involving? Do they cultivate different perceptions of what politicians are like as communicators and political problem solvers from those conveyed in the news, ads, and conventional interviews? What audience and citizen roles do they encourage people to adopt?

The populist currents also open chances to revisit long-standing disputes in democratic theory, especially between those who mistrusted and those who advocated a more active mass participation in politics. Both politicians and journalists apply the new techniques in order to research and respond to the audience. But what are they listening to—in terms of quality and usefulness for policy and decisions? At the same time, there is a clear potential in the new system for independently extending and deepening citizenship, providing for popular “voice” and feedback through talk shows, phone-ins, discussion programs, citizen juries, and cyber politics. It is as if yet another boundary is being transgressed, between representative and direct democracy. The field is thus open for political theorists to devise fresh models of democracy suited to this complex third age of political communication.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the definition and implications of this notion, see Schulz (1997) and Blumler (1998).

2. Other commentators on the early postwar period concur. According to Mayhew (1997, p. 153), “The capacities of the public to formulate demands for policies in pursuit of collective goals, of political leaders to forge effective programs, and of adequate solidary ties to make the system work were taken for granted” at that time. According to Allen, Livingstone, and Reimer (1998, p. 71), society was imagined in films in the first decade after the Second World War “as largely based on shared values and a clear but accepted and just hierarchy of status and authority.”

3. The concluding chapter of Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) illustrates the prevalence of functionalist optimism in this period. Despite empirical evidence of shortfalls of interest, knowledge, and rationality in the voting behavior of many *individual* Americans, they argued that the democratic *system* worked well by maintaining a balanced distribution of involvement and indifference, stability and flexibility, progress and conservation, and consensus and cleavage. In their words, “Where the rational citizen seems to abdicate, nevertheless angels seem to tread” (p. 311)!

4. For elaboration, see Blumler (1990), Swanson (1992), Kavanagh (1995), and Blumler and Gurevitch (1995).

5. The early writings of Blumler and McQuail (1968, 1970) documented the growth of a substantial number of so-called “vote-guidance seekers” in the viewing electorate.

6. See Smith (1999) for British examples.

7. The forging of New Labour under the Blair team is an example, followed by remodeling of the Conservatives as a more listening and caring party under William Hague.

8. This was similar to Gingrich’s “Contract with America” and Labour’s frequently repeated five binding promises in the 1997 campaign—to reduce National Health Service waiting lists, schoolroom class sizes, are youth unemployment, and so forth.

9. These are approaches that regard certain political institutions or events as “intrinsically important,” entitling them to “substantial coverage as of right” (Blumler, 1969, p. 100).

10. In the United States, however, the presidential debates of 1996 were followed by fewer viewers than in 1992.

11. Examples are crime, discipline in schools, quality of family life, parenting and upbringing of children, sexual mores and behaviors, abortion, gender and ethnic relations, and the legitimacy of certain leisure enjoyments, like gun clubs, fox hunting, pornography on the Internet, and smoking.

12. In their pioneering agenda-setting study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found “a high degree of consensus among the news media about the significant issues” of the 1968 presidential campaign in the United States (p. 183).

13. British cases in point include issues centering on the environment, transport policy, energy policy, and food safety.

14. An example is www.moveon.org, which reportedly reached thousands of individuals fed up with the impeachment of President Clinton and dedicated to defeating those, standing for election in year 2000, who had pressed the charges in Congress.

15. Noting how proliferating cable news shows in the United States often flog high-profile political stories to death, Shepard (1999, p. 23) suspects that many viewers “overdose on the constant belaboring of any story, no matter how juicy.”

16. We use this term not as a synonym for “cynical” or “manipulative” but rather to refer, in its deeper political theory meaning, to the publicity sphere as an arena shaped by a set of unavoidable constraints to which even idealists must submit in order to stand a chance of achieving their ends.

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