

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Political communication is the interplay of information that is created, shaped, and distributed by those involved in the political system, the media, and the larger public which constitute the public sphere. Discursive power in the public sphere is the extent to which the information within it is controlled by a given player. Examining political communication as part of the media system and in terms of its relevance to the political system helps to delineate how it differs from place to place.

Comparative Study of Political Communication

Comparative research on political communication differentiates between at least two separate settings and seeks to illustrate how the macro-level context moulds the modes of communication differently. This macro-level, called the *communication ecosystem*, is composed of collaborative as well as contentious streams of information between political operators, their own communication outlets, the news media, social media platforms and the public. Political communication today has two simultaneous modes of operation: (i) the long-established, legacy media, top-down oriented model of mass communication; and (ii) the diffused, participatory, and interactive model of internet communication. The cohabitation of these two logics have turned media systems today into 'hybrid systems'.

Media-politics Relations

A political system's ability to exert influence on the news media depend on five factors: the function of the state and oversight in media policy; the existence of a majority driven or consensus government; the manner in which interest arbitration has occurred in the past regarding pluralism; the type of political system; and the history of democratisation. Working with these factors, Hallin and Mancini identified three media system types: the North Atlantic liberal model, a North-West European democratic corporatist model, and a Southern European polarised pluralist model. While subsequent media systems have been added, they are mostly associated with Western countries. Researchers understand the need to broaden their studies to non-Western countries and weak democracies as media systems can help illustrate why regime and system changes happen.

Political Information Flows

Political Actors

Political actors engage in three forms of message creation: government communication, parliamentary communication, and election communication. Their approach to each form of communication has become measured and professional as they identify the importance of the media and their role.

In the area of government communication, the government may take a party-centred or citizen-centred approach to communication. The former is an approach that is biased toward the party in power while the latter is a more citizen-focused approach that involves participation, in which institutions and policies require a non-partisan, civic form of talking to the public.

In the area of parliamentary communication, the news media in political systems has a substantial effect on setting the parliament's agenda. Studies have shown that opposition parties' parliamentary activities are more sensitive to media scrutiny than that of the party in power. Moreover, voicing opposition to a member of the government in parliament is also shown to increase chances of being seen by the press.

In the area of election communication, the 'fourth era of political communication' incorporates new campaign tools, techniques, and capabilities made possible by the rise of big data technology. The resultant individual-centred campaigns utilise the internet and algorithms to target specific individuals according to their media consumption. The logic of these campaigns is datafication that involves micro-analysis and mobilising accordingly. Despite the ubiquity of data-driven campaigns, the particularities of a certain country determine the methods that campaign experts will use.

Media Actors

Over the latter half of the 1900s, the news media in many Western countries are thought to have become more objective in their reporting on politics. However, they have also tended towards becoming interpretative. A study in 2013 illuminated three types of news coverage. US reporting, even though it tends to be interpretative with news analysis and background stories, still commits to maintaining a fact-based style that depends on expert positions, and a view from both sides of the story. Scandals are exceptions to this manner of reporting. Compared to the US, the Italian model of reporting is inherently adversarial, pessimistic, and opinion driven. A third style found in German and Swiss newspapers contains both news and opinion features heavily but on separate pages. Often country specific factors determine the framing, negativity, bias, and personalisation of news.

National Audiences

In most countries, notable generational breaks can be seen in the type of news sources consumed. Older citizens continue to depend on traditional news sources which they use regularly, while younger groups use digital and social media heavily but rely on them for news infrequently. Different countries vary in the degree to which their audiences are splintered, polarised, and tuned out of news completely. The tendency appears to be that the blend of the changing nature of democracy, hybrid media and political communication ecosystems creates outcomes that are ambivalent.

Adapted from Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch, 'Political communication' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

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Neville Jayaweera, 'Mass media and state in Sri Lanka – the uncomfortable juxtaposition' (1978) 5 *Media Asia* 68, 77