



## Introduction: Communication and Civic Engagement in Comparative Perspective

W. Lance Bennett

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# Introduction: Communication and Civic Engagement in Comparative Perspective

W. LANCE BENNETT

*The present era is defined by sweeping changes in economies, social institutions, political party systems, and communication processes in many nations. These changes go by various names from globalization to poststructuralism. The impact of these tectonic shifts in the political foundations of nations is greatly debated. In particular, considerable uncertainty surrounds the effects of various changes on the importance of politics for individual citizens and for the kinds of civic activities that people engage in and even regard as political. This is an important time for communication scholars to develop comparative frameworks that bring conceptions of social change together with how people located in various cultural, demographic, and audience groups define their relations to government and, more broadly, to civil society. At stake is our understanding of the role of communication in shaping these political relations, and in shaping the attitudes of citizens about politics, government, and society itself.*

**Keywords** comparative political communication, citizenship, civic engagement

Recent debates on both sides of the Atlantic have raised questions about possible declines in the psychological importance and organizational coherence of traditional politics. Some observers offer gloomy views about contemporary civic life, as reflected in diminished confidence in government institutions, declines in voting, and shifts in political identity and identifications with others in society. Proponents of the civic decline school often argue that these changes are caused, or at least aggravated, by communication. Popular communication-centered explanations for civic decline include the isolating effects of television, the tabloid trends in news media, and the rise of political marketing techniques that break up society by appealing to immediate individual emotions over broader social identifications (Putnam, 2000; Turow, 1997).

In contrast, other observers argue that changes in national institutions and citizen identification patterns simply mark a transition from modern to late or postmodern society. In these views, new forms of public identity and civic life are emerging even as old patterns fade away. From this perspective, changes in political rhetoric, marketing

W. Lance Bennett is Professor of Political Science and Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communications at the University of Washington.

Address correspondence to W. Lance Bennett, Department of Political Science, Box 353530, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA. E-mail: lbennett@u.washington.edu

methods, campaign techniques, or news formats are less the causes of, than they are responses to, changing societies. For example, new forms of family, community, religion, work experience, and social association may be accompanied by more fluid social identities. Accompanying forms of civic engagement may be more closely linked to personal lifestyles. Indeed, for many of today's global citizens, the very private activities of consumption are regarded as having public and even international consequences for human rights, labor conditions, life in fragile democracies, and environmental quality. From these standpoints, politics is still thriving, but political engagement may be closer to home, less conventionally organized, and more likely to be defined in terms of struggles over evolving notions of rights, morals, and lifestyle values. It is increasingly likely that engagement can occur at both local and global levels without traditional participation through traditional government or national institutions. In this view, the forms of public life, and the ways in which communication organizes them, are not only changing, but they require new concepts and methods for study (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1997; Schudson, 1998).

These broadly different views of social and political change raise important questions about the political uses of communication and the very definitions of politics and citizenship in democracies. It seems particularly important to design new research that helps to identify new patterns of communication and civic engagement, to understand how they fit with more traditional political communication forms, and to compare those patterns across different societies. The need for new, theory-driven, comparative research on the changing relations among citizenship, politics, and communication motivated the creation of the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at the University of Washington (<http://depts.washington.edu/ccce>). The research agenda developed by the scholars affiliated with CCCE includes the following topical areas and questions.

## **A Research Agenda for a New Era of Citizenship, Politics, and Communication**

*Reassessing the role of traditional media and citizen information needs.* The agenda-setting function of the daily papers is challenged by the rise of the 24-hour news cycle and the fragmentation of news audiences. What are the political implications of the decline of traditional media gatekeeping both for public opinion formation and for the political communication strategies of groups, leaders, and candidates?

The fragmentation of media audiences and the growing personalization of information delivery raise a host of questions about how people process similar topical information from different media. Is the role of entertainment media in framing social issues increasing as the focusing capacity of news declines? How do people talk about social issues as conventional vocabularies of politics become less desirable in everyday communication?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of what has become known in the United States as “public” or “civic” journalism in this media environment? More generally, should journalists rely on citizen input through polls or deliberative forums to set the news agenda? To what extent does this create a short circuit between news topics and narrow audience self-interest—a short circuit that may sacrifice the general public interest information that journalists might better determine if left alone. (This assumes that journalists are left to their own news decisions—a dubious assumption in an era of increasingly commercialized media.) If the answer to “news that citizens can use” is not

to be found in civic or public journalism, what alternatives might help the press regain a more stable and useful mediating role in democratic communication? Parallel questions arise in many European media systems in which both party news organizations and public service media are being squeezed by commercial forces.

In the area of new media (which is rapidly converging with the old), how can the growing access to technologies such as the Internet be used to facilitate citizen networking and two-way communication both among citizens and between citizen networks and elites? What communication formats are most attractive, and what vocabularies, information retrieval, and communication options motivate continued engagement? And, of course, what happens to the large numbers of citizens who may be excluded from such information nets by the lack of access to computers, service providers, or even telephones (the now familiar “digital divide” problem)?

*Understanding the rise of “lifestyle” values and the related disengagement from traditional politics.* How have the symbols of politics, along with the communication strategies of political actors, changed in nations undergoing declines of traditional party and national identifications? As traditional symbols of political identification become less commonly shared, what kind of communication will constitute shared engagement with public issues for different kinds of people?

Are people who are less likely to respond to collective and traditional political appeals more likely to engage with concerns about life quality, such as threats to the environment, rights, or labor conditions surrounding the production of consumer items? Can disaffection from traditional politics be countered with lifestyle and consumer based value appeals? If so, does such engagement translate into identification with other causes, or to renewed interest in more conventional politics?

*The decline of common political experience and socialization to new politics.* What kind of imagined communities (either virtual or socially constituted) will new generations find and join? How are national and international boundaries, identities, and political regimes being shaped by the Internet, and by its growing use to promote global issue and cause campaigns? Is national citizenship slowly giving way to or being supplemented by “issue tribes” and global citizen initiatives?

How do people engage locally with social issues such as pornography, violence, drugs, crime, traffic congestion, environmental quality, and youth mentoring? Are these concerns regarded as political? How is information gathered and shared? And how can both traditional and new media facilitate such engagement? As social institutions and publics fragment, do non-governmental organizations (NGOs) fill the role of surrogate publics at all levels of government, and how does this change the way in which governments communicate with citizens?

*The new politics of the Internet.* Beyond the uses of the Internet for traditional political communication about issues and elections, there are many political aspects of cyber politics that are relatively neglected. For example, how many largely Internet-based cause campaigns currently exist, and what is their growth rate? How does participation in networked campaigns differ (both for people and for the policy impact) from more conventional group- and institution-based political engagement? For example, in what ways does it make sense to distinguish network activism from group based activism? And how can we conceptualize Net-based issue and cause campaigns, and how are they distinctive in their communication patterns, stability, membership commitments, and political effects?

How can we best understand the surrounding struggle over commercial and public uses of the Internet? What is the underlying ideology and role of the open source

movement? What sensible national and international policies need to be created for the governance of the Internet, and what provisions make sense for the protection of privacy and the preservation of public cyber-spaces?

What methods can be developed for mapping political networks, charting their changes over time, and assessing their effects? For example, how was a coalition of consumer advocates, open source ideologues, and business competitors formed and how did it work to secure landmark government antitrust action against the Microsoft operating system monopoly?

*Global citizenship initiatives.* While many observers see little change for conventional politics stemming from the Internet, others see the emergence of new network politics joining individuals across national boundaries in new political regimes engaged with the supra-national issues of a global order. For example, the increasing importance of NGOs linked in broad “affinity” coalitions may suggest new power arrangements that span traditional distinctions among local, national, and international politics. Not only do NGOs communicate with governments and the media in ways that may be different than traditional interest and lobbying organizations, but they may be filling the spaces in civil society created by the decline of traditional civic organizations.

With regard to what issues and campaigns (e.g., genetic modified food and organisms, environmental issues, human and labor rights) does it make sense to think about a convergence of local and global politics? And how do communication and participation in such campaigns differ from traditional interest campaigns oriented toward policy change through traditional participation in government institutions?

How can we measure the growth of global cause networks? How should we conceptualize the effects of participation in such networks in terms of consciousness, community building, and policy change? What are the promising new communication technologies and government policies for developing effective citizen networks?

## **An Inaugural Conference**

In May 2000, the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement and the West European Studies Center at the University of Washington sponsored a conference to explore these and other questions surrounding the contemporary state of communication and civic engagement. Scholars from Europe and the United States gathered in Seattle for two days of workshops on a range of topics related to this research agenda. In addition to the authors of the following short papers, Diana Mutz of Ohio State University also took part in the meeting. Susan Herbst of Northwestern University contributed a paper but was unable to attend the Seattle conference.

The brief articles in this issue of *Political Communication* are adapted from papers presented at that gathering and initially posted on the CCCE Web site. Authors were specifically asked not to present fully developed papers, but to share idea pieces in the spirit of opening their work to questions from, and collaborations with, scholars from different polities and paradigms. The focus was on raising important questions and exploring common strategies for addressing them. I think it is fair to say that the gathering produced an unusual bridging of the conventional divisions in our field. There was a strong sense of the need to rethink our conventional understandings of politics, citizenship, and communication in light of palpable changes in society, economy, and democracy around the globe. Perhaps most refreshing of all was the ease of dialogue among scholars from different nations who recognized that national differences, while important, were also rendered malleable by the sweeping changes confronting individuals and societies in this era of global economic and political change.

The first collection of papers address qualities of the political environments in which communication and participation take place. Philip Schlesinger explores the macro environment of the new Scottish parliamentary order, examining the communicative space created by press, politicians, and publics in an emerging system. Paolo Mancini examines the dissolving space for citizenship created by the related decline of party organization and the rise of commercial media in Italy. Gianpietro Mazzoleni notes that although party organizations have changed and media are more commercial, citizens continue to participate, albeit in more personalized and volatile ways. And Bruce Bimber considers how the Internet may be creating new political structures and organizations even as more traditional forms of organization and communication are in decline.

The authors in a second broad topical grouping explore changes in civic cultures as new technologies and social values come to dominate personal life. Peter Dahlgren considers the practices of Internet communication as potentially transformative of civic culture. Michael Delli Carpini examines the potential of the Internet to reconnect disconnected youth. And Margaret Scammell considers the ways in which consumer values and Internet political networks may converge to create a new consumerist politics with a global reach.

The next group of authors explores the perils and potential of public deliberation in both face to face and mediated environments. John Gastil shows why face to face deliberation is both important for, and technologically feasible in, modern democracy. Adam Simon and Michael Xenos consider the conditions under which news coverage of political conflicts may contain deliberative aspects. And Regina Lawrence and Lance Bennett argue that in an era of more personalized politics, the tendency toward journalistic sensationalism may actually contain more meaningful political content than is commonly assumed.

The area of community values and public spheres is addressed by the next pair of authors. Sabine Lang asks whether the increasing role of NGOs as surrogate publics in local communities enhances or restricts the dialogue between citizens and governments. And Nina Eliasoph explores the connection between child care and politics with an eye to whether seemingly private concerns about child-raising are potential points for political engagement.

Finally, we turn to questions about whether the traditional media still matter in the same ways for informing citizens. David Domke and his students explore the continued importance of elite cuing in matters of citizens' race perceptions. Bette Jean Bullert shows how new media and old have become part of contemporary global issue campaigns, each contributing an important element to the communication of political messages to broader publics. And David Swanson reflects on how media systems and politics have changed in parallel ways, with some potentially negative consequences for citizen engagement in democratic societies.

The papers are published here with few changes from the form in which they were delivered at the workshop. The authors are to be commended for accepting the editor's suggestion that they resist the temptation to turn their fresh and reflective think pieces into full-blown conventional articles. They are offered here in the spirit of continuing the dialogue about how to theorize and research communication and civic engagement in changing societies.

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