

THE BIAS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE IN THE STUDY OF
MASS MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Paper presented at the AEJMC 1996 Annual Convention
Communication Theory & Methodology Division

Anaheim, California
August 11, 1996

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The Bias of Political Science in the Study of Mass Media and Democracy

In a recent commentary on the "disciplinary divide" between political science and communication research, Jamieson and Cappella (1996) observe that academic disciplines "see research through the biases created by their presuppositions and preferred methods" (p. 13). These biases, they argue, cause political scientists to focus primarily on outcomes and the social-economic judgments that shape them, while prompting communication researchers to study the messages that constitute campaigns. An assumption common to much political communication research--whether conducted from a political science, mass communication, or rhetorical perspective--is that media play an intervening role in the political process. Functionally, media are seen to occupy an intermediary position between candidates who require coverage to run for elective office and voters whose political behaviors depend, in large part, on information they receive from news. Theoretically, media use has thus been widely regarded as an independent variable that helps explain some desired outcome, or dependent variable, such as political participation, attitude formation, or vote choice.

Regardless of perspective, the "media/politics interface," as Graber (1987) calls it, has been examined in terms of certain prevailing, cross-disciplinary assumptions.

The Origins of a Marginal Press

Early election studies which examined factors involved in voting decisions seemed to demonstrate that the news media had little influence on the vote (e.g. Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960) and therefore played a relatively minor role in the political process. Despite evidence to the contrary (see Becker et al., 1975; O'Keefe, 1975; Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985; Rogers, 1994), the Lazarsfeld and Berelson studies held that media exposure, rather than changing people's voting decisions, simply reinforced or strengthened already existing attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. These early, essentially negative, findings gave rise to the "limited effects" school of media research synthesized by Klapper (1960) and effectively discouraged the further assignment of much importance to mass media in the political decision-making process (Graber, 1987). Subsequently, the news media's primary contribution to democratic theory came to be viewed in terms of its role in political socialization (Graber, 1989). Media were thus generally regarded as subordinate institutions and, much like school, the family, and the church, were expected to lend legitimacy to political processes (Davis, 1990).

field" (early 1980s) period of communication research.

Throughout this definitional decade, studies in political communication bolstered the case that news messages, institutions, and, increasingly, journalists themselves were central to the conduct and outcome of elections and a dominant influence on the public's perceptions of candidates and issues (Graber, 1987).² The limited effects model had become outmoded.

Yet despite these developments, many democratic theorists as well as empirical researchers in political science continue to ignore or gloss over what Zolo (1992) calls the "centrality of communication." Here, we encounter the first normative orientation, which guides studies of politics toward "the needs of the political system, in particular the electoral component of that system, and from the perspective of political elites" (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985:269). In this vein, the early "classics" continue to exert considerable influence on the conceptualization and execution of much political communication research. As recently as the late 1980s, writers such as Dahl (1989) and Sartori (1987) could devote entire books to political processes without directing any attention to the relationship between democracy, public opinion, and mass

communication research, has long had difficulty demonstrating whether mass media exposure, attention, and use has observable effects on audiences outside of controlled laboratory settings (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Jamieson & Cappella, 1996). As Bartels (1993) notes, the scholarly literature on this subject has been much better at "refuting, qualifying, and circumscribing the thesis of media impact than at supporting it" (p. 267). Given the pervasiveness of the mass media and their virtual monopoly over election information in advanced industrial democracies, the inability to prove a causal connection between media messages and voter behavior is, according to Bartels, "one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science" (1993:267). Indeed, with regard to political communication, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) argue that the lack of a (universal) theory of media effects significantly impedes our understanding of how a mass democracy even works (p. 3).

Political science is strongest when assessing factors that influence voters' political attitudes and voting decisions and weakest when analyzing media content elements (Graber, 1987). This is ironic, considering that when political scientists discuss the substance of media

and politically balanced" (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985:268), represent a threat to the healthy functioning of the democratic system. In contrast to an ideal political communication system, existing media practices are regarded as increasingly intrusive, disruptive, and an inappropriately interpretive part of the campaign process, especially in presidential elections, where journalism has filled a vacuum created by the decline of the political parties as the primary mediating institution between politicians and the public (Patterson, 1993; Kerbel, 1995). With the introduction of direct-vote primaries to select presidential nominees after the 1968 election, political parties were forced to appeal to heterogeneous and widely dispersed statewide audiences and, in conditions of a mass (or direct) democracy, became dependent upon mass media to reach voters (Patterson, 1980). This situation amplified the press' role in elections and has allowed political correspondents to act as a kind of screening committee or filtering mechanism for presidential aspirants (Schudson, 1983; Davis, 1990). Media institutions are thus held to be in direct, competitive opposition to the political parties (Davis, 1990).

political process--the first normative orientation. More contextually, they evoke Lippmann's (1922/1965) ideas on the limits of the reasoning powers of ordinary citizens, and his argument that journalism could best serve society by supplying experts with information needed to make intelligent governing decisions. Modern media intrusion theory thus complements Lippmann's "elite pluralism." It is interesting to note the expansiveness and pull of the media intrusionist view. As to its expansiveness, champions of media intrusion theory are not confined to political science. They appear in slightly different form in the field of communication wherever an assumption of strong media effects and a robust normative view of society (i.e. what makes for a good society) intersect. Neil Postman's (1985) critique, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, about the negative social implications of an entertainment-oriented media, and Lichter, Rothman & Lichter's (1986) survey of media practitioners, The Media Elite: America's New Power Brokers, "proving" that journalists have an overtly partisan or liberal bias, are just two examples of this genre.

As to its allure, recent communication research continues to validate the intrusionist position. Indeed, we

institutional themes and relentlessly negative portrayal of political elites by the press. For neoconservative critics, the line of demarcation between a fair and balanced press and a biased, openly antagonistic press is the Vietnam War period (roughly, the late 1960s), when the press began to venture beyond official sources of information and started to become more interpretive in orientation (Hallin, 1985).

This period of time coincides with the rise of neoconservatism as a political perspective. In 1970, Dorrien (1993) notes, the editors of Dissent magazine began to actively look for a term to describe "an assortment of former liberals and leftists who had recently moved to the Right" (p. 1). Regardless of their exact location on the political spectrum (e.g. the right wing of the Left or the left wing of the Right), neoconservatives were united in their disillusionment with the Johnson administration's War on Poverty and Great Society social programs--not for their intended effect of helping the have-nots and creating a more egalitarian society but for encouraging the formation of "a 'New Class' of parasitic bureaucrats and social workers" (Dorrien, 1993:1).

Whereas traditional conservatives favor the outright elimination of the welfare state and a return to the

Neoconservative critiques of television gained currency in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Braestrup (1977, cited in Carragee, 1993) contends that negative coverage of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam transformed an American military victory into a troubling psychological defeat. Critical reports of the war, so this argument goes, eroded public support for American foreign policy and contributed to American defeat (Rothman, 1979). The influence of this argument can be seen in subsequent American military interventions, which have been characterized by a high degree of media management. Robinson (1981) directly locates the problem of America's crisis of confidence during the post-Vietnam War, post-Watergate era with network news. "Our doubts about ourselves and hostility toward our institutions would be far less severe were it not for the images we receive from electronic media, more specifically, from network journalism" (Robinson, 1981:314).

Patterson, who has built a career assailing the press' role in three influential, and suggestively titled, books--The Unseeing Eye (1976, with McClure), The Mass Media Election (1980), and Out of Order (1993)--is perhaps the leading neoconservative critic of media and politics writing today. Patterson (1993) regards the press as a jaded,

news drives a wedge between candidates and voters rather than serving to bring them together. Hence, political journalism as currently practiced violates the third normative orientation of political science--that media coverage should be comprehensive, scrupulously fair and politically balanced. Other writers have not been so circumspect. Rothman, for instance, has written that the national news media's political role is not only inappropriate, it has directly "contributed to the decay of traditional political and social institutions" (1979:346).

The Adversarial Argument

Another tenet of the neoconservative argument, and one which exacerbates the normative assumption of political fairness, is that news media engage primarily in an adversarial relationship with political power (Patterson, 1980, 1993; Davis, 1990; Carragee, 1993). While the oppositional position represents only a partial reading of the intricate press/politics relationship, it resonates with a wide audience (not the least of which are journalists) because both the press and political actors view themselves in these terms (Rivers, 1970; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981). The metaphors of the press as the "Fourth Estate" or "watch dog" on government stem from this professional ethos or

production and distribution may have democratized the market for news, the production of news became centralized, placing the press under corporate control (Hallin, 1985). Because of its close association with economic power, "modern journalism is characterized by a great reverence for political authority" and "revolves like a satellite around the center of political power" (Hallin, 1985:309).

Consequently, the mainstream media, Hallin argues, has developed an "intimate institutional connection with the state, despite the absence of formal state control" (1985:305).

Despite these contradictions, the adversarial model persists primarily because it occupies an ideological position, that is, it prescribes how journalists should normatively regard leading political actors and governmental institutions: as adversaries (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981:470). The adversarial model's dominance among journalistic practitioners makes it attractive for use by political scientists. Moreover, Carragee argues that the attention and prominence the neoconservative thesis of oppositional media has achieved in recent years "may owe more to the conservative political climate in the United States than to the adequacy of its arguments" (1993:341).

(Edsall, 1995; Putnam, 1995).⁶ Thus, he argues, the country's supply of social capital, or citizen engagement in public affairs, has eroded. This privatization of public life through technological means, to quote Ithiel de Sola Pool, "will promote individualism and will make it harder, not easier, to govern and organize a coherent society" (Pool, 1990:262, cited in Putnam, 1995). Putnam's position typifies the bias of political science in studies of media and democracy, and one does not have to look far or very closely to see a strong normative orientation at work.

Putnam's argument points to two assumptions driving much political communication research, namely, that people should be concerned and accepting of the political system and that the role of media should be conceived in terms of what they might do to people rather than what people might be doing with media (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985). In Putnam's research design, television exposure is conceptualized as an independent variable acting on the dependent variable, political participation, and does not constitute active civic engagement. Instead, television is seen as the "800-pound gorilla of leisure time" (Robinson & Godbey, 1995, cited in Putnam, 1995). Television thus displaces "nearly every social activity outside the home,

analyzing politics in terms of the needs of the political system, have been placed ahead of the evolving political ecology, in which mass media play an increasingly central role.

Traditional conceptions of political participation, then, may not go far enough in explaining actual citizen involvement in democratic processes. Like liberal democratic theory itself, which has been under attack for failing as a theoretical justification of individualism in a highly stratified, corporatized industrial society, traditional participation measures may be inadequate indicators for explaining the changing relationship of the citizen to the (late) modern state. Rather than "relegating media-related activity to the status of a minor mode of political participation," as political science has through the National Election Studies (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985:284), media involvement might instead be treated as a primary or major mode of civic participation, that is, as a dependent variable that is an integral component of popular consent.

From this perspective, the question of democratic legitimacy and political stability in the face of low voter turnout, decreased traditional participation, and a largely

such areas as uses and gratifications, agenda setting, reception analysis, and critical theory (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981), the field has not entirely left behind the once (and many say still) dominant "voter persuasion paradigm" of media having effects on voting choices (Nimmo & Swanson, 1991). As this paper has shown, research at the media/politics interface is driven by basic normative orientations, or biases, that stem largely from the disciplinary assumptions of political science but which are embraced by communication. Whether explicit or implicit, these biases frame many of the questions, and thus many of the findings, of political communication research. Moreover, more than one normative orientation may be at work in analyses of media and democracy at any one time.

As Graber (1987) suggested almost a decade ago, political communication researchers on both sides of the disciplinary divide "need to become better acquainted with each other's work so that their combined efforts can produce superior findings in this complex and fluctuating research area" (p. 10). Although the problem of "shocking mutual ignorance or disregard" between political science and communication research that Graber observed in 1987 has somewhat subsided since that writing, the media/politics

one with a great deal of representational validity. As Graber (1989) notes, media coverage constitutes "the very lifeblood of politics because it shapes the perceptions that form the reality on which political action is based. Media do more than depict the political environment; they are the political environment" (p. 238). Media's time as a dependent variable may have come.

⁵ Dorrien (1993) defines neoconservatism as "an intellectual movement originated by former leftists that promotes militant anticommunism, capitalist economics, a minimal welfare state, the rule of traditional elites, and a return to traditional cultural values" (p. 8).

⁶ Correlations, of course, are only one component of causality and never "prove" anything by themselves. While they can lend support to an argument, they do not rule out the vast number of potential third variables that could also determine the relationship.

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