

The Evolution of Political Communication as an Academic Discipline: Media Infrastructures, War, and the Making of an Interdisciplinary Field

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ABSTRACT: Political communication is becoming an interdisciplinary research field but somehow histories either diminish its evolution to a media-effects line or provide a disjointed catalogue of theories. The paper provides an evolutionary genealogy which reinvents political communication as a hybrid field of studies due to the transformation of media infrastructures, war, ideological conflict and the transformation of models of the citizen and of the public opinion. The discussion starts with Greek and Roman rhetoric as the initial theories of civic persuasion and then the non-Western traditions of symbolic governance to prevent being confined to a highly Eurocentric origin story. It is followed decade after decade, tracing the development of interwar propaganda research and the theory of the public opinion, wartime persuasion studies, Cold war press-system thinking and comparative agendas, the effects researches of the television, the sociology of news rooms, the agenda setting, framing and priming, and the subsequent mediatisation and the digital transformation as cumulative developments in the development of the field. The article posits that political communication has developed by the process of accretion as opposed to paradigm shift. Its long-standing definitional dispute is a product of structural interdisciplinarity, which is formed through the intersection of journalism studies, mass communication research, political science, sociology and behavioural and social psychology. Instead of putting forward a single definition of coherence in political communication, it suggests that the major concern of coherence in political communication is a recurrence of problem spaces of communication to legitimacy, power, and judgement of the people in the changing media environments.

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Introduction

What “Evolution” Means in Political Communication

Political communication is a label that is frequently regarded self-evidently in relation to scholarship on the topic of politics and media. However, development of the field is not that easy, and it cannot be reduced to a single field. Political communication arose due to the fact that modern political orders faced the same fundamentally basic problem despite a new changing condition i.e. how political power is attained, challenged, or compromised through communication, and how publics make judgements with restrictions of information, attention, and institutional mediation (Lippmann, 1922; Deutsch, 1965). What changed with time was not just the content of research but the political life infrastructure as well. The relations between political actors, journalism institutions, and citizens were reorganized, as long as print publics, radio, television, and subsequently other platforms were used. With every shift, new research questions were produced, and new borrowings pursued in neighbouring disciplines were encouraged.

In this paper, there is a response to the need of an account that exhibits evolution by progression. In this case, evolution is considered as two processes which are connected to each other. The initial one is cumulative expansion. The new theories and techniques created by new technologies and political situations were additive to the previous work, not fully substituting it (Berelson, 1959; Katz, 1987; Bajwa et al., 2022). The second is unremitting contestation. Political communication was conceptually ill-posed since it was developed as an interdisciplinary convergence. Institutions, distribution of power and behavioural results were stressed by political scientists (Almond, 1990). Production, professional norms, and news authority were also investigated in journalism (Schudson, 1989; Gans, 1979; Ayub et al., 2026). The study of mass communication tended to focus on effects, exposure, and information flows (Klapper, 1960; DeFleur & Lowery, 1995; Ali et al., 2024). The social and behavioural psychology was concerned with persuasion, cognition and attitude process (Festinger, 1957; Hovland et al., 1953; Cacioppo and Petty, 1984). The sociology focused on opinion making, institutional power, and construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). These traditions were not integrated into one cohesive structure. They created a gray area the borders of which are controversial (Jamieson, 2017; Kenski & Jamieson, 2017).

To render this development visible, the paper will be chronologically followed. It starts with classical traditions of persuasion, moves to more general cultural precursors of symbolic governance, and then follows the twentieth century decade by decade, with the prevailing schools and problem-spaces. It will attempt to demonstrate how journalism and mass communication scholarship came to be constitutive of political communication, and how psychology, sociology, and political science defined its practices and conceptual strains.

Greeks and Romans: Rhetoric as a Theory of Civic Persuasion and Authority

Rhetorical theory is the oldest intellectual basis of political communication. Aristotle viewed rhetoric as a civic exercise that is tied to the common opinion, and provided an analytical model of credibility, emotion, and reasoning as tools of persuasion in the decision-making process involving a group of people (Aristotle, 2007). Roman rhetoric, invented by Cicero, associated the power of persuasion with civic virtue and political power, and the oratory of citizens as a part of the government and legitimacy instead of a methodology (Cicero, 2001). These customs were significant to subsequent political communication scholarship in two respects. To begin with, they postulated politics as communicatively constituted. Second, they pre-empted the connection between speaker authority and audience judgement that subsequently re-occurs in discussions of propaganda, media credibility, and popular opinion.

Their limitations also ended up being formative research problems. Classical rhetoric presupposed limited publics and did not foresee the contemporary mass mediated space. Civic oratory gave way to mass publics generating pressures on theories of mediation, publicity, and cognition that subsequent disciplines provided.

Political Communication Pre-Modern West: Traditions of Symbolic Governance and Cross-Cultural Persuasion

A lineage of modern Western history which starts and stops at the modern west creates a danger of imposing a single course of history as a universal one. The practices of strategic communication to achieve legitimacy, ritual authority and statecraft were well established in many political orders long before the modern academy came to be known as a field of political communication. Comparative rhetorical studies have examined Confucian traditions as both a mode of governance by moral discourse, by ritual enactment and not just adversarial persuasion, as examples of alternative models of communicative legitimacy (You, 2006). It is also pointed out in political sociology and historical pragmatics that ritual performance can be used as a form of political communication that generates identity, authority and social coherence as a result of symbolic action (Koster, 2003). Such traditions are not a part of political communication as a contemporary field. They however assist in understanding why subsequent definitions become volatile whenever scholars realise the cultural and institutional instability of politics and communication.

It is an early sign of interdisciplinarity as well. Political communication when viewed to include persuasion, symbolic governance, public judgement and even institutional mediation, does not demand a single analytical language.

Naming and Defining the Field: Why Definition Became a Discipline-Level Problem

Definitional struggle is no marginal matter in political communication. It shows the way the field is shaped at the crossroads of various disciplines. The narrative of the hybrid field by Jamieson presents political communication as a domain of political science, communication studies, and other social sciences that have come to have overlapping research agendas but have not found a single stable point (Jamieson, 2017). Kenski and Jamieson introduce political communication as the analysis of political messages, information flows, and symbolic transactions that have a bearing on power and governance within the same context of the handbook, but they admit that the scope of political communication increases with media change (Kenski & Jamieson, 2017). The definitional problem is thus a historical product of interdisciplinary construction, not a mere inability to be conceptually clear.

Institutional consolidation matters here. The existence of organised sections and divisions in professional associations marks a stage in disciplinary recognition, even if the intellectual work pre-dates formal structures. APSA's Political Communication organised section exists as an institutional node that signals the field's status within political science. Likewise, the ICA Political Communication Division provides a parallel disciplinary home within communication studies. These institutional anchors do not resolve definitional contestation. They reflect the field's hybrid identity.

The 1920s: Interwar Propaganda and Public Opinion as the First Modern School

The first recognisable modern "school" of political communication scholarship formed in the interwar period. Its research problem was shaped by industrial-scale persuasion and the experience of the First World War i.e. how mass publics could be mobilised, managed, or redirected through mediated symbols.

Lasswell's early propaganda scholarship is central. In "The Theory of Political Propaganda", he conceptualised propaganda as the management of collective attitudes through symbolic manipulation, placing communication inside the machinery of political power rather than outside politics as mere messaging (Lasswell, 1927). This work sits at a crossroads of political science, psychology, and communication analysis, and it helped define propaganda as a research object. Lasswell's later model of "who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect" became an adaptable analytic template that travelled across disciplines, shaping later communication research agendas (Lasswell, 1948).

Parallel to this, the theory of public opinion by Lippmann stated that citizens act under mediated pictures of the world instead of having direct access to the political complexity and as such, developing epistemic constraints on the ideals of democratic informed public judgement (Lippmann, 1922). Bernays, who operated in the related field of publicity, defined propaganda as a structured process of opinion-making in the mass society and defined the managerial rationality of persuasion in democratic settings (Bernays, 1928). The interwar era therefore generated a group of core assertions concerning mediated publics, persuasion and power. Such assertions influenced subsequent studies on campaigns, news impact, and opinion.

The 1930s: Mass Media, Radio, and the Expansion of Psychological and Sociological Approaches

The rise of radio and mass broadcasting intensified the concern over the psychological aspects of mediated influence. In earlier studies on the psychology of radio, as in the case of broadcasting, it was perceived as a novel aspect of attention, identification, and shared mood, and examples of how psychological issues entered into communication analysis can be seen (Cantril & Allport, 1935). Meanwhile, there was an increasing tendency of the emerging social sciences to regard communication as a variable in governance and collective behaviour.

This decade is also important as it prefigures subsequent methodological conflicts. Research on communication was tugged between interpretative study of the symbolism and the empiricist desires to quantify the influence. That stress subsequently became a hallmark in the field of political communication.

World War II and Persuasion Research and Institutionalisation of Measurement, 1940s

The Second World War was a catalyst to the integration of persuasion research. The circumstances of wartime provided sufficient motivation to the systematic research of morale, persuasion, and information control. One of the sources of methods and concepts was social psychology.

This shift is symbolic in the work of persuasion by Hovland. Experimental arguments were incorporated into communication studies as the Yale tradition associated message variables, source credibility, and audience predispositions with quantifiable attitude responses (Hovland et al., 1953). This was later developed by Sherif and Hovland into social judgement, providing additional conceptual resources to the examination of assimilation and contrast in attitude modification, which strengthened the behavioural and cognitive turn (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). The connection between communication and state power was also visible during war time and shortly afterwards during the immediate post-war context that subsequently contributed to the Cold War psychological operations and the comparative press-system thinking.

The years of war also testify to the reason why journalism took the center stage in political communication. The institutions of journalism were targets and channels of state messages. The information/persuasion boundary was challenged in practice and scholars have to consider them as political infrastructure.

The 1950s: Limited Effects, Cognitive Dissonance, and the Re-Socialisation of Influence

The 1950s are often framed as the “limited effects” era, but the more accurate view is a re-theorisation of influence. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet showed that interpersonal relations and opinion leaders mediate media influence, developing the two-step flow perspective (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Katz later clarified and updated the two-step flow idea, emphasising social structure and interpersonal networks as key mechanisms (Katz, 1957). The result was a more sociological view of publics than earlier mass society assumptions.

Klapper synthesised this period by arguing that media effects often operate through reinforcement and selective processes rather than direct conversion, while also emphasising that effects occur in interaction with social and psychological factors (Klapper, 1960). At the same time, cognitive theories shaped political psychology and later political communication. Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory offered a mechanism for post-decision attitude stabilisation and selective exposure, which later research on political information processing developed further (Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986). This matters for political communication because it helps explain why citizens may resist counter-attitudinal information and why persuasion effects are conditional.

The 1950s therefore reshaped the model of the citizen from a passive recipient to a socially embedded, psychologically motivated interpreter. That shift made political communication more interdisciplinary by necessity, since no single discipline could explain these combined processes.

The 1960s: Systems Thinking, Press Models, and Early International Foundations

The 1960s saw increasing interest in communication as a system of control and coordination in governance. Deutsch's model treated government as a communication and control system, linking information flows to decision-making and feedback processes (Deutsch, 1965). This approach connected political science concerns about governance capacity with communication theory concerns about information and control.

This decade was also shaped by Cold War ideological conflict, which influenced comparative thinking about press systems and political order. Four Theories of the Press offered a press-system typology that linked media norms to political regimes and ideological models (Siebert et al., 1956). Later scholarship criticised the framework for oversimplification and normative bias, yet it played a historical role in making media systems an explicit object of political inquiry. That is part of how political communication became international in scope. Cold War conditions created institutional and intellectual incentives for comparative analysis of media, persuasion, and legitimacy across regimes, even if the resulting frameworks were contested.

The 1960s and 1970s: Journalism Studies, Gatekeeping, News Values, and Agenda Formation

The historical account supports this insistence that journalism and mass communication research did not merely become political communication but instead offered bridges by importing concepts. This path is depicted in gatekeeping. Lewin proposed the concept of gatekeeping in social psychology and group dynamics to explain the way decisions organize flows in channels (Lewin, 1947). White applied this idea to journalism by examining editorial choice, demonstrating how news is framed by professional opinion and organisational pressures (White, 1950). The notion then made the focus of political communication since the content that goes through the gate defines political visibility and attention.

The research in news values introduced additional explanatory instruments. Galtung and Ruge examined the processes of selection that make events news in relation to organisational routines and priorities in a cultural context in their analysis of foreign news (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). This study changed the focus of investigation to the upper side of the whole issue i.e. the effect of the journalists in influencing the audience to the creation of the political reality.

The agenda-setting theory then related journalism output to priorities to the population. McCombs and Shaw demonstrated that media salience is related to the salience of the public issue indicating that media effect is mediated by organizing what citizens consider politically significant (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Subsequent agenda-setting research followed this tradition and helped to conceptualize its evolution (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2005; Weaver, 2007). This was a pivotal move in the development of political communication as a discipline as it

developed a template of association between journalism practices, political contest over policy, and the development of the opinion among the people in a single arrangement.

Journalism was another area that was influenced by sociological work in political communication. The constructionist explanation given by Berger and Luckmann offered a general theory of production of social reality in terms of shared knowledge and institutionalisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Tuchman used the logic of constructionism to news and saw journalism as creating reality instead of reflecting on it (Tuchman, 1978). The sociology of news and newsroom practices, in a different fashion, was analysed by Schudson and Gans, which further enhanced the concept of media institutions creating patterned forms of political reality (Schudson, 1989; Gans, 1979). The following contributions can be used to describe why journalism theories tend to have a sociological or psychological origin and why they have become an essential part of political communication.

Political Communication as a Named Research Agenda: the 1970s

In the 1970s, political communication became more frequently used as a designation to denote the convergence of research on overlapping topics of campaigns, media, popular opinion and government. The maturation of the field of research was a sign that the field of political communication was not a fad, as Chafee framed his work as having long-term research concerns as opposed to a fad (Chafee, 1975). The research into voter decision making and campaign communication operated media exposure as a single variable in overarching political and psychological mechanisms (O’Keefe et al., 1976; Patterson & McClure, 1976). Meanwhile, sociology of opinion polling and mediated public voice became more apparent, which preconditioned the subsequent research on the role of polling in politics (Herbst, 1995; Ali et al., 2023).

The development of the field here denotes the turn toward isolated research of media influence to larger research programme pre-occupied with the communication circumstances of democratic politics.

Framing, Priming, and Symbolic Politics in the 1980s

The 1980s broadened political communication to focus on more than issue salience to meaning and interpretation. The frame analysis by Goffman offered a broad theory of the organisation of experience via interpretive frames, and these interpretive frames were recast by other researchers to apply to a political and a media frame (Goffman, 1974). Entman developed framing as choosing what is perceived as reality to influence how the perceived reality should be interpreted, evaluated, and preferred in policy formulation, and framing was central to the development of political communication (Entman, 1993). These issues in television news were formulated by Iyengar in his study of episodic and thematic framing in which format was related to responsibility attribution and political judgement (Iyengar, 1994).

The study of priming also changed the perception of media impact. Experimental studies indicated that news focus can alter criteria that citizens apply to judge political leaders and performance, which disputes minimalism conceptualizations of media impacts (Iyengar et al., 1982). It is also at this point that political psychology and communication studies started to intersect. Selective exposure and motivated reasoning were already being worked on to inform political communication interpretations of polarisation and information processing, despite subsequent decades of formalisation (Frey, 1986).

The study of symbolic politics intensified the interest of the field in both representation and spectacle. Edelman believed that symbolic construction and performance is oftentimes the organisation of the political life creating the perception of conflict and authority (Edelman, 1985; Edelman, 1988). These are some of the works that led to the

interdisciplinarity of political communication by relating media discourse to political theory, cultural analysis, and interpretive sociology.

The 1990s: Mediatization, Self-reflection of the Field, Professionalisation

The 1990s are widely described as being marked with increased professionalisation of political communication such as strategic communication, media management, and political marketing. The argument of the third age of Blumler and Kavanagh reflected the complexity of the political communication environment, as well as the strategic adjustment of political players to the conditions of the media (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). This is described by Zaller in his study of campaign news, and his concept of product substitution, which shows the interaction of campaign communication with news routines and citizen attention to reinforce the emphasis of political communication on the ecology of information (Zaller, 1998).

Theoretical diversity and disciplinary identity were also reflected on in the decade. Rogers followed the history and biographical unfolding of the communication study, providing a background of how political communication came to be created in the wider communication research traditions (Rogers, 1994; Ali et al., 2025). Almond's description of political science into schools and sects can be used to explain why the development of political communication was not a paradigm but a conflict-ridden interdisciplinary space (Almond, 1990). They are not marginal writings. They can be applied to understand why political communication emerged as a hybridist field and not as one field.

Beyond 2000: Digital Transformation, Minimal Effects Revisited, and Platform Politics

Following 2000, political communication had been reconfigured through speed, scale, fragmentation, and new forms of participation made possible by digital media and platforms. The initial research regarding the internet and the public sphere emphasized the promise of democracy and structural limitations (Sparks, 2001; Barber, 1998). Benkler in his narration of networked information production indicated that digital infrastructures provided new ways of communicating with the masses and forming political organisation, at the same time bringing into question the issue of governance, power and institutional mediation (Benkler, 2006). The study of blogging and contentious politics investigated the role of digital media in mobilisation and information flows in conflict situations (Aday et al., 2010). Social media and political communication research came up with analytical tools to quantify network dynamics and political influence of digital spaces (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Zeng et al., 2010).

Simultaneously, the concept of the minimal effects was brought up again on different conditions. According to Bennett and Iyengar, the shift in media conditions and the fragmentation of the audience necessitates the reconsideration of the basics of research on the effects of political communication (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This does not revert to early determinism in propaganda. It is a recognition that media influence can work in new ways including selective exposure, algorithmic distribution and network amplification, which requires interdisciplinary instruments of psychology, sociology, political science and computational methods (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009).

Blumler's later "fourth age" argument further conceptualised the digital turn as a new stage in political communication, defined by changed power relations between elites, media institutions, and publics, and by the disruption of earlier communication models (Blumler, 2016).

Discussion: Layered Evolution and the Structural Sources of Interdisciplinarity

This genealogy supports a layered model of evolution. Classical rhetoric provided a vocabulary for persuasion and civic judgement (Aristotle, 2007; Cicero, 2001). Interwar propaganda and public opinion theory framed

communication as symbolic power and epistemic constraint in mass democracy (Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1922; Bernays, 1928). Wartime persuasion studies and post-war behavioural psychology institutionalised measurement and mechanism-based explanation (Hovland et al., 1953; Festinger, 1957). Limited effects and two-step flow models re-socialised influence by locating it within networks and group processes (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz, 1957; Klapper, 1960). Systems thinking and Cold War comparative models linked media and political regimes, while also embedding normative assumptions and institutional agendas in scholarship (Deutsch, 1965; Siebert et al., 1956). News production research and agenda-setting linked journalistic selection to public priorities and political competition (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Framing, priming, and symbolic politics pushed the field toward meaning-making and political spectacle (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1994; Edelman, 1985). Digital transformation then altered the infrastructure of political communication and revived old questions under new conditions (Benkler, 2006; Aday et al., 2010; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Blumler, 2016).

Interdisciplinarity is therefore not optional. It is structurally required by the field's object. Journalism studies contributes the institutional analysis of news production and professional norms (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). The research on mass communication brings about influences of traditions and measurement instruments (Klapper, 1960; DeFleur & Lowery, 1995). Theories of institutions, power distribution, and democratic competition are made by political science (Deutsch, 1965; Almond, 1990). Sociology provides constructionist explanations of how reality is constructed and institutional power (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). Psychology adds persuasion, dissonance, selective exposure, and motivated cognition processes (Hovland et al., 1953; Festinger, 1957; Taber & Lodge, 2006). The problematic nature of the field is that every discipline has various normative commitments. Epistemic authority and the knowledge of the populace is frequently the focus of journalism studies. Institutional performance and power are often the focus of political science. Cognition and affect are often the focus of psychology. Structure and inequality are common in sociology. They are all inherited by political communication, and therefore, it is hard to achieve definitional closure without excluding major traditions (Jamieson, 2017; Rogers, 2004).

Conclusion

Political communication developed as an academic field by a series of historical crises that transformed the structures of politics and the circumstances of popular opinion. It started its path with classical theories of persuasion and civic power, then expanded to wider traditions of symbolic rule that make both the narrow origin narratives more difficult, and the modern research programme based on interwar propaganda analysis and the theory of public opinion. The institutionalisation of the research and measurement on persuasion was accelerated by World War II. The Cold War had a spillover effect on comparative press-system thinking and agendas in international research. The production of news and the salience of news in the television era were linked to agenda-setting and newsroom sociology, and subsequently the Framing and symbolic politics research expanded the interest of the field in meaning, interpretation and spectacle. Since 2000, digital platforms restructured the communication environment and rekindled older discussions on the influence, legitimacy, and control of information in new infrastructural conditions.

The coherence of the field is not so much in a definition as in a regular re-emerging problem-spaces: how does communication mediate power, legitimacy, mobilisation, and public judgement in the varying media spaces? Its interdisciplinarity is a structural phenomenon that is historically influenced. Scholarship does not have the task of eliminating this hybridity but rather theorising it and being clear about what traditions and normative assumptions are being mobilised in a given study.

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