The Social Psychology of Communication

Edited by

Derek Hook
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Bradley Franks
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Martin W. Bauer
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK
The Social Psychology of Political Communication

Matthew C. Nisbet and Lauren Feldman

Keywords: Agenda-setting; deliberation; framing; hostile media effect; knowledge gap effect; miserly public; polarisation; political trust; priming; public opinion; social trust.

Introduction

Political communication is formally defined as the exchange of information, messages, and symbols between institutions, elected officials, social groups, the media, and citizens with implications for the balance of power in society (McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod, 2007). In a recent article summarising the state of the field, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) trace research on the social psychology of political communication across several intellectual traditions. One strand, as they note, connects closely to early twentieth-century sociologists such as Gabriel Tarde and Paul Lazarsfeld. These pioneers inspired research on how interpersonal conversations and community contexts shape individual news choices, opinions, political decisions, and participation (see also Chapter 4 on social influence). Theorists such as John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, and Niklas Luhmann have contributed significantly to how the examination of these processes might be evaluated in the context of an idealised vision of public deliberation and participation while drawing attention to important power imbalances (see also Chapter 6's discussion of communicative action). A third influential tradition derives from work by theorists such as Murray Edelman, Harold Blumer, and Erving Goffman. The focus by these scholars on how political language and symbols lead to the selective definition and interpretation of policy issues and social problems anchors contemporary research on framing and media influence (see also Chapter 7, on social representations theory). Another major strand of research derives from the cognitive revolution in social psychology, with general theories of information processing and persuasion applied to the study of political communication (as in Chapter 4 on social influence).
This chapter reviews and integrates several of these major strands of scholarship. A specific emphasis, similar to other chapters in this text, is that when it comes to the prospects for facilitating social change in society, political communication is rarely a level playing field. Even in the most vibrant democracies, government officials and powerful interest groups are often able to steer news and public attention to key political issues while also simultaneously defining them in advantageous ways. However, applying theories developed from this research is also the starting point for creating the political conditions that might catalyse social change and wider public participation, addressing social problems and injustice, and rebuilding public trust. Across countries, media and political systems have changed dramatically and will continue to evolve in unexpected ways. Despite these changes, the several decades of research reviewed in this chapter offer a set of guidelines for how to communicate about complex problems and issues; how to structure media presentations; how to strategically design messages; and how to effectively reach and empower citizens.

**Political communication, the media, and public perceptions**

Even today, many public officials, commentators, and journalists still define the public in overly idealised and inaccurate terms. This still dominant perspective conceives of public opinion and behaviour as consisting of individual judgements arrived at on an issue, candidate, or government leader after conscious and knowledgeable deliberation. The key component of this assumption is that the wider public possesses both the motivation and the ability to understand the complexities of policy debates and to draw connections between their preferences and the specific positions of candidates and officials (a similar assumption, historically, has shaped health communication, see Chapter 14).

Yet a preponderance of evidence from the public opinion literature finds that the public is generally more 'miserly' than fully informed. Whether a person is making a choice about a political figure or buying a car, research in social psychology shows that individuals are far more likely to 'satisfice' than 'optimise' their use of information, relying on available heuristics as a means to process new information, form attitudes, and reach decisions (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Specific to political opinions and behaviour, the miserly public tends to rely as short cuts on ideology, social identity such as religion, and the information most readily available to them via the media and interpersonal sources (Nisbet, 2005; Popkin, 1991). As a result, rather than directly persuading or shifting the direction of public preferences, much of the influence of political communication occurs indirectly, activating and intensifying existing preferences and views. There are indeed some citizens who change their minds during the course of a campaign, but these so-called 'switchers' are rarely the idealised well-informed and deliberative voters.
Rather, people who change their preferences have been found to be the least knowledgeable, the least attentive, and the least politically sophisticated.

Given the nature of how the miserly public forms opinions and reaches decisions, power in politics more generally turns on controlling media and public attention to different issues while simultaneously defining—or framing—these issues in selective ways. By setting the agenda of issues the public considers most important, the news media shape the criteria that the public uses to evaluate candidates, leaders, and institutions. In addition, by strategically framing issues around certain dimensions of a debate at the expense of other considerations, the news media and various political actors create causal stories for the public about who or what might be at the root of a problem and what should be done in terms of policy options and political actions.

*Agenda-setting: shaping public priorities.* One of the most common findings in political communication is the ability of the media to direct the focus of the public to certain issues over others. The media ‘may not be successful most of the time in telling people what to think’, famously observed Bernard Cohen in 1963, ‘but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about’ (p. 13). Subsequent research on the ‘agenda-setting’ effect of the media has provided overwhelming evidence that the issues portrayed in the media shape the issue priorities of the public. By giving attention to some issues over others, the media influences what the public perceives as most pressing and most important (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2007). Even as changes in the media system and political campaigns over the past decade have created many more news and information choices for citizens, public opinion research continues to show an almost direct one-to-one correlation between the issues dominating the overall news agenda and public attention (see e.g. the Pew News Index, 2009).

Researchers explain the agenda-setting influence of the media by way of a memory-based model of opinion formation which assumes that: (a) some issues or pieces of information are more accessible in a person’s mind than others; (b) opinion is to a large degree a function of how readily accessible these certain considerations are; and (c) accessibility is mostly a function of ‘how much’ or ‘how recently’ a person has been exposed to these certain considerations (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan, 2002; Scheufele, 2000). In surveys, for example, when individuals are asked to describe the issues of most concern to them, they search quickly across their short-term memory, and are most likely to draw upon those issues that are most readily salient and therefore easily recalled. Research shows that accessibility is typically a direct function of news exposure: the more attention an individual pays to the news generally or to a particular news outlet, the more likely it is that their perceptions will track the agenda of issues portrayed in the news or at the individuals’ specific preferred news choice.
Priming: Why the news focus matters. Media agenda-setting effects matter because they ‘prime’ public evaluations. The issues that receive the heaviest coverage in the news are not unexpectedly the standards by which the public tends to evaluate a candidate, a political party, institutions, or a corporation (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Psychologically, priming effects derive from the memory-based model of opinion-formation discussed earlier. For example, when voters are asked in the context of a campaign to evaluate competing candidates and parties, if national security is a dominant focus at the time in news coverage, then the public are on average more likely to give weight to this issue over other issues. Under these conditions, voters are more likely to favour the candidate who is perceived as best able to deal with national security. If news attention switches to a different issue, then the evaluative criteria applied by voters are also likely to shift, and under these conditions a different candidate may gain in the polls (Scheufele, 2000).

Research on priming offers clear implications for communication strategies and initiatives that might seek to achieve social change in society. Candidates, elected officials, and corporations have a strong intuitive if not formal sense of how the news media can prime public evaluations. Therefore, if an organisation or group can elevate news attention to an issue, politicians and powerful institutions are more likely to take action on these issues in order to protect their public image. Media priming also helps explain why major corporations have invested heavily in social responsibility campaigns. Over the past decade, with rising news attention to issues such as climate change, fair trade, and labour practices, corporations now recognise that consumers are more likely to give greater weight to their perceived social record on these issues. As a result, companies such as British Petroleum and Wal-Mart have combined real changes in corporate practice with advertising, media, and branding campaigns to promote their environmental and labour records.

Framing: Defining meaning and solutions. The news media and political strategists not only have the ability to shape public priorities, but they also often ‘frame’ attention around only certain dimensions of a complex issue while ignoring others. When an elected official or journalist ‘frames’ an issue, they communicate why the issue matters; who or what might be responsible; and what should be done in terms of action (Entman, 1993; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Frames are an unavoidable aspect of political communication. They are used by audiences as ‘interpretative schema’ to make sense of and discuss an issue; by journalists to condense complex events into interesting and appealing news reports; by policy-makers to define policy options and reach decisions; and by experts to communicate to broader audiences (Scheufele, 1999). (See also Chapter 7’s discussion of Social Representations Theory and also discussion of schema in Chapter 5, Pragmatic Theory, cognition, and social relations.)
In terms of psychological accounts of the influence of framing, Price and Tewksbury's (1997) applicability model argues that a message frame is only effective if it is relevant - or 'applicable' - to a specific existing interpretive schema acquired through socialisation processes or other types of social learning. Specifically, an issue has been successfully framed when there is a fit between the line of reasoning a message or news story suggests on an issue and the presence of those existing mental associations within a particular audience. Alternatively, if a frame draws connections that are not relevant to something a segment of the public already values or understands, then the message is likely to be ignored or to lack personal significance (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

Complementing these psychological accounts, sociologists such as William Gamson have promoted a 'social constructivist' explanation of framing. According to this research, in order to make sense of political issues, citizens use as resources the frames available in media coverage, but integrate these packages with the frames forged by way of personal experience or conversations with others. Media frames might help set the terms of the debate among citizens, but rarely, if ever, do they exclusively determine public opinion. Instead, as part of a 'frame contest,' one interpretative package might gain influence because it resonates with popular culture or a series of events, fits with media routines or practices, and/or is heavily sponsored by élites (Gamson, 1992; Price, Nir and Capella, 2005).

In everyday conversation, news coverage, and in strategic messages, the latent meaning of a frame is often translated instantaneously by specific types of framing devices such as catchphrases, metaphors, sound bites, graphics, and allusions to history, culture, and/or literature (Gamson, 1992). For example, in the UK and Europe, Greenpeace has used the term 'frankenfood' to redefine food biotechnology in terms of unknown risks and consequences rather than the industry-promoted focus on solving world hunger or adapting to climate change. Similarly, in the US, anti-evolutionists have coined the slogan 'teach the controversy,' which instantaneously signals their preferred interpretation that there are holes in the theory of evolution and that teaching rival explanations for life's origins is really a matter of intellectual freedom (Nisbet, 2009b).

Perhaps no other area of political communication research has received more attention and direct professional application than framing. Over the past decade, academic scholars have joined with government agencies, not-for-profit organisations, and advocates to examine how seemingly intractable policy problems such as poverty or climate change are currently framed in political discourse and how new frames of reference might catalyse wider public attention, understanding, and action (see Box 14.1 for discussion on climate change). This process begins with audience research techniques such as in-depth interviews, surveys, and media content analysis that
Box 14.1 Framing and climate change

Survey analyses depict the American public for the most part as still largely divided and disengaged on climate change, despite overwhelming expert agreement about the urgency of the problem. Advocates for policy action on climate change – including environmentalists, political leaders, and some scientists – have sought to rally support among Americans by framing the issue in terms of a looming environmental disaster or ‘climate crisis.’ To instantly translate their preferred interpretation, these advocates have relied on vivid depictions of specific climate impacts, including hurricane devastation and famous cities under water due to future sea-level rise. In a leading example, publicity for Al Gore’s documentary on climate change’s effects, *An Inconvenient Truth*, dramatised climate change as an environmental Frankenstein’s monster, including a hurricane-shaped plume spewing from a smoke stack on its movie poster and a trailer telling audiences to expect ‘the most terrifying film you will ever see’. Yet this line of communication was effectively reframed by sceptics of climate change as liberal ‘alarmism’. This challenge – rendered easier because the target of ridicule (Gore) was a partisan figure – quickly activate a counter-interpretation of lingering scientific uncertainty and the heuristics of partisanship and liberal media bias. The result is a public that is unsure about the scientific basis for man-made climate change and ambivalent about proposed policy actions (Nisbet, 2009a).

To generate greater wider public engagement on climate change, communication experts have suggested that messages about the issue need to shift away from an exclusive emphasis on environmental disaster and include new frames that are personally relevant and acceptable to broader and more diverse segments of Americans. Over time, these new meanings for climate change, argue experts, are likely to be key drivers of public engagement and, eventually, policy action.

One suggested strategy is to frame climate change not just as an environmental issue but also as a public health problem, calling attention to the scientifically well-understood linkages to asthma, allergies, infectious disease, and the health risks of events such as heat waves or severe flooding. A focus on public health also shifts the visualisation of climate change away from remote arctic regions, peoples, and animals to more socially proximate neighbours and places such as suburbs and cities. Research involving in-depth interviews with representative segments of Americans finds that when climate change is introduced as a health problem – with information then provided about climate policy actions that will also lead to health benefits – this reframing of the issue is positively responded to by a broad ideological cross-section of respondents (Maibach, Nisbet, Akerlof, Baldwin and Diao, in press).
systematically identify the metaphors, examples, and mental frameworks that the public, journalists, and experts use to understand, discuss, and make choices about the issue. This research then informs government agencies, organisations, expert institutions, and media producers on how to better reach specific groups within the general public, build trust, and adapt their communication efforts to motivate greater attention, understanding, and participation (see Frameworks Institute, 2009; Nisbet 2009b for overviews).

Knowledge, civic engagement, and the news media

The news media and campaign strategies do not just have indirect and subtle influences on our perceptions through processes such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing, but they are also important sources of informal learning on the part of the public. Across countries, an engaged and public affairs-savvy citizenry is widely idealised as critical to a fully functioning political system. In this tradition, political knowledge is the glue that holds together civic culture. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) review, individuals with greater levels of political knowledge are on average more politically tolerant, hold stronger support for democratic principles, are more likely to participate in politics, and are better able to draw connections between their policy preferences and their support for specific political candidates.

The knowledge gap effect. Given the importance of political knowledge, scholars have devoted considerable attention to how and under what conditions individuals learn about politics from the news media. In one major implication for civic engagement, rates of learning from the news media appear to be substantially different across audience segments. Specifically, there is evidence of a persistent knowledge gap effect, whereby information from the media is more easily acquired by segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and more education (Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1970). As news attention to a social problem or political campaign increases over time, it serves to widen—not narrow—gaps between the information-rich and information-poor, the latter segment disproportionately comprised of lower-status individuals. Moreover, given the strong connections between knowledge and forms of participation, studies show that these gaps in information also lead to correlated gaps in participation (Eveland and Scheufele, 2000). The reality of the knowledge gap phenomenon, therefore, reinforces status quo differences in resources and participation within society, and poses challenges to using the news media to catalyse social change.

Why is it easier for members of socially advantaged groups to learn about political affairs from the new media? On the one hand, their existing levels of knowledge and media habits increase the ease and efficiency with which they can process and learn new information (Price and Zaller, 1993). Individual differences in motivation also play a role. According to several
scholars, disparities in knowledge accrue because of differences in the perceived utility of information: higher SES segments find news and public affairs information more relevant and compelling and, as a result, pay more attention to it (Kwak, 1999).

The structure of a particular country's media system also contributes to disparities in knowledge. For example, in cross-national comparisons, researchers find that the market-driven model of the US media system produces lower levels of hard news knowledge and wider knowledge gaps than are found in European countries which utilise a public service model (Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Iyengar, Hahn, Bonfadelli, and Marr, 2009). In Finland, Denmark, and the UK, for example, publicly funded news programming airs during prime-time evening television hours and across multiple time slots, thereby making it more accessible—sometimes incidentally so—to a broader audience; in contrast, in the US, commercial television networks broadcast news in the early and late evenings, and reserve prime-time for entertainment content (Curran et al., 2009). As such, news consumption in the US is more clearly confined to those with sufficient motivation or preference for public affairs.

Another factor related to the knowledge gap, especially in terms of public understanding of highly technical or complex issues, is the level of political controversy. Analyses of survey data by Bonfadelli and Bauer (2002) finds that in European countries with greater levels of political controversy over biotechnology, news coverage of the issue expanded beyond just élite print outlets to include coverage from the tabloid press and television, broadening the news audience for the issue and thereby lessening gaps in knowledge. But there was one key related factor. Specifically, in countries that had greater parity across citizens relative to SES, controversy served to narrow knowledge differences among citizens. But in countries with wider disparities in SES, controversy had little impact on gaps in knowledge across segments of the public. Bonfadelli and Bauer reason that in countries with greater SES disparity, news organisations 'ghettoise' coverage to just a few élite outlets, even under conditions of political controversy, with other media channels paying far less attention to the topic, diminishing opportunities for learning among lower SES segments.

Learning across types of media. Besides differential gains in learning by social status, studies have also focused on differences in the potential for civic engagement across print, broadcast, and online news users. Newspaper reading, in particular, has traditionally been associated with greater levels of civic engagement. Studies have found that newspaper readers tend to have a stronger sense of community and national identity, and a richer network of overall social connections (McLeod et al., 1996). Newspaper coverage is also particularly good at identifying broader thematic issues or problems of potential concern that may require citizen action or involvement (Stamm, Emig and Hesse, 1997). Through similar means, consumption of quality
sources of public affairs television has also been found to have a positive impact on these dimensions of civic engagement, though to a lesser degree than newspaper use (Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard, 2004).

While these findings concerning traditional media effects are well documented, views still diverge on how Internet use may shape wider public participation and influence in society. Specifically, many scholars fear that the Internet likely strengthens rather than shifts traditional patterns of political communication effects, reinforcing gaps across countries between the resource rich and the resource poor, while exacerbating cleavages based on ideology or political identity. The conclusion is that, at societal level, the Internet likely promotes status quo power structures and political gridlock, and may actually further widen disparities in civic engagement (Dimaggio, Hargittai, Celeste and Shafer, 2004; Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004; Norris, 2001).

There are different factors that might account for the reinforcement effects of the Internet. First is the miserly way the public typically use the media. As explained earlier in this chapter, the availability of media information does not necessarily lead to the use of that information. Citizens who do choose to take advantage of Internet-based political information sources are likely to be characterised by their personal resources – including time, money, and technology skills – as well as by motivation, including confidence and feelings of efficacy (Norris, 2001). Consider also that the most influential and widely consumed content online is still produced by traditional news organisations, large media companies, powerful interest groups, and government agencies or institutions. These entities maintain a disproportionate control over the agenda of issues attended to and discussed online, disproportionately influence how these issues are framed, and despite calls to do otherwise, continue to cater to high SES audiences. This reality is unlikely to change anytime soon, despite increased capability through blogs and other digital applications for individuals and independent media to convey information. Even as the media system rapidly evolves, studies find that traditional newspaper coverage – distributed in print and online – still remains at the core of the news and information ecology, serving as the major source for original reporting on problems and policy debates, with newspaper reporting driving the agenda and discussion at cable news, blogs, and other new media (see Knight, 2009 for a discussion).

Though research points to the many problems and barriers to wider learning from the media about politics, this same scholarship suggests several initiatives that might narrow disparities across audiences. First, as Eveland (2003) suggests, whether it is print, television, or online media, it is important to think about how attributes that vary across these media may facilitate different modes of learning and knowledge gain. As he describes, dimensions such as interactivity, user control, narrative structure, and textuality need to be examined carefully by researchers and media producers, with each of these attributes potentially facilitating greater learning on the part of wider audiences.
Second, looking to the future, Bennett (2007) and others have argued that in order to widen the net of informal learning, media producers need to consider a new generation of audiences who arrive at public affairs content with very different expectations. Specifically, younger audiences have a unique set of issue priorities from their older counterparts, with a stronger preference for more globally focused topics such as the environment, poverty, or human rights and far less interest in conflict-driven coverage that focuses on traditional ideological cleavages. Younger audiences also expect their public affairs media to be 'participatory', meaning that they want to be able to actively comment, recommend, share, and contribute to coverage; and they want direct information on how they can become politically involved on the issue. (See also discussion of participatory journalism in health communication, Chapter 14.)

Third, other scholars have argued for increased investment in school-based programmes that provide a 'civics media literacy' curriculum for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Research shows that participation in a civics media literacy curriculum promotes increased student news use at home and increased discussions about politics with their parents. As a result, evidence indicates that these types of programmes not only boost student attention and learning about politics, but have similar influences on their lower SES parents (McDevitt and Chaffee, 2000).

Political deliberation and social interactions. If there are many limits and biases in public knowledge of politics, what exactly then should be the role of the public in decision-making? Should government and other organisations consult the public on questions of policy and what might be models for doing so?

Participatory and deliberative theorists argue for enlarging the civic role of ordinary citizens by engaging them directly in deliberations about public policy (Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1995; Matthews, 1994). Deliberation, when it takes the form of reasoned and open-minded discussion, is expected to increase tolerance for opposing viewpoints, deepen awareness and understanding of one's own political preferences, increase involvement in civic and political life, promote greater efficacy and social trust, and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policy (for a review, see Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs, 2004).

Several scholars have investigated the impact of deliberation on public opinion and civic engagement by bringing citizens together to talk about public issues in controlled environments, both in face-to-face 'deliberative polls' (Fishkin and Luskin, 1999) and online (Price and Cappella, 2002). These studies have found that formal deliberations about political issues can increase knowledge about politics, enhance the quality of public opinion, and foster attitudes and behaviours consistent with political participation. Moreover, informal, everyday political conversation, as it occurs unprompted among ordinary citizens, is associated with similarly positive
outcomes, such as opinion quality, civic and political participation, and political knowledge (Nisbet and Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard, 2004).

When specific features of the discussion environment are examined more closely, however, findings emerge that may temper this optimism. Political disagreement, which features centrally in most definitions of deliberative democracy, may actually serve to deter people from participating in deliberative exercises (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). Moreover, when disagreement is aired, any benefit it has for increasing political tolerance and fostering more informed opinions may be outweighed by its potential to induce ambivalence and political inaction (Mutz, 2006).

The idea that political discussion will contribute to more reasoned opinion is itself challenged by the social psychological tendency towards group polarisation, which occurs when members of a group, following discussion on some topic, move towards a more extreme point in the direction of the initial opinion taken up by the group (Moscovici, 1985a). Group polarisation is problematic to the extent that it leads diverse social groups to adopt increasingly extreme and oppositional viewpoints, thereby interfering with the ability to agree upon solutions to collective problems (see also Chapter 4).

Group polarisation is an increasing concern of the online environment. Cass Sunstein (2001) has been most vocal about these concerns, arguing that the Internet makes it easier for individuals to selectively expose themselves to like-minded viewpoints, and, as a result, the potential for group polarisation and extremism is exacerbated online. The discrepancy between Sunstein’s (2001) view of the online discussion environment and Price and Cappella’s (2002) more optimistic findings regarding the value of online deliberation reflects an important difference between the democratic potential of deliberation – both in online and face-to-face environments – and how it actually plays out in the real world. When the conditions are right – whether those conditions be the purpose of the deliberation, the type of participants involved, or the rules governing interactions – deliberation can offer substantial democratic benefits. What Sunstein reminds us, however, is that these conditions are not always realisable in the real world of political conversation.

Public evaluations of the political system and the news media

The media and communication campaigns not only influence public choices, learning, and discourse, but they also play an influential role in shaping public trust in institutions and fellow citizens. As discussed in this section, this has significant implications for the ability of citizens to work cooperatively to solve social problems.

Social and Political Trust. Among the key perceptions shaped by the news media and by political campaigns are social trust and political trust. Described as the ‘chicken soup of social life’, social trust is the belief that the
world is a generally benign place and that other people are generally well
motivated (Uslaner, 2000). Social trust helps alleviate concerns of individuals
that others in society will simply pursue their own narrow interests instead
of working towards a greater good. Political trust complements social trust
by assuring individuals that institutions and their officials work towards a
common good, that government services are reliable and responsive, and
that, if need be, government can step in effectively when problems are so
great that they exceed the capacity of individuals or organisations to solve
them on their own (Nee and Ingram, 1998). Both forms of trust enable indi-
viduals in society to work together, view certain expectations or outcomes as
predictable, and build feelings of overall solidarity and identity.

Unfortunately, over the past two decades, across national settings, there
has been a remarkable decline in overall social and political trust. A number
of factors account for the overall decline in trust including scandals that
drive a loss in public confidence, an absence of efforts at effective trust-
building on the part of major institutions, and the increasing complexity
and diversity of modern societies. Scholars, however, also note that as news
coverage, especially television, has increasingly covered politics in terms of
conflict and win-at-all-costs strategy, this stylistic focus has promoted wide-
spread public cynicism about the intentions and goals of elected officials
(Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Mutz, 2006). In the US, a growing number
of conservative media outlets have openly attacked government institutions
and promoted fear of specific social out-groups such as immigrants
or Muslims, likely further undermining overall political and social trust
(Jamieson and Cappella 2007). Other researchers point to heavy TV news
attention to crime as undermining social trust across communities, while
entertainment media use displaces opportunities citizens might have to
connect with others (Putnam, 2000; Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorelli,
2008). Yet other scholars contend that not all media are the same relative
to political and social trust, and dispute direct evidence for a time displace-
ment influence (Moy and Pfau, 2000). According to this line of research,
use of quality public affairs news – especially newspaper reading – is found
to promote political and social trust, enhancing the readers’ connections to
institutions and their community members (Shah, Kwak, and Holbert, 2001:
Shah, Yoon, and McLeod, 2001).

As solutions to the decline in political trust in democracies, scholars
and practitioners alike have called for the need for new types of dialogue-
based initiatives that bring a diversity of citizens into direct contact with
government officials and their institutions (Einsiedel, 2008; McComas,
2006; Yankelovich, 1991). They have also emphasised the use of digital
media tools to increase government transparency and to sponsor direct
citizen interaction. Others have pointed to the need for research on effec-
tively reframing how the role of government is discussed relative to major
problems such as poverty, explanations that also counter the free market as
a government alternative (Nisbet, 2009b).
Media trust and perceptions of bias. If the media have contributed to a loss in confidence in government, journalists and their news organisations have also suffered their own significant decline in public perceptions. Across national settings, there is an ever pervasive belief in various forms of media bias. In the US, over the past two decades, the dominant belief regarding media bias is that that the mainstream news media favour liberal causes and political candidates. Yet, when researchers conduct content analyses to search for systematic patterns of partisan bias in coverage of elections, across studies they are unable to find definitive evidence (D’Alessio D. and Allen, 2000). If social scientists using the best tools available to them find it difficult to observe hard evidence of liberal bias, why are beliefs among the public so widespread? Moreover, across country setting and issue, what

Box 14.2 Perceptions of media bias: The Israeli–Palestinian conflict

The hostile media effect was first demonstrated reliably by Vallone et al. (1985) in the context of news about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians. Undergraduate students from Stanford University, who self-identified as either pro-Arab, pro-Israeli, or neutral on the issue of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, were recruited to participate in an experimental study. Subjects viewed a selection of US network news coverage detailing the events leading up to a 1982 massacre of Palestinians by a Lebanese militia group and the questions of Israeli responsibility in its aftermath. Results showed that students who characterised themselves as pro-Israeli saw the news as biased against Israel, whereas pro-Arab students saw the news as biased in favour of Israel. Thus, both groups saw the news coverage as hostile to their own position, whereas neutral viewers perceived the coverage as relatively balanced.

What might explain such discrepant perceptions? According to Vallone et al. (1985), when individuals are heavily invested in an issue – whether the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, climate change, or gay marriage – they tend to see that issue in black or white terms. Objective news, however, by representing both sides of a controversial issue, portrays the issue in a shade of grey (i.e. as both black and white). Thus, in the eyes of partisans, giving facts on both sides equal weight constitutes a hostile bias. In addition to this evaluative explanation, Vallone et al. (1985) also provide evidence for a perceptual explanation for the hostile media effect, whereby partisans actually see completely different stimuli. This latter mechanism, often termed ‘selective categorization,’ has emerged, in recent research, as the more well-supported explanation for the hostile media effect (Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart, 2004).
The hostile media perception presents news organisations and professional journalists with a nearly impossible job as even fair, balanced coverage of controversial issues will be perceived as biased and antagonistic by members of the groups being covered. Perceptions of hostile news coverage may also contribute to a broader mistrust of media and government institutions and, in so doing, undermine faith in the democratic process. Tsfati and Cohen (2005) demonstrated these relationships in a study conducted among Jewish Israeli settlers in the hotly contested Gaza Strip. At the time of the study, in 2004, the Israeli government had proposed a plan under which Jewish settlers would be relocated and Israeli Defence Forces withdrawn from Gaza. A survey of Jewish settlers facing displacement from Gaza revealed that they saw news coverage as providing an unfair, negative treatment of their group, despite a content analysis that showed a relatively balanced – even positive – treatment (Sheafer, 2005, cf. Tsfati and Cohen, 2005). Moreover, the settlers’ hostile media perceptions were associated with weakened trust in the Israeli media as a whole and in Israeli democracy, as well as with heightened intentions among the settlers to use violence to resist their possible relocation.

explains the difference between subjective perceptions of media bias and objective indicators relative to coverage?

In research on perceptions of the news media, credibility is understood as a subjective assessment, influenced by the partisan or ideological background of the audience and the claims about bias that might emanate from trusted sources such as political commentators or like-minded friends. In the US context, these claims are typically focused on a liberal bias charged by conservative elites, and reinforce a widespread belief among conservative-leaning audiences (Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan, 1999). Audiences, then, do not typically assess story content on its own merits but rather on the basis of preconceived notions about the news media – often stemming from journalists’ tendency in many stories to cover and reflect on their own potential liberal bias. A number of other studies have also suggested that individuals’ expectations for bias in a news source or in the media, more generally, are likely to influence their perceptions of bias in news coverage (Arpan and Raney, 2003; Baum and Gussin, 2007).

Perhaps the most crucial determinant of perceptions of bias in the news, however, is the extent to which news coverage is seen as disagreeing with one’s own views. Individuals who feel most strongly about an issue tend to see their own side’s views as being more a product of objective analysis and normative concerns, and less influenced by ideology, than the other side’s views (Robinson, Kellner, Ward, and Ross, 1995). This human tendency translates directly to judgements about the media. In a range of studies,
when news audiences who hew to opposing sides on an issue are given the same news coverage of the topic to evaluate, both view this identical coverage as biased in favour of the other side (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004; Vallone et al., 1985). The phenomenon is commonly referred to as the ‘hostile media effect.’ Researchers believe that the explanation for this hostile media effect is selective categorisation: opposing partisans attend to, process, and recall identical content from a news presentation but mentally categorise and label the same aspects of a story differently – as hostile to their own position (Schmitt, Gunther, and Liebhart, 2004).

The original hostile media effect assumes that news coverage is inherently balanced. The relative hostile media perception (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia, 2001) relaxes this assumption, making it applicable to news that is slanted in favour of or against a particular issue. In the presence of the relative hostile media effect, supporters and opponents of a given issue perceive bias in a consistent direction (i.e. leaning towards one side), but each group perceives coverage as significantly more unfavourable to their own position relative to those in the other group. In other words, partisans perceive less bias in news coverage slanted to support their view than their opponents on the other side of the issue.

Interestingly, then, whereas the implication of the original hostile media effect is a partisan public perceiving media bias where none was present and thus potentially rejecting useful information, the implications of the relative hostile media effect are somewhat different. Of consequence here is that partisans will fail to recognise bias in news that is in fact biased, in instances when that bias is congruent with their pre-existing views. This bias against news bias is troubling. Americans’ trust in news sources has become deeply polarised in recent years – with Republicans, for example, attributing more credibility to the conservative Fox News and less to most other news organisations than Democrats (Pew Research Center, 2008). In other countries, similar perceptions of a Left or Right bias to news – or alternatively a bias relative to national or ethnic identity – exist.

In each context, as news – particularly on cable TV and online – is infused with increasing amounts of opinion and ideology, this may make it even easier for partisans to validate their personal political beliefs by accepting at face value information that comports with their views while rejecting information that advocates for the other side. Thus, the relative hostile media effect may not only reflect partisan divides in news perceptions but may also contribute to the further polarisation of political attitudes and knowledge across political systems.

Conclusion

The findings from political communication research may make it very easy to simply critique the news media, campaigns, and the public. Indeed, there
is an unfortunate 'dismal science' aspect to the field: the more things change in political campaigns or in the media system, the more they appear to stay the same relative to reinforcing power imbalances, ideological cleavages, and public alienation. Yet if anything, this research should not be viewed narrowly as a direct indictment of the interaction between the media and our political systems, but rather as a powerful resource for working towards social change.

If this is going to happen, however, there need to be far more collaborations and connections between research theorists and practitioners. Scholars have an obligation to translate and articulate the implications of their research so that it can serve as a blueprint for professionally oriented students who want to tilt the communication playing field in favour of social change within their communities, countries, or cross-nationally. This research can also help clarify for journalists and political leaders the norms, ethics, and goals of political communication, focusing their practices and strategies on the factors that promote a functioning political system. Across countries, initiatives built on the foundation of theory and research will be necessary to restore and maintain public faith in government and the media.
REFERENCES


community: An exploration of print, broadcast, and Internet influences. *Communication Research, 28*, 464-506.


