19 Applied Political Communication Research

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Political communication traces its roots to the earliest attempts by classical scholars to describe democratic functions, with Aristotle, Plato, Quintilian, Cicero, and others concerned about rhetorical devices and uses of language and oratory that affected public life in the early days of Greek and Roman societies (e.g., Newall, 2005). From these early roots, political communication has evolved into a multidisciplinary field that draws from research in, among other disciplines, communication, political science, psychology, sociology, and marketing. Although many definitions have been offered for this field of study, Chaffee’s (1975) simple, straightforward description sufficiently captures its essence: “the role of communication in political processes” (p. 15).

We focus this chapter on applied political communication research that provides knowledge about political processes that sometimes explicitly, yet more often implicitly, informs the communicative practices of a democracy. As political communication scholars, we view democracy as a civic dialogue, an ongoing conversation between and among elected leaders or candidates and the citizens they lead or wish to lead. The interaction between those who govern and those who are governed largely is conducted through mediated communication, and, thus, the media play a large role in this civic dialogue. Although most of the scholarship reviewed here was designed and conducted to test hypotheses or answer research questions grounded in specific political communication theories, the results of such studies, although not explicitly designed for application to, or intervention in, democratic processes, provide useful knowledge that may well be translated for such uses. We focus in this chapter on five areas of research where such applications and interventions occur most frequently: political speaking, political campaign debates, political advertising, political news, and political uses of new technologies.

Political Speaking

A long-standing area of applied political communication is the study of political speaking, which concentrates on source and message aspects of the communication process. From Aristotle’s recommendations for successful persuasion in the Greek poli-state to modern-day political speechwriters, communication analysts have identified themes in political messages, political speakers’ motives, rhetorical strategies employed, and the effectiveness of political speakers and speeches. Early research on political speaking relied almost exclusively on critical/interpretive/rhetorical analysis (see Condit & Bates, this volume), applying various perspectives to study great orators, such as William Jennings Bryant,
Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and the “great communicator” Ronald Reagan. Moreover, because applied communication scholarship on political speaking focuses on particular messages or speakers (Jamieson, 1988), researchers often analyzed the effectiveness of techniques used in various genres of speechmaking, such as apologia (e.g., Ware & Linkugel, 1973) and presidential inaugural speeches (e.g., Hart, 1987) and State of the Union addresses (e.g., D. R. Hoffman & Howard, 2006).

Researchers also have analyzed techniques of political speechwriting (e.g., Ritter & Medhurst, 2003). One of the most comprehensive discussions and applications of general communication research and persuasion principles to political speaking is provided by Trent and Friedenberg (2007) in their classic text on campaign communication. Although most communication research on political speaking uses rhetorical/critical methodologies, contributions have been made by the application of quantitative methodologies (see Query et al., this volume). For instance, Hart (1984) developed and applied a computerized content analysis system (DICTION) to identify the “verbal style” of presidential speeches. Quantitative research methods, including opinion polls, also have been used to measure the effectiveness of specific political speeches, and field experiments have been conducted to measure changes in candidate images attributable to particular political speeches (e.g., Sanders & Kaid, 1981).

Research on political speaking has allowed applied political communication scholars and practitioners to craft speeches that assist political leaders in making their cases to the U.S. public. Many communication scholars, for instance, have written speeches for and advised candidates running for political office and helped officeholders to explain or persuade constituents about policy issues. Political speechwriters use research on the effectiveness of rhetorical devices, such as repetition and thematic focus, humor, and use of symbols such as metaphors, and research on various aspects of delivery, such as tonal variation, cadence, gestures, and other nonverbal communicative behaviors. For instance, Craig R. Smith, now at California State University, Long Beach, applied his scholarly knowledge of political communication as a speechwriter for President Gerald Ford. Political communication researchers also have served as analysts and commentators of political speech, sometimes in a public forum and often via the media. Political communication scholars who frequently appear in the news media to apply their knowledge include Kathleen Hall Jamieson (University of Pennsylvania), Robert Denton (Virginia Tech University), Kurt Ritter (Texas A&M University), and Bruce Gronbeck (The University of Iowa). In this way, political scholars use information acquired from applied research studies to help audiences better understand and evaluate the speech of political leaders and policy makers.

**Political Campaign Debates**

Political campaign debates involve candidates meeting face-to-face in a formal debate exchange. In fact, the debate stage or forum often is the only campaign event where candidates appear side by side, allowing viewers of these frequently televised events to compare candidates and their messages. The debate encounter typically is structured by varying rules of engagement and interaction with opponents, with the most common debate rule affording equal time to all candidates. The primary audience for the debate exchange is the voting public, with the principal purpose of this form of campaign communication to produce a more informed electorate.

Perhaps the justification cited most often for televised campaign debates, particularly presidential debates, is that they reach large audiences. Since the inception of televised presidential debates in 1960, such debates have continued to generate the largest view-
ing audience of any single televised campaign event (McKinney, 2007). Pfau (2003) also pointed out that debates, with their attendant media hype, may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of the “marginally attentive” citizen who may tune out other forms of campaign communication.

Much can be learned from existing research on political campaign debates that is useful for campaigns and candidates preparing for debate participation. The following sections provide an overview of major research findings regarding debate effects, with specific attention to the limited research on lower level or nonpresidential debates, media coverage of debates, and how candidates’ messages and viewer learning from debates are affected by debate formats.

**Effects of Political Debates**

For most people, the usefulness of political debates hinges on whether viewing debates influences citizens’ vote choice. The empirical evidence on this matter is quite clear: Very little change in voting intentions follows exposure to political debates. Most citizens who watch debates do so to cheer on the candidate they already support. However, although debates may not alter the voting preferences of previously committed viewers, ample evidence has found that debates help undecided, conflicted, or weakly committed viewers to form or change their voting preference. Although undecided and uncommitted citizens may constitute a small segment of the debate-viewing audience, it is exactly this slice of the electorate to which most general-election campaign messages are targeted and, in close contests, these voters ultimately may decide the election outcome. At the presidential level, for example, postdebate Gallup polling data from the nine presidential campaigns that featured general-election debates suggest that televised debates played a decisive role in the outcome of more than half of those elections, including the 1960, 1976, 1980, 2000, and 2004 elections (McKinney, 2007; McKinney & Carlin, 2004).

Beyond the behavioral effects of debate viewing, numerous studies have shown that debates facilitate citizens’ acquisition of issue information and influence their perceptions of candidates’ character or image traits (for a review of this research, see McKinney & Carlin, 2004). Debate viewing also may activate a number of latent civic and democratic tendencies, including decreasing viewers’ reported political cynicism; enhancing citizens’ sense of political efficacy, interest in the ongoing campaign, and likelihood of voting; and encouraging citizens to seek additional campaign information following debate viewing and greater participation in a campaign through activities such as talking to others about preferred candidates (for a review of this research, see McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007).

**Learning from Nonpresidential Debates**

Although overwhelming attention has focused on the quadrennial U.S. presidential debates, campaign debates occur even more frequently among candidates seeking local, state, and other federal offices. The scant evidence available suggests that state and local televised debates differ in both content and viewer effects from their presidential counterparts. Studies conducted by Lichtenstein (1982) and Pfau (1983), for instance, found that citizens who watched both local and presidential debates reported learning more from local candidates than they did from presidential candidates. Local-level debates also had a greater effect on viewers’ vote choice, as many viewers knew little about local candidates and had not selected a candidate before watching those debates.

Nonpresidential debates also afford scholars opportunities to answer research questions not easily examined in the context of presidential debates. For example, given that
female political candidates are seeking—and achieving—public office in greater numbers than ever before, many of these candidates engage in campaign debates. Edelsky and Adams (1990) studied six mixed-gender state and local debates, finding clear differences between male and female candidates’ communication patterns, such as “men got better treatment (safer turn spaces, extra turns, more follow-ups on their topics) and they took control of more resources (more time for their positions, and engaged in more of the ‘aggressive’ speaking)” (p. 186). Banwart and McKinney’s (2005) examination of gubernatorial and U.S. Senate candidates’ debate styles in mixed-gender races, however, found more similarities than differences between female and male candidates’ communication patterns, which resulted from a pattern of “gendered adaptiveness,” whereby male candidates debating a female opponent adopted a greater number of “feminine” communication strategies and female candidates debating a male opponent adopted a greater number of “masculine” communication strategies.

It also is more common today for independent and minor-party candidates to be included in state and local debates. With the exception of limited research surrounding Ross Perot’s inclusion in the 1992 presidential debates, however, scholars know very little about the impact of minor-party or independent candidates in debates. Beiler’s (2000) analysis of Jesse Ventura’s successful bid for Minnesota Governor in 1998 showed how the election of this former professional wrestler and bodybuilder actually may have turned on his inclusion in the three gubernatorial debates that were broadcast statewide. Ventura gained steadily in credibility with voters throughout the debate series, aided by his anti-establishment appeals to independents and those who previously had not voted. Prentice’s (2005) examination of congressional (U.S. House and Senate) and gubernatorial debates identified communication obstacles experienced by third-party candidates engaged in campaign debates with major-party opponents. Specifically, ways in which a debate dialogue is framed, guided by journalists’ questioning, typically ignores or negates third-party worldviews and ideologies; moreover, major-party candidates regularly ignore or communicatively demean third-party opponents and frequently co-opt or diminish the issue positions championed by third-party candidates.

Media Coverage of Debates

In addition to attracting scholarly interest, debates attract a high level of media attention. At the presidential level, for example, analysis of major network news broadcasts during the fall campaign, from Labor Day to Election Day, reveals that debate-related news segments are among the most frequent campaign stories (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). McKinney and Lamoureux (1999) suggested that the debate news narrative is best viewed as an ongoing media drama performed in three acts. First, the typical news story begins with the requisite “debate over the debates,” focusing on one candidate challenging his or her opponent to debate. This stage of the narrative also deals with uncertainties such as how many debates will take place, what formats will be adopted, and who will be allowed to participate, particularly when “legitimate” third-party or independent candidates are involved. The second phase of the drama sets expectations for each candidate, with people learning from the media who is considered the stronger or more experienced debater, who is expected to attack whom and how, and possible debate strategies that candidates will likely pursue. Finally, after the actual debate takes place, the news narrative reveals who won or lost, or performed better than or not as well as expected, highlighting candidate attacks, stumbles, or gaffes.

Research conducted on the news media’s coverage of debates has examined both the content and effects of that reporting. In characterizing the content of debate coverage,
although issue discussion constitutes the major element of debates, issues are not the main focus of debate reporting (Kaid et al., 2000); instead, media coverage focuses largely on candidates’ performance and highlights the “horse-race” aspects of the campaign, with heavy reporting of “snap” postdebate polls showing who won the debate and much speculative analysis regarding the likely impact of the debate on the election outcome.

A number of experimental studies have tested the effects of exposure to postdebate media commentary. Lowry, Bridges, and Barefield (1990) found that viewers exposed to postdebate analysis featuring an instant poll showing that a particular candidate had won the debate were significantly more likely to identify that candidate as the debate winner than were viewers not exposed to the postdebate commentary. Experimental studies by McKinnon, Tedesco, and Kaid (1993) and McKinnon and Tedesco (1999) also found media commentary effects, with exposure to postdebate “spin” significantly increasing respondents’ evaluations of candidates. In analyzing the influence of postdebate media commentary, Chaffee and Dennis (1979) concluded that “it may well be that the press’s interpretation of the debate...is more important in determining the impact on the electorate than is the debate itself” (p. 85).

Debate Format and Candidates’ Messages

A limited amount of empirical work has tested relationships between debate format and candidates’ message content. Because debates remained virtually unchanged at the presidential level until the 1990s, until then sticking largely to the standard “joint press-conference” design, the scant systematic analysis of debate formats is somewhat understandable. However, the limited findings that now are available make it increasingly clear that debate format matters in several important ways.

In analyzing possible format effects in general-election presidential debates, perhaps the most systematic analysis is the research program by Diana Carlin and colleagues examining the influence of debate format on candidate clash (e.g., Carlin, Howard, Stanfield, & Reynolds, 1991; Carlin, Morris, & Smith, 2001). Their analyses address the contention that televised debates are devoid of actual candidate clash (when candidates offer analysis of their issue positions versus opponents’ positions, and through direct attack of opponents’ positions) and direct comparison of issue positions, finding that particular format features influence candidates to engage in such clash. Specifically, Carlin et al. (1991) found in their comparative content analysis of the presidential debates in 1960, 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1988 that candidate clash is limited when format design limits rebuttal times or when the same or similar questions are not posed to both candidates. More recently, Carlin et al. (2001) found that the type of questions asked influences candidate clash, such that “comparative” questions (asking candidates to contrast their positions to those of their opponent) generate significantly more clash than do less comparative questions, often put to candidates by citizen questioners in town-hall debates. Finally, when comparing the amount of clash that occurred across three debate formats—the formal-podium debate, the less formal candidate-“chat” debate, and the town-hall debate—the formal-podium debate demonstrated the greatest overall level of candidate clash and the more conversational chat debate featured the least amount of clash.

Kaid et al.’s (2000) analysis of the two most common debate formats now used at the presidential level—the formal-podium debate with journalist questioners and the town-hall debate with citizen questioners—found three significant content differences: Town-hall debates (1) contain significantly less candidate attack; (2) lead candidates to develop significantly more issue (rather than image) appeals; and (3) feature significantly more candidate-positive (rather than opponent-negative) discourse. Kaid et al.’s (2000) study
confirmed Benoit and Wells’s (1996) finding that town-hall debates contain the least amount of candidate attack, leading to the conclusion that “the format of the debates—and in particular when audience members are able to clearly express their desires to the candidates—can affect the nature of persuasive attack produced by the rhetors” (p. 59).

To test the relationship between debate format and issues discussed, Kaid et al. (2000) conducted an experimental study that examined the degree to which issues discussed by candidates in a journalist-controlled podium debate versus a citizen-controlled town-hall debate corresponded to issues that voters thought were most important. Their study found a debate-format effect relating to issue agendas, such that in the journalist-led podium debate, the public’s predebate issue agenda was unrelated to the agenda of issues that respondents thought were discussed during the debate, whereas in the town-hall debate, viewers’ predebate issue agenda was significantly correlated with the rank order of issues stressed in the debate itself. This difference in issue-agenda agreement supports the notion that a town-hall format, in which citizens ask candidates questions, taps more directly into the issue priorities of ordinary voters than does a podium debate.

Finally, McKinney, Dudash, and Hodgkinson (2003) tested viewer learning from exposure to debates, examining both issue and image learning across three debate formats: the more formal journalist-led podium debate, a more informal conversational debate with candidates seated at a table with a single journalist moderator, and a citizen-led town-hall debate. Comparing respondents’ overall issue and image learning from the three debates combined, approximately two-thirds of all claims of learning were about candidate image and one-third was about issue learning. However, the debate format had an effect on the type of learning that occurred, such that chat debates led viewers to focus less on candidates’ performance and image considerations, and more on issue appeals. Moreover, whereas chat debates resulted in an almost equal amount of issue and image learning, the podium and town-hall debates resulted in almost three times as many candidate-image observations than claims of issue learning.

In summary, the limited research available suggests that the structure of a political debate can have significant effects on candidates’ communication and viewers’ learning. Specifically, content-analytic research suggests that the more formal podium debates conducted by a professional moderator encourage greater candidate clash and more aggressive and attack-oriented candidate discourse, but when the public is included in the debate dialogue, candidates reduce their level of clash and attack, adopt a more personable or “humanizing” style, focus more on issue than image discussion, and address issues that are of greatest concern to the public. Finally, limited evidence suggests that the debate structure may influence the type of learning—issue versus image—resulting from debate exposure.

The decades of research about political debates provides useful information for candidates preparing for debate participation, as well as those planning debate encounters that are most useful to citizens. The foundation of a participatory democracy is an informed and engaged citizenry, perhaps best demonstrated in campaign debates in which those desiring to be leaders stand before the public and argue why they should be granted one of the greatest expressions of power that citizens have—their vote. To aid that process, communication scholars often have applied research about debates to actual campaigns. For instance, communication scholar, and now consultant, Myles Martel (1983) served as the chief debate advisor to Ronald Reagan during his 1980 presidential campaign. Diana Carlin (The University of Kansas) has served as a consultant to the Commission on Presidential Debates, advising on format and production of presidential debates. Carlin also coordinates the DebateWatch program that involves college and university faculty organizing groups of citizens and students in their local communities to engage in postdebate...
discussions (Carlin, 2005; Carlin & Anderson, 2003), and Carlin and Mitchell McKinney (University of Missouri) have worked with international colleagues to organize Debate-Watch groups throughout the world and to advise on the organization of political debates in other countries (see Beom, Carlin, & Silver, 2005). The media also often turn to communication scholars, such as Carlin, Robert Friedenberg (Miami University), McKinney, Sidney Kraus (Cleveland State University), Judith Trent (The University of Cincinnati), and David Zarefsky (Northwestern University), for commentary on political debates.

Political Advertising

Political advertising occupies a central role in the electoral process of most democratic systems, whether represented by the paid advertising system that characterizes the United States or by unpaid political programming provided by broadcast outlets in many other democracies (see Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). Political advertising also represents one of the clearest, most direct applications of communication research. As a result, researchers have investigated the content of political television advertising, identifying the “video-style” of candidates by analyzing the verbal, nonverbal, and television production content of political ads (Kaid & Johnston, 2001). More important to political practitioners are findings about the effectiveness of various strategies and components of political advertising, with researchers establishing that political advertising can have identifiable effects on people’s knowledge and attitudes about political candidates and issues, as well as their voting decisions (e.g., Kaid, 2004, 2006).

Early research on political advertising effects suggested that televised political advertising was especially valuable because of its ability to overcome partisan selective exposure, meaning that television spots help candidates to get their messages to a large number of voters who might not ordinarily seek out those messages but are exposed to them as part of routine television programming (Atkin, Bowen, Nayman, & Sheinkopf, 1973). Televised political advertising also has proven particularly effective at persuading undecided voters (Bowen, 1994) and those who are not highly involved in politics (Rothschild & Ray, 1974). The following sections examine (1) how political advertising affects people’s knowledge about candidates and issues, attitudes toward candidates, and their voting; (2) negative political advertising; (3) communication channels employed in political advertising; and (4) issue advocacy in political advertising.

Effects of Political Advertising on Knowledge about Candidates and Issues

Among the most important findings about the effectiveness of political advertising has been the establishment of learning effects from exposure. For instance, voters exposed to televised political ads, compared to those who are not, are more likely to recall a candidate’s name (Kaid, 1982; West, 1994), an important factor in candidates’ success at the polls. Voters’ knowledge about campaign issues and candidate positions on those issues is increased by exposure to political advertising (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008; Pfau, Holbert, Szabo, & Kaminski, 2002; Ridout, Shaw, Goldstein, & Franz, 2004).

The content of a political ad may affect voters’ recall of information; for instance, ads focused on the image and character qualities of candidates appear to be particularly successful at increasing voters’ knowledge about those candidates (Kaid & Sanders, 1978). Advertising exposure also can affect voters’ judgments about issue salience and, thereby, have an agenda-setting effect for both issues (Golan, Kiousis, & McDaniel, 2007; Roberts, 1992; West, 1993) and candidates’ perceived attributes (Sulfaro, 2001).
Political advertising is so effective that researchers have found it to be more valuable in eliciting voters’ knowledge gain than exposure to television news (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002; Patterson & McClure, 1976). Even political debates, a much longer and presumably information-rich communication format, appear to be less successful at transferring issue knowledge to voters than is political advertising (Just, Crigler, & Wallach, 1990).

**Effects of Political Advertising on Attitudes toward Candidates**

Political communication research also has considered how exposure to political advertising affects voters’ evaluations of candidates, which may be more important than information gained from political advertising. Consequently, numerous experimental and survey studies have investigated effects of political advertising on people’s evaluations of candidates (e.g., Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Kahn & Geer, 1994; Kaid, 1991, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001; Kaid & Chanslor, 2004; Kaid, Leland, & Whitney, 1992; Pfau, Kendall et al., 1997; Tedesco & Kaid, 2003; West, 1993).

In contrast to knowledge and information gain, where image ads appear to be successful, political ads that emphasize issue content are most effective at increasing people’s positive attitudes toward candidates (Kaid, Chanslor, & Hovind, 1992; Kaid & Sanders, 1978; Thorson, Christ, & Caywood, 1991). The emotional content in ads also generates emotional responses related to the evaluation of candidates (Chang, 2001; Kaid, 1994; Kaid, Leland, & Whitney, 1992; Tedesco, 2002).

**Effects of Political Advertising on Voting Behavior**

In the political arena, the behavioral effect of most concern to practitioners is the decision to vote for or against a candidate, and political communication scholars have demonstrated that political advertising affects directly such electoral decisions. Direct voting effects have been shown by research that identifies the vote impact of exposure to specific advertising messages (Goldstein & Freedman, 2000; Kaid & Sanders, 1978; West, 1994).

**Effects of Negative Political Advertising**

Over the past several decades, the tenor of political advertising has become more negative, giving rise to a considerable amount of political communication research to determine conditions under which such advertising is and is not effective. However, the definition of negative advertising is not as obvious as it may seem; in fact, it is the subject of great debate. In their work on videostyle, Kaid and Johnston (2001) defined negative advertising as that which focuses on or targets opponents rather than the candidate who sponsors the ad. Benoit (1999) described the function of such advertising as “attacking” and Franz et al. (2008) used the term attack advertising. Some advertising, labeled comparative advertising, provides both negative advertising about an opponent and positive information about the sponsor (Meirick, 2002; Sorescu & Gelb, 2000). Whatever the label or definition, negative advertising seems to create a knee-jerk negative reaction from citizens who proclaim loudly and often that they dislike and disapprove of it (Franz et al., 2008; Kaid, 2004; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000).

Despite widespread dislike of negative advertising, one reason for its increased use has been political practitioners’ belief that it works. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that this conclusion is more than just a presumption or “gut reaction” by practitioners, as
research shows that negative advertising exposure, compared to positive ads, can lead to higher levels of voters’ knowledge about candidates and issues (Basil, Schooler, & Reeves, 1991; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Chang, 2001; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1989; Kahn & Kenney, 2000; A. Lang, 1991).

Although positive ads appear to be more successful than negative or comparative ads at producing more favorable attitudes toward candidates (Kahn & Geer, 1994; Shen & Wu, 2002), negative advertising can deflate the image evaluation of opponents or targeted candidates (Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Tinkham & Weaver-Lariscy, 1993; West, 1994). In fact, Jasperson and Fan (2002) found that the effects of negative information were four times greater than that of positive information with respect to people’s favorability toward candidates.

Backlash from negative advertising, however, sometimes causes declining evaluation of sponsoring candidates, even as it decreases positivity toward targeted candidates (Garramone, 1984; Jasperson & Fan, 2002; Merritt, 1984). The conditions under which negative advertising is used, however, can diminish this problem. For instance, research confirms that the old adage “the best defense is a good offense” applies to political advertising; hence, inoculation, or getting one’s message out first, on a vulnerable issue can greatly reduce the likelihood that voters will be persuaded by opponents’ subsequent negative attacks on that issue (Pfau & Burgoon, 1988; Pfau & Kenski, 1990).

Independent or third-party sponsorship also makes negative ads more credible and believable (Garramone, 1984, 1985; Garramone & Smith, 1984; Groenedyk & Valentino, 2002; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Shen & Wu, 2002). However, the widely accepted view of the effectiveness of negative advertising has been questioned recently by new research findings suggesting that independent sponsorship does not necessarily outperform but exerts the same impact as candidate sponsorship (Kaid, Fernandes et al., 2008; Pfau, Holbert et al., 2002).

The content of negative ads can be decisive in determining their effects, with negative ads attacking opponents’ issue positions being more effective than negative ads attacking opponents’ personal qualities (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1989; Kahn & Geer, 1994; Pfau & Burgoon, 1989; Roddy & Garramone, 1988). The success of intertwining personal and issues attacks may explain the success of the 2004 ads against the Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, sponsored by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, that related primarily to Kerry’s Vietnam War experience and competence to be “Commander-in-Chief,” and made direct and implied criticisms of his character and leadership potential, but related the attacks to military or terrorism issues. The use of contrast/comparative ads also sometimes can offset potential backlash effects (Meirick, 2002).

Research has made clear that negative political advertising demands a response from targeted candidates. Rebuttal ads by candidates have been shown to diminish the effectiveness of such attacks (Garramone, 1985; Kahn & Geer, 1994; Roddy & Garramone, 1988; Sonner, 1998).

Communication Channels Employed in Political Advertising

Most of the previous discussion focused on source, message, and receiver variables that relate to the effectiveness of political advertising. Very little research has addressed whether the channel or medium through which political ads are transmitted makes a difference in their effects. Research has suggested the presence of consistent interaction effects between channels and sources of political advertising, such that some candidates are more successful on television, whereas others are more successful using radio or print
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media (e.g., Andreoli & Worchel, 1978; Cohen, 1976). The emergence of the Internet as a vehicle for political advertising has restimulated research on the communication channel question. Kaid (2002, 2003), for instance, identified some differences in evaluations of the 2000 presidential candidates presented in television advertising versus the same advertising on the Web. In the 2004 presidential campaign, John Kerry was evaluated more positively by those who saw his advertising on the Web, whereas George Bush fared better when his ads were viewed on television (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005).

Other political advertising topics that have been important to those making applications to real-world concerns have included research on political advertising for female candidates (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004; Kahn, 1996) and the spread of U.S. political advertising to international venues (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2006). Communication researchers also have been leaders in applying research on advertising to issue-advocacy situations where such advertising is designed to affect public policy outcomes rather than people's vote in a specific election (Kaid, Tedesco, & Spiker, 1996; West, Heith, & Goodwin, 1996).

Communication scholars also have applied their research expertise on political advertising when they have been called on to write, produce, research, and evaluate advertising spots for political campaigns and issue advocacy groups. Kaid and Tedesco, for instance, have applied their research on political advertising to campaigns at several levels, as have Mary Banwart (The University of Kansas), Dianne Bystrom (Director of the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University), Kathy Kendall (The University of Maryland), Karen Johnson-Cartee (The University of Alabama), and Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy (The University of Georgia).

Political communication research also has been applied to news media commentary about political advertising. Often labeled “adwatches,” both newspaper and television news reporters have developed systems for analyzing the accuracy of claims made by political candidates in their ads (Kaid, McKinney, Tedesco, & Gaddie, 1999; McKinnon & Kaid, 1999; Tedesco, Kaid, & McKinnon, 2000). Scholars at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania now are involved directly in checking and verifying political advertising claims through their Web site, FactCheck.org, which offers the media and the public detailed analyses of political advertisements.

Political News

Many political communication researchers investigate journalistic, stylistic, and technological aspects of news media. As explained below, media gatekeeping, news bias, and news media content; agenda-setting and agenda-building; and news framing are robust research traditions addressing journalistic practices and their effects.

Media Gatekeeping, News Bias, and News Media Content Research

Media gatekeeping, initially articulated by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947), first was applied to newsrooms in White’s (1964) landmark observations of editorial decision making during the 1960s. White investigated how editors functioned as gatekeepers through their ability to select, filter, shape or withhold information appearing in their newspapers. More recent analyses have revealed that newsworthiness of information and space constraints (column inches and broadcast time) are the leading editorial considerations predicting what appears in the news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Ironically, a common theme in recent research is whether anyone actually is monitoring the gate. Media sensationalism and tabloidization, coupled with the increased blending of infor-
mation and entertainment, have led researchers to question editorial decision making (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001; Shaw, 1994; B. A. Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000). Researchers also have begun studying gatekeeping on media Web sites, where space constraints are not as restrictive as in print and broadcast media (Singer, 2001).

Media bias is one of the more contentious issues in research about news content. There is much debate about how to operationalize bias, but more important, about the sources used by scholars to assert their claims of media bias. For example, studies focusing only on ABC, NBC, and CBS television networks fail to capture the widely reported politically right- and left-leaning tendencies of Fox and CNN, respectively. Furthermore, the word media is far more complex than network news or major daily newspapers (see Lievrouw, this volume). For example, few researchers have focused on talk radio, which sometimes is perceived to have a conservative bias. Although bias is a fertile concept, allegations of it must be made on strong methodological footing or the research loses credibility.

Media bias research often focuses on conservative and liberal bias (e.g., Domke, Watts, Shah, & Fan, 1999; Eisinger, Veenstra, & Koehn, 2007; Niven, 2002), corporate bias (e.g., Alterman, 2004), and negative bias (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008; Lichter, Noyes, & Kaid, 1999). Researchers also study media bias related to coverage of particular events, such as journalistic practices during times of war (e.g., Hallin, 1992; Kaid, Myrick et al., 1994). Although researchers draw different conclusions regarding whether there is conservative and liberal media bias during election campaigns in the United States, research on international events supports a pro-American bias by U.S. media. The changing reporting styles through embedded journalism during the U.S. war in Iraq also drew scholarly attention to the tone of media coverage, trust in the military, and framing of military and war between embedded and nonembedded journalists (Haigh et al., 2006).

An important consideration of news media content is the “horse-race” style of media reporting, which focuses on candidates leading in the polls to the detriment of more detailed political information (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008; Trent & Friedenberg, 2007). Researchers also have explored the transformation of news in the Internet era, strategies that newspapers employ on their Web sites to improve coverage of public affairs (Rosenberry, 2005), how Internet and traditional news compare with regard to media agendas and information processing by audiences (Ku, Kaid, & Pfau, 2003), and how the new media environment is shifting away from traditional media sources and toward cable and Internet sources that are available all the time (Benoit & Hansen, 2004).

A very practical area of news coverage research highlights the restrictions imposed on news that reaches the public as a result of the tendency to shorten the amount of coverage given to political candidates’ statements. Researchers have verified repeatedly that the time given to direct statements by candidates in presidential campaigns has shrunk in recent years to 7 to 8 seconds (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008; Hallin, 1992; Lichter et al., 1999). Such research provides candidates and officeholders alike with important lessons about how to structure and limit their public statements to fit the short “sound-bite” mentality of journalistic reporting.

**Agenda-Setting and Agenda-Building**

*Agenda-setting*, as first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), is the process by which media influence the salience of issues on the public agenda. Subsequently, scholars have pursued five directions of research: (1) basic agenda-setting; (2) attribute agenda-setting; (3) contingent conditions for agenda-setting effects; (4) agenda-building, or the
process by which sources influence the media agenda; and (5) agenda-setting consequences (McCombs, 2004).

Agenda-setting research extends through many contexts and directions of influence (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004), including campaign agenda-building for media (Tedesco, 2001, 2005a, 2005b), intermedia agenda-setting effects (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Reese & Danielian, 1989), political advertising and agenda-setting (e.g., Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, McCombs, & Lennon, 1998; Ridout & Mellen, 2007; Roberts & McCombs, 1994), and the agenda-setting power of the U.S. president (Wanta & Foote, 1994; Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989). Research also explores agenda-setting and polling (Son & Weaver, 2006); agenda-setting and civic awareness and involvement (Kiousis, McDevitt, & Wu, 2005; Weaver, 1994); Web influence on media agendas (Ku et al., 2003), second-level or attribute agenda-setting (Kiousis, 2005); and relationships between candidates, media, and public agendas (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997; R. E. Miller & Wanta, 1996). Research exploring various media, campaigns, and sources offers mixed results on the power of agenda-setting; consequently, Reese’s (1991) metaphor of a “revolving door” of mutual influence appears fitting.

Agenda-building research investigates source influences on the media agenda (see, e.g., Gandy, 1982). Investigation of newsroom sources during the Watergate scandal pioneered agenda-building research (G. E. Lang & Lang, 1981). Tedesco (2002) asserted that the 24-hour news cycle, convergent technologies that allow media transfer, and the speed of modern political campaigns have contributed to the likelihood that sources influence the media agenda. Individuals and organizations with information resources have the power to create information subsidies, such as advertisements, press releases, blogs, speeches, and Web sites, where information may be distributed in print and broadcast formats, and disseminated across a network of news media (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986, Turk & Franklin, 1987). Information subsidies from campaigns are shaped in multiple message forms, including political advertisements, direct mail, press conferences, speeches, press releases, and Web-page content.

**News Media Framing**

Debate continues in the scholarly community about whether attribute agenda-setting and framing are mutually exclusive conceptualizations of media interpretation and presentation of news (Golan & Wanta, 2001; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; McCombs et al., 1997). However, framing research has a clear and distinct research tradition complete with broad approaches and definitions of framing (e.g., Edelman, 1993; Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar, 1991). In fact, framing may be viewed as a news function (a predictor variable) and as a criterion variable in effects research (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Scheufele, 1999). Researchers have identified a wide range of dominant framing strategies, including episodic and thematic framing (Iyengar & Simon, 1993); issue-specific or generic frames of conflict, human interest, economy, morality, and responsibility (DeVreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000); substantive and ambiguous framing (A. P. Williams et al., 2008); and macroframes of cynicism, metacommunication, and speculation (Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007).

Social norms and values, interest group pressures, journalistic routines, political bias of journalists, and newsroom ownership constraints are among the significant influences that affect framing (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Researchers have addressed framing of political and health policies (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Hoffman & Slater, 2007), framing of media during elections (D’Angelo, Calderone, & Territola, 2005), framing
and news discourse (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), and framing of politically oriented television dramas, such as \textit{West Wing} (Holbert et al., 2005). Another emerging area of research focuses on media framing during reporting of war, with research about journalistic framing in the post-Cold War era (Norris, 1995), framing by the press during the Abu Ghraib scandal (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006), and framing of the war in Iraq (Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, & Trammell, 2005).

**New Technologies in Political Communication**

The emergence of the Internet and its quick adoption and implementation by political campaigns, political advocacy and activist groups, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations offer researchers countless opportunities to study new applications of political communication content and effects. Selnow’s (1998) prediction that the Internet would become as essential to political communication as traditional media appears realized only a decade removed from his forecast, as political candidates and groups now rely heavily on the Internet for functions such as fund-raising, voter mobilization, media relations, and voter information campaigns (e.g., consider the Obama presidential campaign). The Internet, thus, has emerged—and is expanding—as a primary source of political communication.

Scholarly attention to the Internet’s role in political communication demonstrates a variety of established and developing research applications. Here, we address five research applications of the Internet in political communication settings: (1) the Internet and campaign communication content and effects, (2) e-Government initiatives, (3) political activism, (4) the public sphere, and (5) voter uses and gratifications (see also the essays in Chadwick & Howard, 2008; Lievrouw, this volume).

**The Internet and Campaign Communication Content and Effects**

Although the 1992 presidential campaign conducted by Bill Clinton pioneered application of the Internet for dissemination of speech text (Whillock, 1997), political candidates realized quickly the promotional possibilities of even a basic, glossy, e-brochure-style Web site. Consequently, by the 1996 election cycle, most major party candidates for national office had established a Web presence (Browning, 2002; D’Alessio, 1997; Davis, 1999; Tedesco, Miller, & Spiker, 1999). The Internet’s emergence coincided with discussion of declining civic engagement, increasing political cynicism, and declining social capital (connections within and between social networks; e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000; Putnam, 1995). The Internet, however, had a polarizing effect on the research community. Some scholars were optimistic that the Internet could offer citizens new political uses and rewards (e.g., Budge, 1996; Rheingold, 2002), primarily because of the Internet’s structural opportunities, such as inherent interactivity, generally low cost, freedom from boundaries, high speed, and lateral, horizontal, and nonhierarchical modes of communication, that could enhance democracy (Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997; Sparks, 2001). Other scholars were skeptical of the Internet’s ability to reinvigorate civic engagement because they said it would have little effect on politics or support, and that it would strengthen established political organizations (e.g., Bimber, 1998, 2000; Davis, 1999; Margolis, Resnick, & Tu, 1997).

Despite rapid adoption of the Internet by political candidates and campaigns, most researchers concluded that candidates and elected officials failed to utilize the Internet to its potential (e.g., Congress Online Project, 2002; D’Alessio, 2000; Foot & Schneider, 2002; Owen, Davis, & Strickler, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Much of the criticism...
was directed at the lack of interactivity, absence of lateral means of communication, and overwhelming reliance on self-promotional material apparent in the political use of the Internet. For instance, there is only slight evidence that candidates are engaging voters through interactive applications, with English and Tedesco’s (2007) analysis of the 2006 U.S. Senate candidates’ official blogs revealing that only 3 of the 67 major-party candidates allowed visitors to interact with the campaign by posting to their blogs, although the content of the posts suggests limited, if any, filtering by the campaigns. Stromer-Galley’s (2000) argument that candidates avoid interactivity mostly due to dangers associated with loss of message control remains valid. Perhaps even the slight move toward interactive tools, such as an open-post blog, forecast the possibility that citizens will come to expect interactive opportunities with candidates and campaigns. Schneider and Foot’s (2006) comparison of 2000 and 2004 campaign Web sites also suggested increases in connecting and mobilizing features. Foot and Schneider (2002) were critical of scholars who assert that online politics offers little more than a resemblance of off-line politics because those scholars overlook the enormous Web sphere of political campaign sites and their ability to shift information consumers to information producers via coproduction, transcend class and race boundaries, and persuasively mobilize people. Furthermore, candidates are including more hyperlinking as a form of interaction on their campaign Web sites and blogs (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). Such interactivity is important because political Web-site visitors view it favorably (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002).

A significant focus of new technology and political communication research concerns the effects of the Internet on civic engagement, political efficacy, and trust of politicians. Underlying much of that research is an assessment of whether the Internet promotes social capital. Although Putnam (2000) implicated television as the primary cause for a decline in social capital, other researchers have challenged Putnam’s claims by freeing television (Norris, 1996, 2000) and the Internet (Norris, 2001) from blame. In fact, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) argued that information-seeking and information-exchanging users of the Internet are more engaged in their communities and more trusting of their fellow citizens. More recent experimental research on the interactive features of political Web sites demonstrates a strong relationship between interactivity and young adults’ political efficacy and political information efficacy (Tedesco, 2006, 2007). In addition, Min’s (2007) evaluation of online and face-to-face deliberation showed that both forms can increase political participation, political efficacy, and issue knowledge. Interesting results from the American National Election Survey also have revealed direct Internet effects on information acquisition but contingent effects on actual civic engagement and participation (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Similar research conducted by Xenos and Foot (2005), based on a sample of 200 races from the 2002 U.S. elections, challenged the “politics-as-usual” argument by demonstrating that third-party and challenger candidates are not significantly different in their employment of issue content, and that biographical, archived information on Web sites offers a significant alternative to dynamic media, such as paid political advertising and news stories.

The Internet and E-Government Initiatives

Much of the application of Internet research to e-Government initiatives essentially asks whether the Web can reform democracy in positive ways by encouraging greater public participation. Analysis of 270 municipal Web sites in California revealed that the vast majority did not contain participatory features and rarely included mechanisms to enhance deliberative opportunities (Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000). Contrary to some
fears that the Internet would “rob us of our political commons, and isolate us from each other” (Neuman, 2001, p. 203), findings from the experimental community of Netville—a cutting-edge, wired community in the Toronto suburbs, with homes provided access to the latest in high-speed Internet, desktop videophones, discussion forums, and other Web-based entertainment applications—revealed that computer-mediated communication actually strengthened community bonds and supported new relationships among community members (Hampton & Wellman, 2001). Specifically, Netville residents who made use of the technology, compared to those who did not, were better at sustaining established community ties and establishing new community networks. A subsequent analysis by Hampton (2007) of four Boston neighborhoods to test the generalizability of the results about Netville found that individuals with a predisposition for local interaction were more likely to use the Internet for local engagement, whereas residents without preexisting local network ties were less likely to adopt it for community engagement. Additional research exploring community-level social capital reveals a strong relationship between community members’ length of Internet use and their social capital-building behavior. Social capital also serves as a predictor of effective computer-mediated communication for civic involvement (Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001).

Stromer-Galley (2002) observed that the comfort and security of participating from private space (e.g., via the Internet) heighten the prospect of citizens’ communication in the political process. In addition, online interactive features lead to increased opportunities for public engagement and deliberation (Coleman, 2004). More specifically, interactive structures online promote public deliberation, provide valuable feedback to political representatives, and engage citizens to participate in the transformation from transmission politics to dialogical, direct representation (Coleman, 2005). In fact, analysis of whether the Internet promotes different political activities and invites varied political users also is an important applied consideration for e-Government, with responses from more than 1,200 Americans showing that the Internet fosters different political activities than does offline political engagement (Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007). Although research regarding online and offline political engagement usually reports a correlation between these two forms of political activities, Jensen et al. (2007) reported that “online practices of community involvement are empirically distinguishable from offline practices” and that there were “notable differences in the predictors of online and offline political participation” (p. 47). More specifically, democratization of the political process online—or a broader public sphere—decreased the strength of traditional socioeconomic status variables (e.g., income, age, and length of residence) as predictors of political engagement online.

The Internet and Political Activism

Explorations into the Internet’s role in the mobilization and effectiveness of activism generally conclude that the Internet provides activist groups with critical tools to collect and mobilize around social issues (Bennett 2003; Dartnell, 2006; Herman & Ettema, 2007; Mann, 1995; Rheingold, 2002; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004; see also Lievrouw, this volume). Mann (1995) was among the first to recognize that social activists were developing coalitions and networks through Internet user groups. Scammell (2000) noted the likely transformation to an age of a “citizen–consumer” who wields power through politically conscious choices based on platforms ranging from the environment to fair trade and from animal rights to human rights. Although evidence of the Internet “changing everything” is not apparent in politics—at least not yet—Scammell asserted that the Internet greatly transforms activist politics. In addition, a formal content analysis
of activist organizations’ Web sites revealed evidence of the Internet’s facilitation of a transnational activist network (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004). Bennett’s (2003) exploration of activist networks, particularly those labeled as “resource poor” in comparison to conventional political party organizations, showed that communication patterns among these networked groups are shifting the political game. Through case study analyses of political strategies applied by activist hubs, such as NetAction and Global Exchange, Bennett demonstrated that activist groups are using the Internet successfully to sustain campaigns; create broad, accessible, and transportable communication networks; control their identity and transform it based on issue demand; and create information subsidies that influence traditional media agendas. Media convergence and software developments allow activists to enter hyperlinked communication networks in a variety of ways, which Bennett argued enables the shift from information consumers to information producers of news, thus providing tools to influence traditional media agendas. Bennett cautioned, however, that the very features that enable activist groups in the networked environment—control, decision making, and collective identity—also threaten those groups that cannot manage control across network hubs.

The Internet and the Public Sphere

Perhaps one of the most vibrant areas of applied political communication research and new technologies focuses on whether the Internet is fostering an online public sphere (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001, 2007; Streck, 1998). Such research generally explores whether the Internet enhances deliberative democracy, invites broader participation from people disengaged from the political process, and promotes rational political decision making. There are mixed reviews on the Internet’s ability to promote a more representative public sphere, with some scholars arguing that the Internet will reinforce politics as usual (Davis, 1999; Margolis & Resnick, 2000), but the research on activism presented previously demonstrates that the Internet is engaging marginalized groups and enabling them to create and sustain communication networks. In addition, Dahlgren (2005) suggested that the public sphere includes participatory opportunities beyond the activist domain, including e-Government initiatives, civic forums, and journalistic feedback domains and blogs. Case study analysis from Hamburg, Germany indicates that the Internet has the ability to strengthen democratic practices; in fact, Albrecht (2006) found that online deliberation was close to the rational–critical model expressed in deliberative theories.

Future Applied Political Communication Research

Future research in applied political communication faces many challenges. One important direction is the renewed interest in the role of interpersonal communication. Although Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) identified an early role for interpersonal communication in politics, subsequent research has focused more often on the influence of the media. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in the importance of interpersonal communication—particularly political discussion—in political knowledge and participation. Research has confirmed that political knowledge and participation can be traced directly to the amount and frequency of political discussion in which individuals engage (Eveland & Thompson, 2006; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; McClung, 2006). In a study that involved direct intervention through use of interpersonal communication in schools, McDevitt and Chaffee (2000) showed that introducing children in low-income households to political information can positively affect their political social-
ization and activate their parents’ interest and participation in politics, thereby reducing the knowledge gap through personal discussions. However, enhanced knowledge levels only occur when political discussions take place among those with similar viewpoints; discussion with third parties who disagree does not lead to greater knowledge about political issues (Feldman & Price, 2008). Feldman and Price (2008) also found relationships and interactions between interpersonal discussions, disagreement, and debate viewing, suggesting more complex interactions among interpersonal and media information sources as antecedents of political knowledge and learning. Future applied political communication research must address these interactions more fully.

Another important direction for future research is the increasingly important role played by alternative media in the formation of people’s political knowledge and attitudes. Young citizens, in particular, no longer get their information about politics from traditional news exposure but, instead, increasingly turn to alternative formats, including entertainment venues, such as The Daily Show, Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live, and YouTube; social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace; and virtual environments, such as Second Life. Researchers have begun to investigate the effects of some of these alternative sources (e.g., Holbert, Lambe, Dudo, & Carlton, 2007; Sweetser & Kaid, 2008), but much more needs to be done to understand the motivations and political participation patterns of young citizens.

Young citizens also seem less interested and involved in politics than their older peers, and they exhibit lower levels of political information efficacy, meaning that they do not have much confidence in their knowledge about politics, which leads them to be less likely to vote and participate in politics (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Promising new research (Kenski & Stroud, 2006) suggests that Internet use is positively related to enhanced levels of internal and external political efficacy. Future research needs to search out ways to use new communication technologies and venues to engage the youngest citizens in politics.

The 2008 presidential campaign also has raised the salience of several other important factors in political communication. Future research undoubtedly will place more importance on the study of race (see Nicotera, Clinkscales, Dorsey, & Niles, this volume), gender (see Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Sterk, & Turner, this volume), and even age (see Nussbaum & Ohs, this volume) as factors in the formation of political opinions and behaviors.

Space constraints also limited the ability to cover adequately the robust and growing applications of political communication in international contexts. The expansion of the global economy and the importance of the government in citizens’ lives will make these applications of communication even more important in the future (see Parrish-Sprowl, this volume).

Conclusion

The scholarship reviewed in this chapter represents only a portion of the many venues and contexts in which political communication researchers have applied theory and research to understand and manage ongoing, real-world political problems, issues, and situations. The research areas we considered (political speaking, political debating, political advertising, political news, and political uses of new technologies) showcase the centrality of political campaign communication within the political communication field, making it important to remember that applied political communication encompasses an even wider net of communicative practices and interactions between political actors and citizens in democratic systems. Furthermore, although we focused on political processes in the
United States, the study of political communication and its application throughout the world is an expanding field. Hence, if democracy is to survive and flourish, political communication scholars must continue to explore and apply their knowledge in ways that make an important difference.

References


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