Political Culture and Political Communication: Some Key Shifts

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Four key strands of change

With some simplification, it is perhaps possible to identify four key strands of change at work in political culture and political communication. I want to expand a little on each of these strands and then to pursue selectivity some points for further connection and development that seem to me to arise from them.

These strands are:

1. The reconfiguration of the general character of media–political relations, a process consequent upon fundamental changes in media systems and political systems separately and then in the complex forms of their interconnection. Some commentators have found it useful to classify what has been happening here as part of 'postmodernity', although in my view use of this sweeping term is in danger of assuming too much about the scale and character of specific

changes and therefore of not giving enough attention to continuity or to the full diversity of the factors at work.

2. The transformation of the character of (and perhaps definition of) 'political communication' as a professional practice carried out both by 'politics-side' and 'media-side' groupings, in various relationships of cooperation, indifference or hostility and in the context of different configurations of media system subject to varying norms of practice. The underlying conditions, economic, technological and social, of the practices grouped as 'journalism', and then the specific kinds of role required of 'political journalism' within this broader profile (working with what level of independence? With what guiding values? To what ends? With what kinds of accountability to citizens?) are clearly of major importance here.

3. An emerging pattern both of new connections and new types of disjunction and asymmetry within the sphere of the 'civic'. At the centre of this are changes in the allocated and perceived role of 'citizen', regarded as a person in a self-conscious political relationship both (laterally) with other citizens and (vertically) with representative persons and bodies 'higher up' in the political system. It can be argued that differences in evidence and argument about the precise character and scale of the emerging 'connection/disjunction' pattern are currently at the core of political communications research. They are certainly a recurrent and sometimes troublesome feature of the work assembled here.

4. An expansion of the terms of the 'political' to cover a much wider range of social and cultural practices than was formally the case. As well as retaining many aspects of its 'formal' character, the political has become 'colloquial' in

quite new ways, which has been regarded as a disturbing sign by some (a thinning, a diminution, perhaps a debasement) and welcomed by others (an extension, an overdue phase of genuine popularization). Questions about the language of politics and the appropriate 'civic' terms for engaging with political themes have been raised here with particular force, although they have also been relevant to the three previous strands. As I noted in point 2, just what is taken into account and what is not in 'political communications' research is undergoing revision in relation to this expansion and we may confidently expect this trend to continue.

Across all these areas of change, matters of technology and its application have been significant. The steady growth in the use of what is still called, with increasing inaccuracy, 'new media', has clearly been an important focus in research on media–political relations. With some exceptions, work here has displayed an optimism about the consequences for democratic culture (ranging from the cautious to the utopian) that has yet to receive adequate empirical confirmation, although it is abundantly clear that the older patterns of political information flow have not simply been 'added to' by the new developments but have started to be significantly changed. Sometimes it almost seems as if an established pessimism about the political consequences and likely future direction of mainstream media structures and practices (as outlined classically in Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch's thesis (1995) about the 'crisis of public communication') has not been substantially revised but has, instead, been *offset* by a positive reading of what the new channels of information flow and of debate might usher in. This apparent disjunction, between the mainstream and the 'new' is something to which I want to return below. In a recent, strikingly original,

commentary on models of 'publicness', Daniel Dayan (2009) has examined the varied roles – as resource, agency of repetition and critical respondent – that the new media play in relation to mainstream accounts. These roles, he argues, have reconfigured the idea of 'centre and periphery' as the relationship between elements so identified is played out in respect of specific issues within the public sphere. Clearly, in a variety of ways, some involving combinations with 'old' media, new media are radically modifying the cultural settings and the flows of information and opinion by which 'politics' is sustained, sometimes precariously, as the exercising of legitimized power over civic space. It is no longer possible to engage with any questions of political communication without recognizing their impact.

One other general point I think it is worth making in relation to the strands is the extent to which a vigorous exchange on normative questions runs alongside the descriptive and analytic challenges of conducting research. Recent work operates with its own, various, criteria for judgement, some broadly compatible and some clearly in relationships of contrast if not of conflict. How bad, and in what ways, is the present state of 'political communication' and what are the implications more generally for the state of politics? How likely is it that things will get worse? Conversely, what positive developments can be discerned? What are the possibilities for their growth? To put matters like this is to be deliberately simplistic, yet the dynamics and tensions of evaluation run through recent commentary. In some work, a clear emphasis is placed on either a positive or negative reading, in others there is an internal dialogue running alongside the analysis and discussion of data (which may point in rather different directions). It is likely that as inquiry into political culture develops, 'grand narratives' of either despair or celebration will give way more markedly to

complicated 'balance sheets' in which the significance of change for ideas of democratic development will be both mixed and frequently ambiguous.

I want to develop this commentary by connecting with selected themes from the profile suggested above in a little more detail, noting where I think future work could supplement or support what I take to be the present agenda.

The continuing research agenda: Selected issues

The re-definition of the political

What connects many of the chapters together is a sense, referred to earlier, that the very terms for defining 'politicality', for identifying that which is 'political' or that which carries political meanings and significance, are under revision. Clearly, some researchers believe that only an expanded idea of what counts as political, an idea that goes well beyond established, conventional boundaries, will allow an accurate mapping of how people are variously positioned in relation to ideas of the civic order. Here, it is useful to note the difference between using 'politics' to identify a specific space of social action, one in which engagement with the central institutions and processes of a political system occurs, and using 'politics' to indicate a dimension of everyday life, sometimes recognized as such, sometimes not and nearly always caught up in a complicated manner with other elements. In many societies, an explicit and sustained concern with 'the political', displaying both affirming and critical elements, forms a core around which there is an extensive periphery shading off into levels of partial, occasional and often only implicit concern. Assessing how awareness of politics variously features across the social landscape, active at different depths and in relation to different co-ordinates for guiding perceptions and actions (including use of the media), offers research into the culture of politics a very important objective, one

that has provided a focus for some of the work gathered here. What is the extent and variety of 'the political' within 'the social', 'the cultural' and 'the personal'? How is politics experienced as a factor within, and a constituent of, the self-consciousness of citizens? Formidably general though they may be, these questions are ones that we have to continue to try to answer. The term 'political culture' most often refers to the working values and practices of the institutions in which active, often professional, engagement with politics takes place (it is the culture of what is often referred to as 'the political class' and its administrative support). How, and in what modes, elements of this core political culture extend into everyday life, into 'popular culture' as a field of public representation and portrayal and 'civic culture' as the field of both individualized and cooperative feelings of 'membership', has become a key research issue.

Those working with an inclusive sense of 'politicality' often use it to support a more positive reading of the current situation than the application of narrower, more formal, criteria would encourage. Peter Dahlgren, in writing primarily about the impact and potential of the Web upon civic consciousness and behaviour, has used the terms 'pre-political' and 'proto-political' (Dahlgren, 2009) to describe types of social networking activity that precede engagement with core politics but that are supportive of a movement towards participation within the more central areas of political space.

However, an inclusive sense of the political – an expansive sense of its reach – carries the risk of ignoring the real extent of the distance between core political activities and the everyday frameworks of most citizens and thereby works to inhibit an analysis of the reasons for this distance. There is a tendency in some writing on the issue to privilege the researcher's perception of the 'political' character of particular activities and attitudes and to give reduced attention to the fact these may not be seen

as 'political' by those involved. This perspective can be observed in some writing about popular television, where political aspects and orientations, sometimes perceived as 'progressive' ones, are identified by the researcher but seemingly not generally registered as such by the majority of the audience. As in the old inclusivist slogan 'the personal is political' the important question of precisely how many people regard it as such remains relevant.

The 'integrity' of political communication

Here, I would point to pressing questions about the levels of communicative integrity at work in different parts both of the political sphere and of the media system. A deficit in integrity, variously, if often only loosely, identified by notions of 'spin' and 'propaganda', has often be seen to follow from some of the changes that have so transformed the organization of media–political relations in ways that contributors have discussed in detail. Dominant here is the manner in which political publicity within intensified terms of mediation has more directly aligned itself with commercial practices of branding and advertising, adopting often strikingly similar approaches towards the language within which it makes its claims.

The practices of political deception have, of course, a long, indeed ancient, history, both as strategies to secure advantage (even if only short-term) within the political world itself and as strategies for making positive connections between this world and the larger public world, either through the media or directly – Corner (2010) reviews some recurring features of this. Some of these practices have become 'naturalized' into expected behaviour, just as, for many people, the exaggerations and relentless positives of advertising no longer seem 'deviant' but just the way in which this type of public communication works. The distortions, being expected, are allowed

for and 'discounted', it can be claimed, and we can go on living quite happily in a world dominated by advertising without any great fear of being the victims of serious deception.

However, political claims-making, particularly that occurring outside of the competitive context of electoral campaigns, is only aligned with the claims of advertising and commercial publicity by reducing its status as civic expression, perhaps to dangerously low levels. To use a term recently given a new emphasis by Nick Couldry (2009) there is a reduction in the quality and range of political 'voice', one that has important and broad consequences for the character of governance. Just by what different criteria of communicative integrity current political practice is guided (in, for instance, press releases, press conferences and interviews) and then by what criteria public assessment of that practice is made are two, related, topics that perhaps deserve more research attention than they have currently received. We know that 'cynicism' is an attitude widely identified and debated in political communication studies; some of this cynicism is relatively resigned, some of it is angry. One cause of it would appear to be a lack of trust in the 'truthfulness' of politicians, an unwillingness to 'take them at their word'.

Of course, wariness about the honesty of politicians is as old as politics itself, but it would seem that, along with the continuities, there is something relatively new about the dynamics of distrust currently apparent in many national systems. This is a dynamic to which the media have been seen as significant contributors through the manner in which they have 'covered' politics, while many media professionals regard the activities of the political class itself as almost entirely responsible for the credibility gap that has now opened up. What is clear, and it comes through strongly in some of the chapters, is that the conditions of *visibility of the political* are changing

[the discussion of this theme in Thompson (2000) remains suggestive]. Citizens are getting to 'see' a lot more than they saw before of the political 'backstage'. This 'seeing' is often mediated in forms which can best be called 'gossip', not thereby to dismiss their possible truth content but to signal their emphasis on personality, personal interaction and the established cultural pleasures of speculation on the basis of rumour. But other more serious kinds of 'seeing' are occurring too, as is shown for example by the running story of the Members of Parliament's expenses scandal in Britain across 2009–10.[1]

Such extended risks of having business intended to be private and hidden made visible (the connotations of the term 'exposure' are appropriate here), risks to which new media have greatly contributed, have required new approaches to managing visibility. This has meant revised strategies for attracting attention in order to secure publicity gains while deflecting or diverting attention from that which could be harmful. In these intensified and less predictable conditions, techniques of 'damage limitation' that can be implemented once a 'bad' story has broken have become an even more crucial aspect of professional political communication skills. Over the next decade we are going to see fascinating and important research on these aspects of change.

The importance of history

In addition to the emphasis on integrity (and its frequent absence) I would want to add, too, a remark about the importance of approaching many of these issues within a framework that retains a strong awareness of political and social history. Internationally, far too much media studies research has displayed a tendency to work with an overbearing sense of the contemporary, against which the past is placed in

soft focus when it is visible at all. This has allowed currents of nostalgia to distort a proper assessment of the challenges and risks presented by current change. Versions of the 'good past', often in contradiction of the historical record, have reinforced assessments of decline and of deficit both within the sphere of politics and of mainstream media. There is doubtless much cause for anxiety emerging from our studies of contemporary political communication but we should always keep in mind the history, particularly that over the last century, in relation to which useful judgements can alone be made. A fashion for using 'what might have been' rather than 'what was' as the datum point for assessment of present circumstances should be resisted.

Going beyond journalism

Again, I want to note the benefits of extending political communication analysis well beyond the conventional concern with news and current affairs coverage, important though this remains. More work on the generic variety of the ways in which the political becomes articulated through the media, including through comic and dramatic formats and a range of routes for expressing political affirmation, disagreement, anger and even fantasy, would add considerably to our sense of the overall pattern.[2]

'Mediatization'

Finally, although it has been the subject of extensive debate, it might be worth commenting very briefly on how the idea of 'mediatization' seems to figure in relation to the work offered here. Although there have been many commentaries on the use of this term, Sonia Livingstone has recently provided a useful synoptic

account (Livingstone, 2009). Unlike 'mediation', with which it is sometimes used interchangeably, 'mediatization' in many usages carries the sense of a *changed condition* within the institutions, structures and processes that have become subject to the activities of the media upon, within and around them. The consequences of this include changed forms of relationship with people, perhaps in their identity as citizens, perhaps as consumers, as well as with media professionals. The steady growth of 'public relations' is one indication of this shift to more reified and routinely professional modes of address.

Immediately, of course, questions of scale and rate of change are raised and therefore statements about 'mediatization' almost always require further qualification in relation to these. It has necessarily been a word caught up within the dispute, extending now across much of the humanities and social sciences, about how far and in what ways the media have impacted upon the core institutions and structures of society. This is a dispute that is regularly played-off from polarized positions between those who see the impact as routinely underestimated and those who regard overestimation as the dominant feature. It is sometimes conducted between those working from bases in traditional disciplines, where for a long time the impact of the media on a range of political, social and cultural conditions and practices was not given the attention it deserved (and in some cases, is still not) and those in media, communication and cultural studies, where a strongly and sometimes excessively media-centric view has tended to prevail. Certainly, the dangers are clear of assuming such a dominance of 'media logic' over (and within) political institutions that they are seen to lack *any* significant independent control over their activities or to operate with any policy perspectives that do not have media outcomes as a primary point of reference. I think it is also interesting how, apart from being questionable in its own

terms, such a view of a thoroughly mediatized politics contrasts with the model of a thoroughly politicized media, which also has its place in the history of media–political research, usually in respect of states where the capacity to exert direct and extensive control over media activities at the level of fundamental economic and policy structures shows itself more strongly than in the United States and most of Europe. The apparently conflicting dynamics of 'politicization' and 'mediatization' – dynamics which may be open, in certain conditions, to forms of alignment and combination – are perhaps another productive topic for further inquiry and argument.

However, no matter what the assumptions and hypotheses informing research, we can perhaps all agree with Livingstone when she points out that:

In short, establishing the degree, nature and consequences of the mediatization of anything and everything – politics, education, family, religion, self – is an empirical task still largely ahead of us (Livingstone, 2009, p.7)

References

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Notes

[1] This issue, alluded to by some of the contributors, has been seen to have lowered public trust in the British political class to new levels, creating in the process something of a crisis of political representation. It remains to be seen how deeply, and for how long, the circumstances of 'excessive' expenditure being claimed against public money for Members of Parliament's living costs and household and personal items will impact upon political culture.

[2] Among the initiatives here is an AHRC-funded project at Liverpool University 'Media Genre and Political Culture: Beyond the News', in which a team comprising Kay Richardson, Katy Parry and myself are involved in auditing the extent and character of political mediations across a range of broadcast, print and web output in what are often highly diverse generic formats.[Now published as 'Political Culture and Media Genre' by Palgrave, 2012 hardback, 2015 paperback.].