Theoretical Diversity in Political Communication

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Note: *The late Steven H. Chaffee originally planned to write this chapter, which is dedicated to his memory.*

In the 2000 election, almost every political candidate running for office at every level (presidential, state, county, city, and local) had an active Web site. This fact indicates the current importance of Internet-related communication technologies in political communication and suggests how this specialty field has evolved since its beginnings earlier in the past century in the hands of Walter Lippman, Harold Lasswell, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and other forefathers and founders of communication study. Despite the growth of television in the 1950s and the Internet in the 1990s, which altered the channels of communication carrying political messages to the U.S. public, certain human communication processes involved in changing political behavior have remained much the same.

A long-lasting, stable set of theoretical themes has dominated the study of political communication, rather than any single, overarching theory. Nevertheless, the theoretical diversity of political communication displays certain common themes, such as a lasting concern with communication effects. Our purpose here is to synthesize these diverse theoretical perspectives, showing how they have evolved over the years, with an emphasis on their beginnings. Although the field of political communication began by studying the effects of print media and radio on individuals' voting choice, such as in the 1940 Erie County Study (described later), the field has expanded to include additional aspects of communication and political behavior.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The beginnings of communication study, mass communication, and political communication are intertwined. All shared a common intellectual interest in the effects of mass media communication, and the forefathers and founders of these fields included the same set of scholars. From the early period of what was later to be identified as communication study, scholars focused on changes in political behavior (such as voting) as one of their main dependent variables of study.

Walter Lippmann and Public Opinion

Some observers consider Walter Lippmann's (1922) *Public Opinion* a founding document for communication study. Lippmann was a contemporary scholar with the political scientist Harold Lasswell in studying propaganda and public opinion. During World War I, Lippmann served as a propaganda leaflet writer for the Allied Army in France. During the era when communication study was getting under way in the 1920s and 1930s, until the 1950s or 1960s, propaganda constituted one important stream of communication scholarship. World War I represented a conflict in which both combatants used propaganda extensively, and the public perceived propaganda techniques as being dangerously powerful. This perception was based mainly on anecdotal evidence and on exaggerated claims by governments, rather than on scientific analysis. The public's fear of powerful propaganda served to attract the attention of early scholars like Lippmann and Lasswell. In fact, the field that was later to be called "mass communication" was termed "public opinion and propaganda" (or approximately similar names) in the 1930s. For example, Lasswell taught a course by this name at the University of Chicago (Rogers, 1994).

Lippmann (1922) also did early thinking and writing about what later was called the agenda-setting process, with his insightful chapter on "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." Lippmann contrasted what agenda-setting scholars were later to call "real-world indicators" (which index the seriousness of some social problem) with peoples' perceptions of the issue (later called the public agenda). Walter Lippmann pioneered in conducting one of the first scholarly content analyses, of *The New York Times* coverage of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Lippmann and Merz (1920) found an anti-Bolshevik bias in this news coverage, which led Lippmann to become skeptical about how the average member of the American public could form an intelligent opinion about important issues of the day. Walter Lippmann was called the most gifted and influential political journalist of the 20th century. At the same time, he was a key analyst of propaganda and public opinion, and of agenda-setting.

Lippmann was important in identifying the role of the mass media in public opinion formation in a democracy. He argued that the media, whose freedom was protected by the First Amendment, were crucial in creating a free marketplace of ideas. "The value of participatory democracy, active and widespread popular participation informed by a free and responsible press, serves as an important impetus to political communication research" (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002, p. 215). Study of political communication was stimulated from its beginnings by a normative concern about the need for a free press and an informed public in society.

Harold Lasswell and Propaganda Analysis

The study of media effects as part of an ongoing research program began with the scholarly work of Harold Lasswell, a political scientist at the University of Chicago who specialized in the investigation of propaganda. Lasswell's Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago, later published as a book (Lasswell, 1927), content analyzed the effects of propaganda messages by the Germans versus the French, British, and Americans in World War I. Lasswell formalized the methodology of content analysis of media messages. He is known for his five-question model of communication: *Who* says *what* to *whom* via *which channels* with *what effects*? This conceptualization was to influence early communication study toward the investigation of media effects, a preoccupation that has continued, to at least some degree, to the present day. Although Lasswell earned his doctorate in political science, his scholarly interests ranged widely, and in the latter part of his career, after he left the University of Chicago, he specialized to an increasingly greater degree in communication research. During World War II, Lasswell, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, led a research team at the U.S. Library of Congress charged with content analyzing Allied and Axis propaganda messages in the media.

In 1944, the owner of Time–Life Corporation, Henry Luce, provided funding for a 3-year study of the mass media in the United States by the Commission on Freedom of the Press. The 13-member Commission, chaired by Robert Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, included Lasswell as an influential member. The Commission was concerned about the growing concentration of U.S. media ownership and the decreasing degree of newspaper competition. The Commission report stressed the value of First Amendment freedoms for the media as being essential for an informed public in a functioning democracy.

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and the Erie County Study

Another key forefather of communication study was Paul F. Lazarsfeld, an émigré scholar from Austria, who spent much of his scholarly career at Columbia University. Trained in mathematics, Lazarsfeld became an important toolmaker for social science research on mass communication effects. He led the Radio Research Project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1937, which explored the effects of radio on American audiences. Lazarsfeld transformed the Radio Research Project into the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, arguably the most noted university-based research institute of its day, and one specializing in communication research. With his sociological colleague Robert K. Merton, Lazarsfeld developed the research method of focus group interviews (Rogers, 1994), a data-gathering technique initially utilized to study U.S. government radio spots urging the American public to plant Victory Gardens, collect scrap iron and used rubber, and buy war bonds. These federal government campaigns, essentially a form of domestic propaganda, were designed and evaluated by a set of communication scholars drawn from various social sciences, including Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Wilbur Schramm, and others.

Lazarsfeld led the first quantitative studies of voting behavior, with his most well-known inquiry being the 1940 Erie County Study, which in certain respects represented the most important pioneering investigation of political

communication. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues conducted 600 personal interviews each month for 6 months until the November 1940 presidential election. This study was carried out in Erie County, Ohio, selected by the Columbia University researchers as a representative American county. At the time, the prevailing conception was one of powerful media effects, a perception based loosely on historical events like the role of the Hearst newspapers in leading the United States into the Spanish American War, the panic resulting from Orson Welles' "Invasion from Mars" radio broadcast in 1937, and Hitler's use of propaganda as World War II began in Europe.

So Lazarsfeld intended that the Erie County Study investigate the importance of the direct effects of the media in determining how people voted in a presidential election. The main dependent variable of study was voting behavior, a reflection of Lazarsfeld's background in conducting market research (in fact, Lazarsfeld was one of the founders of market research in America). As Chaffee and Hockheimer (1985, p. 274) stated, "The vote was taken to be the ultimate criterion variable, as if it were the most important political act a person can perform. This focus on voting has been followed by many researchers since the 1940s. . . ." No one would deny that voting is a crucial aspect of political behavior, but contributions of time and money to a political campaign, personal statements to others in support of a candidate, display of campaign buttons and posters, and other political actions are also important (Chaffee & Hockheimer, 1985). The main independent variables of study in the Erie County project, in addition to exposure to newspapers and news magazines and radio (the main media of the day in 1940), were individuals' socioeconomic status and political party identification.

To Lazarsfeld's surprise, only 54 of his 600 respondents in the Erie County panel of voters shifted from one presidential candidate to another, and only a few of these switchers were directly influenced to do so by the media (Converse, 1987). Many of the voters had made up their minds before the electoral campaign began. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) concluded that the media had minimal effects in the 1940 presidential election campaign. However, other scholars (e.g., Chaffee & Hockheimer, 1985) have questioned this conclusion, and so the matter seems to be dependent in part on interpretation and on the types of data that are considered (Rogers, 1994). In any event, Lazarsfeld and others postulated a two-step flow of communication in which opinion leaders with a relatively high degree of media exposure then passed along political information to their followers via interpersonal communication channels. This two-step flow model highlighted the complementary role that media and interpersonal communication often play in influencing an individual's political decisions, a lead that has been pursued in later investigations up to the present (Rogers, 2002a).

In the several years following the Erie County study, communication scholars may have overemphasized the minimal effects of the mass media. A younger colleague of Lazarsfeld's at the Bureau of Applied Research at Columbia University, sociologist Joseph Klapper (1960), concluded in his book *The Effects of Mass Communication* that the media seldom have direct effects. At the time, given the assumptions and methodologies of mass communication research, this conclusion seemed rather obvious. Later developments, however, led to questioning of this minimal effects conclusion.

Along with a follow-up to the Erie County Study, of the 1948 presidential election in a New York community (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954), Lazarsfeld's investigations were the first large-scale election research to give major attention to

the role of the mass media and virtually the last for many years thereafter (Chaffee & Hockheimer, 1985). The University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research began a series of studies of presidential election voting, carrying on Lazarsfeld's tradition of survey research on voting behavior. These national surveys, however, paid relatively little attention to the role of the mass media in voting decisions, concentrating instead on political party identification and socioeconomic variables in influencing voting (the importance of political parties in determining citizens' voting behavior has faded in recent years, replaced by the media, especially television). Because these Michigan studies were national sample surveys, the role of personal communication networks in voting decisions was difficult or impossible to explore (Sheingold, 1973). The primary focus on the individual as the unit of response and the unit of analysis led to a deemphasis on network and other social influences on voting decisions and to lesser attention to larger systems (such as media institutions) in political communication research.

World War II and the Beginnings of Communication Study

World War II Washington, DC, was the gathering place for leading American social scientists who were to become the forefathers and founders of communication study. One important preceding event, however, was the year-long Rockefeller Foundation Communication Seminar, organized by Foundation official John Marshall and held monthly at the Rockefeller Foundation's offices in New York City. Marshall's letter of invitation to the Seminar's participants was one of the first uses of the term *mass communication* (previously, such terms as public opinion or propaganda were used to refer to such study) (Rogers, 1994). The 12 regular participants in the Rockefeller Foundation Communication Seminar included Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Harold Lasswell, with the latter being the dominant intellectual force in the discussions. Lasswell's five-question model of communication was developed at the Seminar. The primary concern of the Rockefeller Foundation Communication Seminar was to have been defining the newly emerging field of communication but centered increasingly on the approaching World War II, which began in September 1939 (as did the first of the Seminar's monthly meetings). The Seminar was important in bringing together leading scholars with an interest in communication research and in forming a consensus about the priority questions that should be pursued. At the conclusion of the year-long series of Seminar sessions in New York, the participants held meetings with high government officials in Washington to brief them on the Seminar's conclusions, including the role that the newly emerging field of communication could play in the ensuing world conflict.

World War II brought together a talented set of social scientists in Washington, DC, where they worked as consultants or employees of various wartime government agencies. Included were Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, sociologist Sam Stouffer, social psychologists Carl Hovland and Kurt Lewin, and Wilbur Schramm, who had been director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. These scholars shared a common interest in human communication study and in its application to wartime problems facing the United States. Their interaction in Washington led to the formation of a paradigm for mass communication study. These scholars were relatively more free of disciplinary barriers in wartime Washington than when they were on their university campuses, and this freedom encouraged them to

think about an interdisciplinary approach to communication research. Some of the participants in these interdisciplinary discussions began to plan how to continue communication research after the War and how to train a cadre of individuals with doctoral degrees in communication.

In 1943, Wilbur Schramm returned to the University of Iowa as Director of the School of Journalism, where he sought to implement his vision of the new scholarly field of communication. He established a Ph.D. program in communication and started a mass communication research center at the university, thus launching a postwar strategy of founding university-based communication research institutes that awarded Ph.D. degrees in communication. After several unfruitful years at Iowa, Wilbur Schramm moved to the University of Illinois, where his efforts to establish communication research and to award doctorates in the new field were more successful. By the mid-1950s, when Schramm moved to Stanford University, the field of communication was becoming well established. By 1960, more than a dozen U.S. universities, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan State, had institutionalized mass communication research institutes or centers and were awarding doctorates in communication.

This new field stressed a social science approach to communication study, building on the communication research and theory that had been conducted in previous decades in social psychology, sociology, and political science (by Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Hovland, and others). Importantly, a prerequisite to doctoral study in these early communication Ph.D. programs was experience as a mass media professional (usually as a newspaper journalist). This requirement meant that the new corps of doctorates in communication looked at the world they studied somewhat differently than had the prior generation of communication researchers, who kept their academic base in a department of sociology, psychology, or political science. The new Ph.D.'s had a central scholarly interest in mass communication effects, like their social science predecessors, but they also had an understanding of the realities of media institutions. This orientation led them to look at the indirect effects of the media (such as through the agenda-setting process), as well as the direct effects, and not to expect such strong effects of media exposure on individuals' behavior (given that the media played mainly an informational, rather than a persuasive, role).

Wilbur Schramm emerged as the dominant leader of the founding of communication as a field of scholarly study in the postwar era. Communication scholars with doctorates from Schramm's program at Stanford University fanned out to universities across the United States, where they often rose to leadership positions. Examples are Paul J. Deutschmann at Michigan State University, Wayne Danielson at the University of North Carolina and later at The University of Texas, and Steven H. Chaffee at the University of Wisconsin (all became deans or directors of schools of journalism). Several of these scholars made important conceptual contributions, such as Danielson and Deutschmann to the study of news event diffusion and Maxwell McCombs, another Stanford product at the University of North Carolina, in collaboration with Donald L. Shaw, a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, in investigating the agenda-setting process (Rogers, 1994).

The institutionalization of communication study at U.S. research universities around 1960 was a turning point in political communication research, in that the new cadre of communication doctorates pursued research on the indirect, as well as the direct, effects of mass media communication. After about 1960, communication study had a greater degree of constancy and continuity, which facilitated

the pursuit of important theoretical questions and paradigms through organized research programs.

RESEARCH ON MEDIA EFFECTS

About the same time that communication study was becoming institutionalized at a growing number of U.S. research universities, television was spreading rapidly in the United States. By 1960, most American households contained a television set, and television soon became the main source of political news. Currently, 56% of the American public responds in surveys that television is their main source of political news, with 24% responding newspapers and 14% saying radio (Graber, 2001). The public wants to obtain its news quickly and easily and generally believes that television does an adequate job of providing news, although many media experts claim that television overpersonalizes the news.

We previously traced how a powerful media effects model was eventually replaced by a limited effects model, with the Lazarsfeld et al. Erie County Study as a turning point (Chaffee & Hockheimer, 1985). Television, of course, was not yet available in the 1940 presidential election. During the decade of the 1950s, when television diffused rapidly among U.S. households, this new medium became the dominant channel used in political communication campaigns and began to occupy an important role in their study by communication scholars. Electoral campaigns soon spent the majority of their budget on television, especially on candidates' television spots, and these campaigns began to escalate in total cost. The previously important role of political parties in influencing electoral outcomes faded in the new age of television politics.

This growing importance of television in politics brought with it new concerns. For example, political communication scholars found that "the amount of learning from television is slight. Large numbers of citizens see news as boring and politics as disconnected from their lives" (McLeod et al., 2002, p. 250). As the costs of television spots rose, forcing up electoral campaign budgets, only wealthy individuals (or those who could attract substantial contributions) could win public office.

Research on mass media effects often dealt with the dependent variable of political behavior change, such as voting choice. "Political communication research has traditionally played a central role on the effects of mass media" (McLeod et al., 2002, p. 218). Mass communication research and political communication research became almost synonymous in their priority concerns with media effects. It is no accident that in the main communication research organization, the International Communication Association, the Political Communication Division split off from the Mass Communication Division in 1973.

Findings from mass communication and political communication studies often supported a minimal effects model, although these results may have been due in part to the research designs and research methods that were utilized. For example, Rogers (2002a) reviewed four recent investigations to find relatively strong media effects when data were gathered (1) about an important news event (such as Magic Johnson's 1991 disclosure of his HIV infection), (2) by tracing its effects on the overt behavior of individuals exposed to media messages about the event, (3) whose contents are analyzed, and (4) whose effects are evaluated by means of data gathered rather immediately after the event occurred. Coincidentally, this research approach is similar to that followed by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his

colleagues at Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research 60 years ago (although not in the Erie County Study), such as the investigation of the panic effects of "The Invasion from Mars" (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940) and the highly successful Kate Smith War Bond radio marathon (Merton, Fiske, & Curtis, 1946). Importantly, both these earlier and later studies of direct effects considered the intermedia processes of mass media effects occurring through, and in combination with, interpersonal communication stimulated by media messages (Chaffee, 1986).

The rise of communication study after 1960 and the pervasiveness of television led political communication scholars to investigate *indirect* media effects such as in the agenda-setting process.

Agenda-Setting

A well-known dictum by political scientist Bernard Cohen (1963, p. 13) was that "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*." Cohen's statement was based on Walter Lippmann's (1920) earlier idea of "the world outside" and "the pictures in our heads." Cohen's dictum suggested that the media have indirect effects along with, in certain cases, direct effects.

Maxwell McCombs, one of the new generation of communication scholars earning his doctorate at Stanford University, read Cohen's book in a seminar taught by Wilbur Schramm and, later, while a young faculty member at the University of North Carolina, collaborated with a colleague, Donald Shaw, in the first empirical study of agenda-setting. These new Ph.D.'s in communication knew from their experience as professional newspaper journalists that news seldom had strong direct effects on audience individuals. However, the *amount* of news coverage accorded an issue by the media might indeed lead audience individuals to rate such an issue as more important (Rogers, 1994).

The ensuing Chapel Hill study (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) of how 100 undecided voters in Chapel Hill, NC, made up their minds in the 1968 presidential election was the first empirical investigation of the agenda-setting process and is the most widely cited publication in this field of research (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). McCombs and Shaw content analyzed the media coverage of the election in order to identify the five main issues and the amount of news coverage given each (this has since been called the media agenda), which they compared with a personal interview survey of the 100 undecided voters, who were asked which issues they felt were most important (this is the public agenda). McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a high degree of agreement between the rank order of the four or five issues on the media agenda and the rank order of those on the public agenda. The implication of this finding was that the media indeed tell the public "what to talk about."

The Chapel Hill research set off a tremendous number of studies of the agenda-setting process. This proliferation of agenda-setting studies amounted to 357 publications at the time of a 1996 synthesis (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), and the number continues to grow. Many of the early studies of agenda-setting more or less followed the model and methods pioneered by McCombs and Shaw, but in more recent years single-issue longitudinal research on agenda-setting also has been conducted

(Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Here the essential question is how an issue like AIDS or the environment rises on the national agenda over time. In contrast, the early agenda-setting research concentrated on the set of issues (usually four or five) that were on the national agenda at any one time. In both types of agenda-setting studies, the media agenda is measured by a content analysis, the public agenda by survey data, and the policy agenda by the laws, regulations, and appropriations regarding the issue of study.

The general model of the agenda-setting process that has emerged from research is a usual temporal sequence of

$$\text{Media agenda} \rightarrow \text{Public agenda} \rightarrow \text{Policy agenda}.$$

Communication scholars study mainly media agenda-setting and public agenda-setting, whereas political scientists and sociologists study mainly policy agenda-setting. The initial multiple-issue research focused on the relationship of the media agenda and the public agenda (a focus similar to that of the Chapel Hill Study), whereas more recent longitudinal, single-issue research illuminated factors important in setting the media agenda. A common finding is that a focusing event or a tragic individual (such as the death of Hollywood actor Rock Hudson and the discrimination against Kokomo, Indiana, schoolboy Ryan White) often initially calls an issue to media attention. If an issue appears on the front page of *The New York Times* or if the U.S. president gives a speech about the issue, it is immediately boosted upon the national media agenda. The seriousness of a social problem, measured by what scholars call real-world indicators (like the number of deaths due to AIDS), has been found to be unrelated to an issue's position on the national media agenda, given that the issue is at least perceived as an important problem (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

One of the important advances in understanding the agenda-setting process is framing, that is, how an issue is given meaning by media people, politicians, or others. Framing began to be studied as an important influence in the agenda-setting process a decade or so after the Chapel Hill Study, in a series of ingenious experiments by Shanto Iyengar (1991), a political scientist and communication scholar.

Agenda-setting research may overrepresent the power of the mass media to set the national agenda through an over-time process. Certain news events shoot immediately to the top of the agenda, such as the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and represent an exception to the more gradual agenda-setting process investigated by communication scholars (McLeod et al., 2002). Nevertheless, agenda-setting research advanced the understanding of the indirect effects of the mass media, this in an era of minimal effects. Further, agenda-setting study represented a refocusing of political communication research away from a primary emphasis on individual political behavior (as in the voting studies) by relating media news coverage of an issue to individual aggregated perceptions of issue salience and to the response by political institutions (the policy agenda). Further, agenda-setting investigations cast light on how people organize and give meaning to the political world around them, as the public gives meaning to various news issues. Finally, agenda-setting research generally recognized that one mechanism of media influence was through stimulating interpersonal communication, which in turn often triggered behavior change (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Diffusion of News Events

Another type of communication research that was launched in the 1960s by the new cadre of experienced newspaper journalists who earned Ph.D.'s in Communication at Stanford University was the study of news event diffusion. Paul J. Deutschmann and Wayne Danielson (1960) established the paradigm for news diffusion research with a pioneering study. These scholars gathered data from a sample of the public soon after the occurrence of a major news event, asking about the channels through which initial awareness–knowledge of the news event was obtained, channels for obtaining further information, and the time of an individual's first knowing about the news event. A common finding in the news event diffusion studies was that the media, especially the broadcast media, were particularly important in spreading major news events. When plotted over time, the number of individuals knowing about a news event increased slowly at first, then rapidly as interpersonal communication channels were activated, and, finally, tailed off to form an S-shaped diffusion curve as the remaining individuals learned about the event. This S-shaped curve was similar to that found for the diffusion of technological innovations over time, and news event diffusion studies were initially influenced by the earlier diffusion research (Rogers, 2003).

The Deutschmann and Danielson (1960) study of news event diffusion led almost immediately to a spate of similar investigations, most of which focused on news events that were more or less political in nature: assassination of a president or a head of state, resignation of a high-ranking official, or a major disaster. More than 60 news event diffusion studies have been published to date. DeFleur (1987) concluded that the field of news event diffusion research was dying because the interesting questions had been answered. However, in the past decade or so, new types of news event diffusion investigations have been completed that explore new research questions (Rogers, 2000). For example, the Mayer, Gudykunst, Perrill, and Merrill (1990) study of diffusion of news of the *Challenger* disaster, which occurred on January 26, 1986, showed the importance of the time of day and day of the week of a news event's occurrence on which media or interpersonal channels were most frequently used by members of the public. For instance, stay-at-home housewives first learned of the news event, which occurred in midmorning on a weekday, particularly from broadcast media, whereas individuals at work were more likely to learn from interpersonal channels.

Rogers and Siedel (2002) investigated diffusion of the September 11 (2001) terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. They found that the news of this spectacular event led to various actions by many members of the public, such as donating blood, sending financial contributions, and flying American flags on vehicles, at homes, and at workplaces. News of the terrorist attacks affected audience members emotionally to a much greater degree than the news events studied in past research. Prior to the Rogers and Siedel (2002) study, most news event diffusion research emphasized the dependent variables of time of knowing and the relative importance of various communication channels. Recent research demonstrates the value of looking at other dependent variables and at additional independent variables in news event diffusion.

In contrast to the news event diffusion studies, which investigate mainly major news event, most political news spreads relatively slowly and with modest impact on public knowledge. So the news event diffusion studies emphasize highly

unusual news events. Most members of the public remain relatively uninformed about most current news. This lack of knowledge is especially characteristic of the less-educated, lower-socioeconomic segments of the American public (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970; Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996).

The pervasive problem of an inactive and inadequately informed public led political communication scholars in recent years to conduct research on "civic journalism," as a means of increasing citizen participation in American democratic society. An example of such research on civic journalism is a study by McDevitt and Chaffee (2002) that evaluated the impacts of KidsVoting USA, a program intended to stimulate family political communication for civic involvement. Current interest in civic journalism is an expression of the values of political communication scholars on an active, informed citizenry, values that go back to the days of Walter Lippmann.

NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

One early and well-studied application of the new interactive communication technologies was the Public Electronic Network (PEN) Project in Santa Monica, CA. PEN was designed to encourage communication exchange, especially about political issues, among the residents of Santa Monica, a seaside community in Los Angeles. A 6-year investigation of PEN was conducted by communication scholars at the University of Southern California (Collins-Jarvis, 1993; Guthrie & Dutton, 1992; Rogers, Collins-Jarvis, & Schmitz, 1994; Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, & Paschal, 1995). PEN was noteworthy because at the time it was established, in 1989, it was the first municipal electronic network available at no cost to residents of a city. Some 5,300 Santa Monica residents (of a total population of 90,000) registered to use PEN, and approximately 60,000 accesses to PEN occurred each year. A core of approximately 1,500 users remained active on PEN, with a turnover among the remaining users each year. Some 200 electronic messages were exchanged monthly between residents and city officials.

PEN was launched in an era of optimism about the potential of the new interactive communication technologies for increasing political participation. The Internet existed in 1989 but had diffused to only a small percentage of the U.S. public. Santa Monica had a tradition of intense political activity. The city government was able to obtain the donation of networking equipment from a U.S. computer company. This equipment included 20 public terminals that were placed in city libraries, senior citizens' centers, and other public buildings. Some 20% of all PEN log-ons occurred from these public terminals, with the remainder from individuals using computers at home or at work. The public terminals, initially expected to be a minor part of the PEN system's design, turned out to be very important as a means for homeless people to gain access to the electronic communication system.

"Ted," a homeless man in Santa Monica, entered the following message on the PEN system: "I . . . spent many hours in the Library; it is my home more or less. Then I discovered PEN and things have never been the same. PEN is my main companion; although it can't keep me warm at night, it does keep my brain alive." At the time Santa Monica had a homeless population variously estimated as from 2,000 to 10,000. They were regarded by most homed people in the city as the priority social problem of Santa Monica, and early discussion on the PEN system by the homed concerned complaints about the homeless. Then the homeless, using the public

terminals, began to participate in PEN. They responded to earlier criticism about their perceived laziness by stating that they wanted jobs but could not apply because of their appearance. Soon, about 30 homed and homeless individuals formed the PEN Action Group in order to identify possible solutions. They obtained the use of a centrally located vacant building for SHWASHLOCK (SHowers, WASHers, & LOCKers), in which the homeless could clean themselves, store their belongings, learn computer skills, and access job information. As a result of SHWASHLOCK, a number of homeless people in Santa Monica obtained jobs.

Importantly, PEN offered a space in which unlike individuals could interact in order to work out solutions to a social problem of mutual concern. "Don," one of the leaders in the PEN Action Group, stated, "No one on PEN knew that I was homeless until I told them. PEN is also special because after I told them, I was still treated like a human being. To me, the most remarkable thing about the PEN community is that a City Council member and a pauper can coexist, albeit not always in perfect harmony, but on an equal basis." Thus PEN demonstrated that electronic communication systems had the potential of connecting heterophilous members of society (note, however, that this ability of PEN to bridge social distance would not have been possible without the public terminals).

A further lesson learned from the PEN Project was that at least certain social problems that occurred on this system could eventually be solved by the system itself. For instance, in the first months of PEN's operation, female users of the system were attacked verbally by certain males. Derogatory messages were sent to PEN users with female first names (individuals must use their real names, rather than computer names, on PEN), along with messages containing male sexual aggressiveness (such as pornographic stories in which the female's name was incorporated). Many female PEN participants discontinued use of the system in the face of these personal attacks. However, 30 of the remaining female participants formed PEN-FEMME in order to organize to resist these verbal attacks. Their first decision was not to respond to the male sexual aggression. PENFEMME was closed to male participants and focused on such issues as domestic violence, sexual equality, child care, and the reentry of mothers into the workforce (Collins-Jarvis, 1993). The perpetrators of the antifemale aggression were eventually identified as several young boys. Soon, 30% of PEN participants were female. This example shows how interactive technologies can be used to organize for social change, a process through which the disempowered can gain control of their situation.

Content analyses showed that most of the messages exchanged on PEN concerned local political issues. In a community that was already very politically active, it is not surprising that a new means of interactive communication was used for political discussion. The Internet, currently utilized by about 70% of adult Americans, plays an increasingly important role in electoral politics (as mentioned at the beginning of this paper) and in many other types of political communication behavior.

One problem limiting the Internet's impacts is the *digital divide*, the process through which the Internet advantages certain individuals who have access to computers and the Internet and relatively disadvantages other individuals who lack such access. At present, approximately 544 million people use the Internet worldwide, about 8% of the world's total population. In many countries, and in poorer economic areas of the United States, telecenters and cyber cafes (Rogers, 2002b) provide community access to computers and the Internet, thus bridging the digital divide.

CONCLUSIONS

A theme of the present essay is that the beginnings of communication study at the hands of Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and others has had a lasting influence on the field of political communication. Scholars of political communication placed a primary focus on mass media communication, although a growing recognition of the interrelatedness of the media with interpersonal communication has occurred. Media messages often stimulate interpersonal communication about a topic, with the interpersonal communication then leading to behavior change in an intermedia process (Rogers, 2002a).

From its initial research (like the Erie County Study), the field of political communication focused on such individual-level dependent variables as voting choices. In contrast, much concern about political communication, such as an inactive and uninformed public, is at the societal level. "Most political action and power relationships operate at the societal or other systemic levels, whereas the bulk of empirical theory and research concentrate on the behavior of the individual citizen" (McLeod et al., 2002, p. 232).

Connecting individual-level research with societal problems remains a concern for political communication scholars, who share a normative belief in the desire for a more properly functioning democracy.

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