

Engineering Consent:

The Renaissance of Mass Communications Research in Politics

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This paper was written in the immediate aftermath of the 2000 presidential election. While the election itself was without parallel in living memory, the spectacle that followed, namely, the regular appearance of the candidates and their spokespersons on network television to cast their individual “spin” on breaking events, was utterly predictable. The need to play to the public even spread to the U.S. Supreme Court. The day after their decision in *Bush v. Gore*, Justice Thomas, in the course of a televised appearance with high school students, claimed that partisanship was irrelevant to the Court’s *modus operandi*.

As Election 2000 well illustrates, there have been fundamental changes to the American political process over the last fifty years. “Media politics” is now central, while the importance of political institutions traditionally entrusted with organizing and aggregating public preferences (political parties and interest groups) have correspondingly declined in importance. Today, the use -- even manipulation -- of the mass media to promote political objectives is not only standard practice, but in fact is essential to survival.

Given the new regime, the study of mass communications has become central to the study of politics. As the foremost theoretician in the field of persuasion, Bill McGuire's works are required reading for professors and politicians alike. My aim in this paper is to provide a brief overview of the evolution of media politics, identify the areas in which scholars have uncovered evidence of the effects of political communication, while showing how Bill's insights have provided the necessary impetus and guideposts for the development of this work.

The Rise of Media Politics

Placed in historical context, the current state of American politics represents a continuation of the third great age of persuasion (McGuire, 1979). The defining macro characteristic of this era has been the gradual atrophy of political institutions designed to organize political preferences, and their replacement by the mass media (Polsby 1983, 1980). Old-fashioned forms of governing, which emphasized the formation of coalitions, and bargaining between rival partisans, have been replaced by efforts to cultivate the appearance of effective and responsive leadership -- through rhetorical posturing, claiming of credit claiming and avoidance of blame (Kernell 1993). The new "engineers of consent" are not party or interest group leaders, but the legion of pundits and spokespersons who make their daily rounds on television news programs and the editorial pages of our newspapers.

The acceleration of "going public" can also be traced to the gradual encroachment of election campaigns on the policy process. Campaign techniques such as television advertising are now used long after Election Day. For example, the "Harry and Louise" ad campaign mounted by the health insurance industry, proved instrumental in swaying

moderate Democrats and Republicans in Congress against the Clinton health reform package. Following suit, the pharmaceutical industry launched a massive ad campaign in opposition to Congressional attempts to extend prescription drug benefits to Medicare recipients. Elected officials and interest groups have accumulated considerable expertise in the use of public relations techniques while attempting to win elections, and it is only to be expected that they seek to capitalize on this expertise when formulating and debating legislation.

In the final analysis, media advocacy has thoroughly penetrated all governmental arenas, including even the traditionally invisible judicial process, because it works. The nation's collective political consciousness is grounded in the content and form of news programming. For all but a tiny number of Americans, the news media represent the sole point of contact with the world of public affairs. Events and stories that fail journalistic tests of "newsworthiness" are, as the proverbial tree falling in the forest, non-existent.

Over the years, different news outlets have assumed the "spotlight" function of the media, depending upon technological and market-based factors. Broadcast journalism dominated by network programming began to supplant the print media in the 1940s; more recently, the preeminent position of network newscasts has been challenged by the proliferation of cable channels, the expansion of local news programming and, of course, the advent of online news outlets. Changes in the prominence of particular sources, not surprisingly, have resulted in changes in the nature of the news itself (Schudson 1981). The substitution of television news for newspapers not only speeded up delivery time, but also affected the content of news; more active or visual issues, such as crime and terrorism, became especially newsworthy. Moreover, as the number of

media channels increased, so did competition for audiences. Increasingly, the need to entice and captivate audiences has taken precedence over the old-fashioned norm of journalism that informs (Kalb 1998).

Notwithstanding these dramatic changes in the shape of the industry and the product, it is taken as axiomatic that those in a position to shape the content and imagery of news improve their standing in the court of public opinion and in so doing gain the upper hand in Washington, Hartford, Sacramento, or other policy arenas. The evidence bolstering this axiom is described below.

Effects of News on the Mass Public

Early research on political communication seemed to discern that mass communications had but “minimal consequences” on voting and public opinion (Klapper 1960). The failure to detect traces of media influence stemmed from both conceptual and methodological limitations (for a recent inventory, see Iyengar and Simon 2000). Initial research focused exclusively on persuasion effects and treated media messages as necessary and sufficient conditions. In addition to missing the key interdependencies between message, source, and receiver factors, researchers also ignored a variety of other highly relevant effects, including changes in the size and composition of the electorate, the transmission of information and the setting of campaign agendas. Moreover, even if one were to accept persuasion as the benchmark for campaign effects, identifiable traces of persuasion were bound to be minimal because most campaigns feature offsetting messages, thus limiting observable effects to cases in which one candidate has a significant resource or skills advantage. This condition occurs rarely, if at all, in presidential campaigns, the races most often studied.

Methodological preferences contributed further to findings of minimal effects. Political communication researchers have been (and still are) limited by their dependence on survey methods. Like all scientific techniques, survey methods have weaknesses, of which the logic of treating respondents' self-reported exposure to campaign communication as a reliable surrogate for actual exposure is particularly dubious. People have notoriously weak memories for past events, especially when the "event" in question concerns an encounter with a particular political campaign (e.g. see Bradburn et al 1987, Pierce & Lovrich 1982), and the resulting measurement error in self-reports necessarily attenuates estimates of the effects of political campaigns (see Bartels 1993, 1997). Adding further disarray to the literature, self-reported exposure to campaign messages is often motivated by political attitudes, including candidate preference. Those who choose to tune in to the campaign differ systematically (in ways that matter to their vote choice) from those who do not (for evidence see Ansolabehere et al., 1999). Unfortunately, most survey-based analyses fail to disentangle the reciprocal effects of self-reported exposure to the campaign and partisan attitudes/behaviors, thus undermining affirmative claims about the effects of campaigns.

As the subfield of political communication has matured, these limitations have been overcome and over the past fifty years, there has been a sufficient accumulation of evidence to warrant a significant rethinking -- if not wholesale abandonment -- of the limited effects view. Notwithstanding McGuire's own skepticism over the scope of mass media influence (McGuire 1986), his research has been central to this evolution.

At the very least, we can attest to two classes of media effects on public opinion. The first, offered by McGuire as a "salvaging" hypothesis in his dialectic account of the

search for media influence (McGuire 1986), may be termed agenda control or media-induced changes in the public's political priorities. The second class of effects is a direct extension of the classic McGuire studies on attitude change, and corresponds to direct political persuasion.

Agenda-Control

Political scientists all agree that ordinary citizens prefer to keep the world of public affairs at arm's length. As casual observers of the political scene, most Americans attend selectively to a few issues that appear important at the moment. Of course, apparent importance is very much a matter of what editors and journalists choose to cover or ignore. Thus, the prominence of issues in the news media is the major determinant of the public's perception of issue importance (see, for example, McCombs and Shaw 1972, Dearing and Rogers 1996). Since government officials (most notably, the President) are the principal sources of news, they are in an especially advantageous position to simultaneously influence the media and public agendas (Behr and Iyengar 1985).

Experimental studies provide the most unequivocal evidence on media agenda-setting. These studies reveal that the insertion of only a modest degree of news coverage into network newscasts is sufficient to induce substantial shifts in viewers' beliefs about the importance of issues. In one experiment, for example, viewers were shown a series of newscasts containing three, six, or no stories dealing with U.S. dependence on foreign sources of energy. When exposed to no news coverage on this subject, 24 percent of the participants cited energy as among the three most important problems facing the country. When participants watched three stories on energy issues, 50 percent of them regarded energy as an important problem. Finally, when the "dose" was increased to six stories,

energy was cited as an important national problem by 65 percent of the viewers (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, Ch. 3).

Agenda-setting researchers have also identified several antecedent factors that condition the media's ability to shape the public's priorities. These include the personal relevance of the issue, the political involvement of the audience, and the prominence of coverage. In general, the more remote an issue or event is from direct personal experience, the weaker the agenda-setting effect of news coverage (Miller, Erbring, and Goldenberg 1980). Thus, people who are personally affected by issues in the news are particularly likely to have their agendas set by the media. After being exposed to news reports detailing the financial difficulties confronting the social security fund, elderly viewers of network newscasts were found to be much more likely than younger viewers to nominate social security as one of the most important problems facing the country (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Finally, the manner in which a news story is presented significantly affects its ability to set the public agenda. Stories with greater prominence -- front-page news, newspaper stories accompanied by photographs, or lead stories in television newscasts -- tend to be particularly influential (Behr and Iyengar 1985, Dearing and Rogers 1996).

Agenda-setting has important attitudinal consequences. The issues deemed significant by the electorate become the principal yardsticks for evaluating candidates and governmental institutions. This "priming" phenomenon (weighting issues in accordance with their perceived salience) has been documented in a series of experimental and non-experimental studies (for reviews of priming research, see Krosnick and Kinder 1990, Miller and Krosnick 2000). For instance, the news media's

sudden preoccupation with the Iranian hostage issue in the closing days of the 1980 presidential campaign caused voters to think about the candidates' ability to control terrorism when choosing between Carter and Reagan (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Given his record in office, this logic proved disadvantageous to President Carter.

Because the average voter is known to employ only a few considerations, candidates are motivated to introduce and pursue issues on which they enjoy a comparative advantage. The candidate closer to the median voter on an issue like tax reform would want to address that topic, in preference to discussing issues where he or she might be some distance away. Accordingly, a great deal of campaign rhetoric and strategy is designed to capitalize on this "disequilibrium of tastes" (Riker 1980, Iyengar 1993, Johnston et al. 1992).

In sum, people pay attention to the world of public affairs through the media. Issues and events in the news are judged to be important and treated as relevant considerations for evaluating the caliber of public officials.

Political Persuasion

Message learning theorists including McGuire analyzed persuasion from the perspective of "who says what to whom;" the major determinants of attitude change were source, message, and audience characteristics (McGuire 1999, Ch. 3). The immediate impact of this work on political science was less than dramatic because the pioneers in the empirical study of political campaigns were more oriented toward sociological than psychological explanations of political attitudes. As a result, survey and experimental research on attitudes were curiously compartmentalized and, for the most part, this pattern continued until quite recently.

Intellectual shifts in the social sciences, most notably, an increasing openness to interdisciplinary synthesis, created opportunities for researchers working at the intersection of psychology, mass communication and political science (this process is traced in McGuire's own account of the development of the subfield of political psychology; McGuire 1993). A growing number of researchers began to examine public opinion from more explicitly psychological perspectives. This line of research applied the "who says what to whom" logic of message learning theory to the study of political campaigns. As described below, the evidence suggests that the effects of media messages (the "what" element) by themselves are insufficient; rather, persuasion requires a set of joint contingencies among message, receiver, and source factors.

Receiver - Message Contingencies

In his classic paper on campaign effects, Converse (1962) demonstrated that both the most and the least attentive strata of the electorate were least affected by exposure to the presidential campaign. The former group encountered a host of campaign messages, but rejected most of them (high exposure-low acceptance). The latter group, although predisposed to accept messages, was unlikely to in fact receive them (high acceptance-low exposure). In short, moderately informed or aware citizens showed signs of greater instability over the course of the campaign than either of the extremes.

Converse's discovery of McGuire's "golden mean" maxim in the electoral arena suggested that the susceptibility of particular receivers to persuasion is conditioned by their political awareness, the volume or intensity of particular messages, and the degree to which acceptance requires small or large shifts from the status quo (Zaller 1992).

When messages are less audible and convey unfamiliar points of view, for example,

exposure dominates acceptance as a predictor of persuasion, and because awareness is positively related to exposure, the awareness - attitude relationship will be monotonic. Similarly, when message content is relatively congruent with the receiver's existing views (e.g. a liberal message and liberal audience), greater awareness will correlate with greater attitude change. When message content and existing views are incongruent, (e.g. a liberal message directed at conservative receivers), however, greater awareness will correlate with less attitude change because more aware receivers recognize the message as discrepant and discount it.

These message-receiver interactions become even more elaborate when considering both one and two-sided flows of information. In the case of consensual or one-sided news, more aware receivers are more likely to conform to the "mainstream" perspective. However, when the news reflects "official" and "opposition" views, the public's attitudes are determined by the interaction of political awareness and partisan values. During the early years of the Vietnam War, for example, news coverage was generally slanted in a hawkish direction. As a result, support for the war grew among less aware liberals but declined among more aware liberals. The former were able to receive the "loud" pro-war message while the latter were sufficiently attentive to receive the less audible countervailing message. As news coverage became more anti-war, the same interaction occurred among conservatives; the less aware shifted in the dovish direction, the more aware remained pro-war (see Zaller 1992).

Source-Related Contingencies

While accepting the premise that the persuasive effects of political messages are conditioned by specific properties of receivers, other scholars have uncovered a different

family of interactions, this time involving message and source factors. Their argument is that persuasion effects are conditioned by the degree of fit between the content of the message and the audience's evaluations of the source of the message. In the context of American political campaigns, the two major sources of news are the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties. It is well established that most Americans have a sense of partisan identity. Acquired during early childhood, this psychological anchor is known to withstand the vicissitudes of events and the passage of time (Jennings & Niemi 1981, Niemi & Jennings 1991).

The relevance of voters' partisanship extends well beyond the mere fact that Democrats will be more responsive to the Democratic candidate and vice-versa. Not only do most voters acquire a partisan identity, they also acquire beliefs about the groups served by the political parties and, by inference, the issues or problems on which they will deliver (Petrocik 1996). For example, the public generally considers Democrats more able than Republicans to deal with the problem of unemployment. Conversely, Republicans are seen as the party more likely to cut taxes. These stereotypes about the differential policy responsiveness of the parties influence campaign strategy. Campaigns that take advantage of (or resonate with) voters' expectations are considered more likely to be effective; a Democrat should be better off using appeals that emphasize his or her intent to strengthen job training programs, while a Republican should promote his or her support for lower taxes.

This "issue ownership" hypothesis has been tested experimentally by examining differences in the persuasiveness of Democratic and Republican campaign advertisements concerning specific policy issues. In one set of experimental studies, the

identical advertisement was attributed to either the Democratic or the Republican candidate running for U.S. Senate in California. Exposure to the unemployment ad elicited greater gains for the Democratic candidate, with the opposite pattern holding for crime (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). In a related study, voters rated campaign ads aired by presidential candidates Dole and Clinton during the 1996 presidential campaign. Republicans were more likely to rate Dole's ads as informative (and less likely to rate them as misleading) when the ads addressed "Republican" issues. Conversely, Democrats were more impressed by Clinton's ads dealing with "Democratic" issues (Iyengar and Valentino 2000). Thus, policy reputations are tantamount to assessments of source credibility.

The logic of differential credibility extends easily to attributes of the candidates other than their party affiliation. Gender is an especially visible attribute, and the popular culture provides several cues about the traits of males and females, cues that are amply reinforced by the media's depiction of women candidates (Kahn 1994). Given the availability of gender stereotypes, it might be anticipated that issues would have differential effects across male and female candidates. In fact, the evidence reveals that "masculine" issues such as defense or crime are especially persuasive as campaign material for male candidates, whereas pre-school funding and other matters of educational policy work well for female candidates (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, Kahn and Gordon 1996).

In short, campaign messages are not encountered in a vacuum and must blend in with voters' partisan motives and attitudes. Persuasion effects are thus inherently interactive -- either involving interactions between the content or source of campaign

messages on the one hand, and voters' political predispositions on the other, or involving higher-order interactions that also capture individual differences in exposure to campaign messages.

The evidence described above indicates that the payoffs from media management are non-trivial. Either by directing the spotlight at particular issues, or by providing more favorable exposure for a particular candidacy or point of view, media presentations affect public opinion.

Conclusion

In the current regime, American politics is almost exclusively a mediated experience. The role of the citizen has evolved from occasional foot soldier and activist to spectator. Those who seek public office invest heavily in efforts to shape news coverage of their candidacy. The returns from this investment provide them with leverage over public opinion; by setting the public agenda or by projecting a general impression of competent leadership, elected leaders stay one step ahead of their would-be opponents.

Scholars are only just beginning to consider the broader implications of the new media-based regime. An obvious possibility is that elected leaders and the policies they pursue are more responsive to public opinion. On those issues where clear majorities exist -- as in the case of "law and order" -- candidates must rapidly converge on the dominant position if they are to remain popular. Thus criminal justice policy, at both the federal and state level, and no matter which political party is in the majority, has changed in the direction of greater punitiveness. The same pattern applies to civil rights

legislation; the mass public and policy makers have both retreated from affirmative action.

While media politics may have heightened the congruence between policy and public opinion, the causal mechanisms and appropriate normative implications are far from clear (Page and Shapiro 1992, Shapiro and Jacobs 2000). The fact that large majorities of the public favor harsh treatment of violent criminals may reflect their response to one-sided news messages and the frequent use of crime as a campaign issue, rather than any well considered judgment over the pros and cons of punishment versus rehabilitation as potential remedies. Voters may follow rather than guide their elected leaders.

The potential for opinion leadership is especially significant because the views and pronouncements of political elites are rarely challenged in the mainstream media. The old-fashioned notion of watchdog or adversarial journalism which views the press as a restraining force no longer applies. Instead, political elites enjoy a significant edge in their efforts to shape the news. Official sources provide the great majority of news reports even in the most prestigious of daily newspapers such as the **New York Times** and **Washington Post** (Sigal 1972). Non-official sources tend to be ignored, even in cases where they may be especially knowledgeable (Bennett, 2000). While the new class of elected leader enjoys a surplus of communications resources (in the form of both staff and money), the degree of professionalism and substantive expertise among reporters has diminished. For a variety of reasons, including the rise of new and less rigorous forms of journalism, the explosion in online news sources, as well as the competitive requirements imposed by the marketplace, the news media today is generally less able to actively resist

official sources. Thus, a new form of “deferential” reporting has replaced the traditional ideal of independent journalists with the ability to challenge official sources (Dorman and Farhang 1987, Bennett 2000).

In short, the increased correspondence between the views of policy makers and ordinary citizens may reflect not a rejuvenation of direct democracy and electoral accountability, but rather the increased control over media messages enjoyed by political elites. Today, the boundaries between news and political marketing are not at all clear.

While the normative implications of media politics are debatable, the revisions to the minimalist view of media management are not. A major stimulus to this progression has been the increasing volume of traffic between political science, psychology, and allied disciplines. In this ongoing process of interdisciplinary exchange, Bill McGuire in his incarnation as a communication theorist has served as a beacon for the current generation of researchers in political communication.

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