

**The Shifting Foundations of Political Communication:
Responding to a Defense of the Media Effects Paradigm**

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Abstract: In our earlier article (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008) we argued that because news audiences are increasingly self-selected, communications scholars will be increasingly hard pressed to document media-induced persuasion effects. The critique by Holbert, Garrett and Gleason does not address the fundamental problem of endogeneity and instead proposes attitude reinforcement as a substitute for persuasion. But the problem of endogeneity applies equally to reinforcement and attitude change research. Our critics go on to argue that exposure to alternative news outlets and entertainment programming is exogenous and that these programs have the potential to shape political attitudes. We respond that the political content of these programs, while surely promoting other desirable political outcomes, is too sporadic to produce anything resembling large-scale message effects of the sort described by the classic persuasion paradigm.

We are gratified that Holbert, Garrett and Gleason (HGG) have engaged in thoughtful ways with our challenge to rethink some core assumptions about the nature of political communication. We note, however, that a number of their observations are not actually responsive to the central thesis advanced in our paper. Nevertheless, we would like to offer our own further thoughts in response to the HGG critique.

First, HHG note correctly that persuasion theories generally encompass attitude formation and reinforcement as well as attitude change. Most social science scholarship, however, views reinforcement as being less consequential than attitude formation or change. Initially, HHG seem to accept that persuasion and attitude formation are the more consequential outcomes of mass communication, but they then go on to argue that reinforcement effects can still be expected despite the self-selected nature of news audiences. No matter where one stands on the importance of reinforcement, we have a fundamental disagreement with HHG concerning the definition of an “effect.”

Our paper was based on the observation that in the present era, news audiences increasingly self-select the programs to which they are exposed. This means exposure to political communication is not exogenous. Of course, most (if not all) scholarship on the estimation of media effects rests on the premise that exposure is exogenous. Thus, even in the area of attitude reinforcement, an “effect” claim requires exogenous treatments. (For further discussion of the endogeneity problem and its implications for political communication research, see Gaines and Kuklinski, 2009; Iyengar, 2010).

HGG then proceed to shift the terms of discussion. They contend that while the news may not be a continuing source of persuasive messages, entertainment

programming seems both exogenous and perhaps persuasive. While we agree that there may be some individual level effects from the deep thoughts of Lisa Simpson, there are at least two problems with looking to entertainment fare for effects as we conventionally understand them. (Before proceeding here, we want to make clear that there are surely lots of other important political aspects of entertainment content, from raising levels of general political interest, to stimulating more conversation around the dorm room). But to return to Lisa's thoughts: while deep, they are also scattered. That is, persuasion models generally assume repetition of clear messages, often through campaigns that reach people multiple times in contexts that tend to reinforce the credibility of the message. We see few examples of such repeated exposure in most entertainment media save for those political comedy shows (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, or *Saturday Night Live*) that often provide softened echoes of hard news content. However, those programs, like the news they parody, are appealing to ever more fragmented and self-selected audiences.

The second problem with looking to programs such as *The Simpsons* as sources of media effects is that there is no obvious political mechanism for aggregating and linking individual preferences back into the political process. If we insert classical persuasion models into political process models (as both scholars and communication practitioners typically do), we see that explicit media formats for repeating political messages (e.g., news and political ads) can then be assessed through instruments such as polls, and finally, that effects trails can be expressed through such behaviors as voting. The problem is that as individuals become both harder to reach with exogenous inputs and more likely to dial up their own reinforcement, the process has changed. We still have news, polls,

and elections, but the assumptions about how people engage with them need to be reexamined. So, unless Lisa Simpson becomes a mouthpiece for some clever political consultant, the larger utility of understanding communication effects through such entertainment programming seems greatly diminished.

The third argument that our critics introduce into the discussion concerns the idea that those who may be drawn to particular reinforcing messages are not necessarily averse to exposure to their opponents' messages. Perhaps HGG's most startling claim is that "bloggers do in fact engage their ideological counterparts." While there may be some small degree of cross talk among bloggers, there is far more persuasive evidence suggesting the opposite, namely, that bloggers and blog readers alike are characterized by ideological homogeneity. A recent analysis of blogs (one of several not cited by HGG) reports that "94% of political blog readers consume only blogs from one side of the ideological spectrum. The remaining 6% read blogs from both sides." (Lawrence, Sides and Farrell, 2009, p. 11; also see Perlmutter, 2008). Quite apart from the issue of selective exposure in the blogosphere, it is clear that new forms of aggregating information do not scale up significantly; in fact, political sites account for less than one percent of all web traffic according to a recent analysis by Hindman (2008, pp. 60-61).

In their next challenge, HGG shift to the odd notion that we are somehow against the ever more personalized interactive digital technologies that are exploding on the political communication scene. Far from being against them, we see their potential to change the communication game to include citizens in different sorts of communication exchanges. However our point is simply that these new kinds of information flows may well involve different kinds of media effects, and that we should get busy theorizing and

figuring out how to measure them. Their example of how people engaged with the Obama race speech during the 2008 U.S. election is actually perfect for our point. If the Obama communication team actively removed all potential sound bites from that speech, those who continue to think in terms of conventional persuasion or attitude reinforcement effects might want to wonder what is going on. Yet HGG slip unreflectively into a new kind of effects language in discussing this example. We agree completely that such engagement with media content may make citizens more aware of the political landscape and their capacity to shape it through mediated deliberation and content sharing. Indeed, the communication future may be bright (although there are other forces working the dark side). The point remains that participation in content creation and sharing greatly changes how we have typically thought about persuasion, reinforcement and effects. Perhaps our critics are actually agreeing with us, but just can't see clearly enough from inside the paradigm to realize it?

Their concluding challenge continues to entrench HGG's position inside the effects paradigm by using Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model in defense of their ever shifting definition of effects. The introduction of the ELM model seems arbitrary and off the mark. ELM is one theory of persuasion or reinforcement; there are several others. ELM relies heavily on a cognitive response explanation of persuadability based on the idea that those who can counter-argue are less susceptible to persuasion. Our best guess is that contemporary audiences for political messages are especially likely to counter-argue since they are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of the politically involved. In the recent analysis of blogs, for instance, nearly 100 percent of blog readers described themselves as "very much interested" in politics (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell,

2009, p. 10). In the case of news audiences, self-selection means heightened resistance to attitude-discrepant information.

The jump from ELM to the motivational element of "pull" media seems a big reach in the sense that if different individuals pull different messages from the same complex texts, there is little in the way of a coherent outcome likely -- raising the question of what is the point of studying effects if there are no large-scale patterns? HGG then shade their point to imply that pulling messages may be more motivating than receiving them from push sources. This may be true, but as with the earlier arguments, it misses our point. People can be highly motivated to take to the streets to call Obama a socialist or denounce the death panels in health care reform proposals, but they may also be living inside a sealed reality loop that implies resistance to external efforts to persuade them otherwise. Thus, while there may still be effects in the brave new communication world, they may not be subject to challenge, deliberation, or the best-intentioned efforts at civilized dialogue. Our point remains that for better or worse, the communication paradigm seems to be changing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the HGG critique ignores the core idea that selective exposure results in attitudes that are endogenous to messages received. As a result, the critique fails to engage with the questions we raise about the implications of increasingly self-selected audiences. By their logic, polarization is a media effect, not a consequence of media and/or audience fragmentation. HHG return to the idea that recent technological innovations work to empower consumers, casting them in the role of agenda-setters. All

of this may be perfectly fine for society and democracy. (Given what we know about networking research, however, we are not optimistic that new forms of aggregating information will counter the increasingly fragmented state of political communication.) But the point of our essay was simply to challenge assumptions about larger scale effects induced by external stimuli such as news coverage and advertising campaigns. We remain convinced that communication theory needs to adjust to the new conditions in the sender-receiver-audience paradigm that made sense in a past era of large audiences that could be reached with repeated persuasive messages at manageable cost and with some reasonable likelihood of effects. Those assumptions, along with the real world conditions on which they rested, are rapidly changing.

In the spirit of setting a research agenda in the area, we offer several potentially interesting variations on conventional effects research that point toward a changing communication environment. First, there may continue to appear to be some exceptions to our vision of a self-selected message world in terms of a small number of top-of-the-agenda issues that are so hotly contested by elite factions that they may saturate so many media channels that individuals cannot escape hearing inputs that are not self selected. However, self-selection may still serve to inoculate against those exogenous inputs.

A second area meriting investigation involves the uses of digital media to tailor messages to individuals. Yet in this one-step flow (Bennett and Manheim, 2006) of communication to micro audience segments, the self-selection principle is again in play as message marketers use data mining to tap into the selected communication preferences of individuals. The delivery of personalized political information through variants on recommendation engines is another sign that the effects paradigm needs to adapt to new

realities.

Finally, European colleagues have claimed that traditional media effects patterns seem to be holding firm in systems with dominant public service broadcasters and national papers that continue to reach large audiences.¹ We propose that these conditions may change rapidly in the future as more information sources enter these media markets, and telecommunications monopoly reforms allow broader and cheaper online access. Indeed, we suspect that younger demographics are already breaking away from the classis assumptions about the relationships between messages and audiences.

There are undoubtedly many other areas that warrant investigation in formulating new models of communication in changing societies and media systems. We look forward to continuing the discussion about how to adapt models of communication to the new media environment.

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