

## **A New Era of Field Research in Political Communication?**

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### **Abstract**

Since the publication of W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar's 2008 critique of the state of the field, more and more political communication researchers have called for a move beyond the testing and extending of existing theories and towards theory-building aimed at improving our understanding of processes of political communication in rapidly changing social and technological contexts. While we agree with this call, we will argue that too little attention has been paid to the methodological issues that plague the field, and suggest that the dominance of quantitative methods—despite all their analytical and empirical contributions—to the exclusion of other ways of investigating social phenomena may have contributed to the problems confronting the field today. In this paper, we sketch out the history of an older tradition of interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research on political communication in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s and chart the rise of the currently dominant methodological consensus from the 1970s onwards. We do so to highlight key examples of how this older mixed-methods tradition used field research as an integral part of both empirical work and theory-building during a time of rapid change, and to outline ways a new wave of field research can contribute to the study of contemporary political communication, supplement quantitative work, and move the field forward.

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## **Introduction**

For forty years, a particular methodological consensus has dominated the study of political communication. Quantitative research methods generally, and content analysis, experiments, and surveys in particular, have defined the core of legitimate research, especially in the United States.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars have produced qualitative work—and some of it has been very influential—most political communication research is quantitative, and graduate students take compulsory courses teaching them how to do more quantitative research, while few programs require an equally rigorous training in qualitative methods. Even more, the assumptions underpinning quantitative research tend to serve as the standards by which most political communication research is judged. This methodological consensus not only provides the main tools scholars have at their disposal for empirical work on political communication—it also shapes the very questions they can ask, the answers they can provide, and the theories they can develop.

Since the 1970s, scholars working within this consensus have generated a remarkable body of findings. Scholars have advanced our understandings of agenda-setting, the dynamics of public opinion, the influence of news media and campaign communications upon political behavior, and the limits of both citizens' independent reasoning and elites' ability to manipulate people. Political communication research has with increasing sophistication uncovered the cognitive and affective processes that underlie many kinds of political attitudes and assessed the relative importance of mediated appeals versus other factors in shaping political outcomes.

Normatively, scholars have made forceful arguments, backed by data, about journalistic and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we are primarily concerned with political communication research as it is practiced in the United States. Other traditions of political communication research exist and while many are (often heavily) influenced by American research, they also differ in important ways both methodologically and theoretically.

political practices, detailing the corrosive effects of negative campaigning and many shortcomings of the news media when it comes to serving American democracy.

And yet, despite these advances, over the last decade cracks have appeared in the edifice of political communication research. In a sweeping essay aimed at the very foundations of the field as it exists today, two leading figures, W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar (2008), have pointed out that theoretical advances have not kept pace with social and technological changes over the past decade, arguing that well-established research programs all too often plod on, seemingly oblivious to the changing world around them. Others have leveled similar criticisms at the broader media effects paradigm that underlies much contemporary political communication research (Neuman and Guggenheim, 2011; Lang 2013). While some have questioned whether the foundations of political communication research are in fact as fragile as these critics claim (Holbert et al 2010), there seems to be widespread skepticism building at the very heart of the field. The core concern is that we as political communication researchers are not always well-equipped to understand our objects of analysis and that we have not kept pace with a world that looks radically different politically, socially, and technologically from what it looked like at the founding of the field as we know it today in the 1970s (or even as recently as the early 1990s). News media organizations, political campaigns, and interest groups, as well as the tools and techniques they use to communicate with citizens, have changed, as have the the broader social, technological, and economic structures that both elites and ordinary people operate within. The rise of the internet and associated digital technologies and social practices is only one of the more visible manifestations of these changes. While we admire much of the work done over the past forty years, we share the concerns expressed by scholars such as Bennett and Iyengar, the concern that our field has not always kept pace. The question then is how to proceed.

In this paper, we argue that the problems political communication researchers face today stem in part from the very same methodological consensus that has helped facilitate advances in the study of agenda-setting, opinion formation, and media effects. In our view, the reigning consensus has marginalized qualitative methods, resulting in an unnecessary and counter-productive narrowing of our ability to understand central aspects of political communication and how they are changing. Whereas much of the conversation about the state of the field so far has focused on whether new theories are needed, we take a different approach and make a case for a new era of field research, defined broadly to include first-hand observation, participation, and interviewing in the actual contexts where political communication occurs. We will illustrate the promise of field research—used alone or in combination with other methods (including quantitative ones)—by highlighting the crucial role it played as an integral part of empirical work and theory-building in an older tradition of political communication research. We then outline some ways that revisiting the design and conduct of such work can move the field forward. In sum, we will argue that we need to expand our research agenda to explore *how* citizens, journalists, and political elites interact and actually experience and engage in political communication processes. Field research is particularly well-equipped to take on this challenge as a method that, in the words of Herbert J. Gans (1962), “gets the researcher close to the realities of social life.” In our view, political communication should, like neighboring areas such as journalism studies, become more methodologically diverse and embrace qualitative methods as tools as relevant as quantitative ones when it comes to shaping and addressing the basic questions and theories of the field. This has implications for future research in the field, as well as for the design of graduate programs.

In the pages that follow, we argue that the specific question of method needs to be at the forefront of scholarly debate about political communication. Our goal is to make the case that much can be gained by again whole-heartedly embracing qualitative methods and especially fieldwork as a necessary part of the empirical and theory-building enterprise of political communication research. First, we outline the form political communication research took with the institutionalization of the field in the United States in the 1970s, and identify an older tradition of interdisciplinary and mixed-methods work on political communication (originating in the 1930s) that was submerged under the quantitative consensus in the process. Second, we go back and examine some key examples of how researchers working out of this tradition, including Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang but also, perhaps more surprisingly to present-day readers, Paul Lazarsfeld, used fieldwork in the 1940s and 1950s as an integral part of their empirical and theoretical work. Third, we outline a few ways in which this older tradition of mixed-method research could guide a new era of fieldwork on political communication, supplement the currently dominant methods, and perhaps help move the field past the impasse identified by Bennett and Iyengar.

### **The field as we know it—and what went before**

The basic institutional structure of political communications research as (a) built across the disciplines of communication and political science, (b) recognized as a distinct field within each, (c) particularly strongly anchored in American academic circles, and (d) oriented to a considerable degree towards a single shared journal, *Political Communication*, originates with the International Communication Association's recognition of the Political Communication Division (PCD) in 1973. The division, first headed by Keith R. Sanders, started publishing the

annual *Political Communication Review* in 1975, providing the first formal forum dedicated to academic research specifically on political communication. Since 1991, the PCD has published the journal *Political Communication* jointly with its sister division of the American Political Science Association.<sup>2</sup>

Since its institutionalization in its current form, the field has continuously presented itself as interdisciplinary and based on multiple methods (Nimmo and Sanders 1981; Swanson and Nimmo 1990). For example, the “aims and scope” of *Political Communication* describes the journal as “interdisciplinary” and “welcom[ing] all research methods.”<sup>3</sup> The PCD’s call for papers for the 2013 ICA conference in London explicitly stated that it was looking for submissions based on “a variety of theories and methods” and “diverse ... methodologies.”<sup>4</sup> The ritual reference to interdisciplinary work and methodological diversity, however, rests uneasily with the *de facto* dominance of quantitative methods. We have performed a content analysis of the 188 articles published by the section journal *Political Communication* over the last ten years (from Volume 20(1), 2003 onwards). The main results are presented in Figure 1 below. We coded as “qualitative” those articles based primarily on interpretative, historical, critical, and rhetorical analyses, as well as those based on interviews or fieldwork. Under this definition, only 38 out of 188 (20%) articles are qualitative.. Of these, only 18 articles (9.6%) present primary data produced through interviews and fieldwork. Even more striking given how much work in the field is focused on and originates in the United States, only 2 of these 18 articles deal with political communication in the United States, despite the dramatic changes in recent years in, for example, how news media (Boczkowski 2004, Anderson 2013), political campaigns (Nielsen 2012, Kreiss 2012a), and interest groups (Chadwick 2007, Karpf 2012) communicate.

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<sup>2</sup> The very coupling of the ICA and APSA suggests the special role US-based research plays in the field.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/aboutThisJournal?show=aimsScope&journalCode=upcp20>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.icahdq.org/conf/2013/londoncfp.asp#POLI> (accessed April 26, 2013)

One reason for this disjuncture between mixed-methods aspirations and actual monocultural practice lies in the particular disciplinary traditions and methodological orientations of the scholars who founded the field as we know it today. In his history of political communication research in the United States, David Ryfe (2001) has shown how the generation that established the PCD drew in particular on three academic disciplines—social psychology, political science, and mass communication research as these were practiced in the US in the 1960s—much influenced in all three cases by the broader behaviorist movement.<sup>5</sup> From social psychology came a focus on the attitudes and opinions of individuals and an emphasis on experimental and survey methods. From political science came a focus on politics understood primarily as a question of elections and formal political processes, skepticism towards qualitative research and broader sociologically-inspired theories, and an orientation towards quantification. From mass communication research came the language of “effects” and “influence,” a particular interest in those effects that took the form of short-term observable behavioral change, a legacy interest in politicians’ rhetoric, as well as the drive of academics in search of a safe and accepted institutional base for their work. (See Peters and Simonson 2004 for a history of the institutionalization of media research in the United States during these years, a period in which psychology and political science both had safe institutional havens in the academy, but communication research did not.)

A closer look at the academic biographies of some key individuals involved in the institutionalization of the field provides a sense not only of what was present at creation, but also of what was not. Of the people highlighted in the PDC’s own history writing, Keith R. Sanders, the first president of the section, received his PhD in communications from the University of

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<sup>5</sup> Political scientists often distinguish between “behaviorism” (the study of individuals’ observable behavior), a term used widely in psychology etc, and “behavioralism”, which was an attempt to apply the epistemology and methodologies associated with the natural sciences to the study of political life.

Pittsburgh, L. Erwin Atwood his PhD from Iowa in journalism, Dan Nimmo his from Vanderbilt in political science, Doris Graber hers from Columbia in political science, Sidney Kraus from Iowa in theater, and Lynda Lee Kaid in speech communication from Southern Illinois University (where she worked with Sanders).<sup>6</sup> (Other foundational figures deeply involved in shaping the field in the US in these formative years includes, in no particular order, the political scientists Shanto Iyengar, Thomas Patterson, and W. Lance Bennett, as well as David Swanson, Donald Shaw, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Maxwell McCombs, and Steven Chaffee, all of whom held degrees in rhetoric or communication.)

Those involved in setting up the PCD were, in other words, all communication researchers or political scientists. Who were not involved? Not a single person had been trained as a sociologist. To contemporary eyes, this is no surprise, as there seems to be little interdisciplinary collaboration or dialogue between political communication researchers (based in either political science or communication departments) and sociologists. But this was not always the case. If we examine the individuals who shaped American research at the intersection between communication and politics in the fifty years *before* the founding of the PCD in 1973, a very different picture of an older tradition of interdisciplinary work drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods emerges. It is this submerged tradition that, we argue, can provide examples of how fieldwork can be one valuable part of coming to terms with the changing foundations of political communication.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the publication of a number of important studies that are part of the heritage of political communication research and are still sometimes read and taught. To name just a few highlights, consider the journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann's book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922; Robert E. Park, one of the founders of the Chicago

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.politicalcommunication.org/history.html> (accessed September 25, 2012).

school of sociology, published *The Immigrant Press and its Control* the same year; and the polymath political scientist Harold D. Lasswell published *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* in 1927. These men were not political communication researchers as we understand the term today. Only Park and Lasswell spent prolonged periods as university professors, and their work spanned many fields over long and illustrious careers (both served as presidents of their respective scholarly associations, the American Sociological Association and APSA). But all three published serious, analytical work on issues of communication and politics in some of the most prestigious scholarly journals of the time, including the *American Journal of Sociology* (Park), the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Lasswell and Lippmann), and the *American Political Science Review* (Lasswell). All three drew on the social theory of their day, including psychological theory and philosophical pragmatism (both Lippmann and Park studied with William James at Harvard, Lasswell wrote about James's work and took classes with Park while a student at Chicago). All three used a sometimes eclectic mix of qualitative and quantitative empirical research methods (and sometimes plenty of anecdotal evidence and assertion to boot).

Lippmann, Park, and Lasswell (and others like them) all influenced scholars working at the intersection of communication and politics in the 1940s and 1950s. This period saw the further professionalization of academic work on political communication, as a new generation of university researchers honed both theories and methods and engaged in more systematic, rigorous research programs designed to explore a range of issues directly related to the 'big questions' of the day, including the rise of Fascism and Communism, the co-existence of representative democracy and the printed press with new mass media like radio, and the transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies. Funded in part by the Rockefeller Foundation

and in part by US government grants, social scientists intensified their attempts to understand the effects of increasingly prevalent mass media on society, studying processes of persuasion (Robert Merton), the impact of television (Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang), and the interplay between political communication, democratic processes, and mass media in the post-war “mass society” (C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, David Riesman).

### **The forgotten role of fieldwork in the 1940s and 1950s**

Because it is sometimes forgotten, it is worth highlighting the role of fieldwork in some of the best work on political communication published in the United States in this period, pursued both as part of mixed-methods and standalone research projects. Paul Lazarsfeld’s *The People’s Choice* ([1944]1968), written with Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, and Gladys Engel and Kurt Lang’s collection of classic research articles re-printed in *Politics and Television* (1968) are powerful examples. In the first book, Lazarsfeld and his collaborators set out to, as the subtitle suggests, how voters make up their mind during political campaigns, and used a combination of panel surveys and fieldwork in Erie County, Ohio to develop a model that combines social characteristics and the flow of campaign communications to account for political behavior. Political communication scholars remember and cite *The People’s Choice* to this day for its early argument about the role of personal influence in shaping media effects (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) and for contributions to political psychology (Iyengar and Kinder, [1987] 2010). The Langs’ both did path-breaking work on the new world of televised politics, examining the 1951 MacArthur Day parade in Chicago, honoring General MacArthur, whom President Truman had relieved of his command of the United Nations forces fighting in the Korean War as well as the 1952 party conventions, and showing as some of the first researchers that television did not

simply “report” events covered, but created a whole new view of events quite different from what was experienced by those present. Their body of work is remembered for contributions to understanding media production (Schramm, 1997) and the role of media in shaping political processes and behavior more generally (Patterson, 1994).

While these studies are widely cited as part of the history of the field with each having thousands of citations, their methodological approaches are often ignored. Scholars casually call *The People’s Choice* a “brilliant study” (Iyengar and Kinder, [1987] 2010), without any substantive engagement with the book’s mixed-methods approach. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 34) go so far as to refer to the MacArthur Day study (originally published in 1952, reprinted in *Politics and Television*) as being “compelling in its simplicity,” despite the fact that the Langs’ argued that one of their contributions was to go beyond extant approaches to communication research in a study that entailed both an expansive content analysis and 31 participant observers on the ground during a significant political event.

Indeed, we see these two works as instructive examples of methodological roads not taken during the subsequent development of the field. We draw on these works here to show what qualitative field studies both have accomplished and can accomplish in terms of theory building and empirical analysis. While we could have selected other examples of qualitative field research, we draw on these works as particularly important cases because they are influential in the field of political communication and took place at a time much like our own, when basic categories of analysis were in flux given widespread social and technical change. And yet, despite their considerable insights and roundly recognized contributions, scholars have generally failed to consider the *methodological* lessons of each of these two for the contemporary study of political communication. We therefore analyze the work of these scholars, focusing on how they

conceptualize qualitative fieldwork as facilitating inductive theory-building that can be logically generalized across cases.

Victors write their own history, which is apparent in the field's collective memory of Paul Lazarsfeld.<sup>7</sup> Scholars remember Lazarsfeld as the father of survey methodology. And yet, Lazarsfeld's writings on method and approach to research were far more varied than is conventionally recognized (for a similar point, see Morrison, 1998). For example, it is instructive to consider how Lazarsfeld and his collaborator Morris Rosenberg, a social psychologist at the University of Maryland, thought about methodology in their edited volume *The Language of Social Research* (1955). Defining the scope of the book, they write:

The methodologist is a scholar who is above all *analytical* in his approach to his subject matter. He tells other scholars what they have done, or might do, rather than what they should do. He tells them what order of finding has emerged from their research, not what kind of result is or is not preferable. This kind of analytical interest requires self-awareness, on the one hand, and tolerance, on the other. The methodologist knows that the same goals can be reached by alternative roads, and he realizes that instruments should be adapted to their function, and not be uselessly sharp....The methodologist is not a technician; he does not tell research workers *how* to proceed, what steps to follow in the actual conduct of an investigation. And neither is it his task to indicate what problems should be selected for study. But once the topic for investigation has been chosen, he might suggest the procedures which, in light of the stated objectives, seem most appropriate (emphasis in the original, 4).

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<sup>7</sup> Critics of "the dominant paradigm" such as Todd Gitlin (1978) have also cemented particular understandings of the field and its exemplary works in ways that obscures some of the methodological diversity of the field.

The pieces contained in the *Language of Social Research* illustrate this general approach to method, containing only “specimens of good work” (ibid., 4), both quantitative and qualitative. Indeed, the authors are methodologically agnostic, explicitly cautioning us that “there is a danger that ‘methodology’ may be identified with “quantification” (ibid., 7).

While this may be surprising to contemporary eyes and memories, Lazarsfeld was well aware of the analytical power of qualitative research. Two of the central theoretical insights developed by Lazarsfeld and his various collaborators – the two-step flow and opinion leaders – emerged during observational fieldwork while researching *The People’s Choice*. In his 1972 book, *Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays*, Lazarsfeld tells us that:

In one case, such a qualitative analysis of mine had considerable consequences. *The People’s Choice*, a study of the role of mass media in the presidential campaign of 1940, made me feel that personal influence played a great role in the way people make up their minds how to vote. Not having anticipated this issue I had no data to pursue it quantitatively. I therefore attached to our book a chapter on “The Nature of Personal Influence” which was based only on a few qualitative observations. Some of the concepts I derived - the two-step flow of communication and the idea of horizontal opinion leaders - have since entered the sociological general literature (XIII).

The passage is remarkable on a number of levels, in particular given that it illustrates how *The People’s Choice* was as much a qualitative as a quantitative research project. Lazarsfeld was writing in a different time, before our methodological orthodoxies took root, in modestly characterizing the book as containing a “few qualitative observations.” In actuality, *The People’s*

*Choice* was what contemporary scholars would call a mixed methods panel study throughout the entire research project. The authors conducted a panel study, surveying a random sample of 3,000 people, from which a research team interviewed a main sample of 600 individuals seven times from May through November 1940 (the other individuals were grouped into stratified samples to serve as controls). When an individual changed his vote intention, he was interviewed in an open-ended fashion as to why. As Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Goudet (1968, 5) write: “the repeated interviews made it possible to secure voluminous information about each respondent’s personal characteristics, social philosophy, political history, personality traits, relationships with other people, opinions on issues related to the election—in short, information on anything which might contribute to our knowledge of the formation of his political preferences.” In addition, the authors provide narratives from open-ended question responses as evidence of many of their conclusions, and conducted follow-up, open-ended “special interviews” with voters who changed their vote (the “changers”) to explore their responses further (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Goudet, 1968, 126-129).

If anything, as the preface to the second edition and the notes to the text make clear, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet regret that the study *did not generate more qualitative field data* (no doubt this was precipitated by the failure to find the strong media effects they were anticipating). At various points, the authors regret not “studying the whole community” and not conducting more interviews (XXXIX); not developing a more “sophisticated case study approach” and not generating “more descriptive material on a local campaign as a whole” including the “way that local political committees spent money and behavior at public meetings” (160); and, the authors even regret not “showing people pictures and allowing them to free associate” (162).

What is striking here is that Lazarsfeld and his collaborators both allowed themselves to be surprised by their findings *and* had observational qualitative fieldwork data that permitted inductive theory-building. Unlike much of contemporary political communication research, which reifies its object of analysis through deductive designs that proceed from assumed, stable categories of social life, *The People's Choice* gets close to the realities of political communication processes and the self-perceptions of those involved. In the process, these scholars were able to generate entirely new categories of media influence and interpersonal dynamics that remain influential to this day.

Although their methodological orientations differ, across the Langs' foundational body of work there is a similar approach to crafting research designs that allow for inductive theory-building. The Langs, like Lazarsfeld, were professional sociologists. Gladys and Kurt Lang were trained as graduate students in Chicago in the "Chicago School" of sociology, and drew on a mix of social theory including the philosophical pragmatism of James, Dewey, and Cooley. They worked on communication and politics in a remarkably interdisciplinary fashion, drawing on a range of theoretical and methodological approaches and allowed themselves to be surprised by their data. For example, in their classic MacArthur Day study, reprinted in *Politics and Television*, the Langs write that they originally set out to do a:

systematic study of crowd behavior and of the role of the media of mass communication, particularly television, in this kind of event. Our main goal was stymied. The air of curiosity and casualness exhibited by most members of the crowd was a surprise to every observer reporting from the scene (1968, 23).

The Langs, like Lazarsfeld and his collaborators, were also writing at a time of unsettled analytical categories. Indeed, the MacArthur study was the first to directly compare in-person spectatorship with the mediated coverage of a political event, as well as analyze the ways the latter shaped the understandings of participants witnessing the live event. To do so, their MacArthur Day “study was, by design, open-ended in an effort to ‘explore’ rather than test specific propositions” (Lang & Lang (1968 [1953], 39). This approach to research design ran throughout their body of qualitative fieldwork. For example, the Langs conducted field observations (including what contemporary scholars now call ‘media ethnography’) and qualitative interviewing at “critical political events” such as the 1952 conventions and analyzed cases such as Watergate (Lang and Lang, 1968, 1983). If they had a methodological and analytical precept, it was a “concern with images of politics, of politicians, and of political moods” (ibid. 32) whose import could be analyzed and discovered inductively:

We naturally assume that every event has some kind of effect; our idea is to so conduct the study of any event that, once it is over, we can depict and analyze in some detail *whatever* effects turn up. This often takes us in new and sometimes unanticipated directions. Insights obtained from these attempts to assess and understand the impact of the events in question then become the starting points for entirely new lines of inquiry (emphasis in the original, 33).

This approach proved extraordinarily productive for the generation of theory and yielded a number of startling insights into political communication. In their remarkable body of work published before 1968 and collected in *Politics and Television*, the Langs prefigured thirty years of subsequent theoretical developments in the field. They open their book with a critique of the

‘limited effects’ model, laying out many themes contained in Todd Gitlin’s famous critique of “the dominant paradigm” (written ten years later). Even more, the introduction and collected chapters of *Politics and Television* advance an account of political communication processes as interactions between media, political elites, and citizens that anticipates much of Tim Cook’s (1998) influential new institutional account published thirty years later.

Despite their differences, Lazarsfeld and the Langs share a common approach to research design that is premised upon a “logic of discovery,” not a “logic of verification” (Luker, 2008, 39), and analysis that proceeds through logical generalization. Lazarsfeld once wrote that “methodology is intuition reconstructed in tranquility” (Pasanella, 1994, 22). As Lazarsfeld makes clear in his 1972 volume, *The People’s Choice* had built-in qualitative field research components that permitted the researchers to discover new analytical categories, which were necessary given that the survey research did not yield the results expected from existing theory. The inclusion of open-ended survey data and field observation permitted the researchers to go beyond filling pre-defined holes in the literature and generate new analytical categories and frame new questions. It was the observation of ‘personal influence’ in the field that lead Lazarsfeld to investigate other disciplinary literatures that spoke to the phenomenon and return to the field to explore it empirically in *Personal Influence*. In the case of the Langs, the building of theory was the goal, not the starting point. The Langs’ approach their studies in ways that are theoretically informed, yet clearly attuned to advancing the field through inductive theory-building. In both cases, these scholars built their work on theoretical insights gleaned through a research design animated by a logic of discovery, a precept that to some contemporary eyes may seem methodologically loose but produced canonical work in the field.

Even further, these scholars seemingly did not question their ability to generate work

with analytical and empirical purchase despite being limited to the in-depth exploration of a few critical events or cases. Indeed, logical generalization is a key tenant of the work of these scholars. The goal of logical generalization is to discover conceptually-related phenomena, not make distributional claims about a variable across a population. Lazarsfeld himself thought about generalizing from qualitative case studies, an approach that he argues “entails generalizing across situations from different studies” or pulling “together a variety of indicators from a single case study” (Pasanella, 1994, 27). This should not be foreign to the laboratory experimentalists who came after in the field of political communication who have routinely used convenience samples of college students and generalized logically (not statistically) from these about the general population. Logical generalization also enabled the Langs to make broader statements about how media and political actors relate to one another, and their analysis has held up markedly well over half a century.

### **Founding a field (without fieldwork)**

As we have shown, some of the most important researchers of the 1940s and 1950s produced interdisciplinary work that utilized a range of methods and integrated theoretical perspectives from sociology, psychology, political science, and the nascent field of mass communication research.<sup>8</sup> But much of their work, especially Lazarsfeld’s increasingly survey-based research aimed at identifying what influenced individual short-term behavior such as voting and shopping (done with Berelson, Katz, Allport, Cantril, and Merton)—what eventually came to be called the “Columbia School”—arrived at conclusions that seemed to suggest that mass media and other

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<sup>8</sup> In this paper we focus on methods. In terms of theory, published works as well as memoirs and interviews document Lazarsfeld’s ongoing engagement with many fields of social theory, including his interest in theorists like Gabriel Tarde and Theodore Adorno as well as contemporary social psychologists such as Allport and Cantril and sociologists like Merton and Shils, in addition to the work done at the University of Chicago.

forms of communication were less powerful than those who feared the power of propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s had thought. This is, of course, what has become known as the “minimal effects” tradition.

Recently, Jefferson Pooley and Elihu Katz (Pooley and Katz 2008, Katz 2009) have suggested that the intellectual success of the Columbia School in essence killed off sociological interest in mass media, including political communication. On the one hand, Lazarsfeld and his associates seemed to show that communication ultimately did not matter as much as some had thought it did. Implicitly, this made it less important to study. On the other hand, the same group established a paradigm for studying communication that over time became relatively inhospitable to sociological methods and thinking, especially of a more qualitative bent. This paradigm entailed (a) short-run studies of persuasion campaigns, (b) individuals and aggregated public opinion as objects of analysis instead of groups and communities, and (3) analytical interest in “media events” as opposed to more long-run processes of socialization and the consequences of living with media (Pooley and Katz 2008, Katz 2009). While Lazarsfeld (1948) himself acknowledged that immediate behavioral response and short-term effects on individuals are only narrow permutations of the different possible (long-term/institutional, general/structural) effects of communication, the broader sociological sensibilities of the Chicago School were, in Pooley and Katz’ analysis, displaced by those of the increasingly behaviorally- and psychologically-oriented Columbia School (just as the qualitative methods associated with Chicago gave way to the quantitative methods associated with Columbia). And, the latter provided few reasons for a continued emphasis on studying the intersection between communication and politics. Indeed, after the two landmark books *The People’s Choice* and *Personal Influence*, Lazarsfeld’s third and last “community study” *Voting* did not pay particular

attention to media and communication in its focus on the role of social institutions and salient issues in determining electoral outcomes. It was more concerned with politics than with political communication.

Thus, by the 1960s, the center of gravity had moved. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the interdisciplinary conversation on communication and politics involved sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, and communications researchers and had been (temporarily) institutionalized in the Committee on Communication and Public Opinion hosted at the University of Chicago and the Hutchins Commission (chaired by the President of the same university). From the late 1950s onwards, a narrow group of political scientists, social psychologists, and mass communication researchers working out of political science and (newly established) mass communication departments dominated the discussion about communication and politics.<sup>9</sup>

This was the context within which a generation of young American scholars set out to create an institutional space for political communication research in the early 1970s. This context was characterized by (1) the displacement of an older generation of sociologically-inspired and interdisciplinary researchers interested in communications and politics (Pooley and Katz 2008), (2) the behaviorist movement, arguably then at its high point in American political science and psychology (Farr et al 1995), and (3) the discipline-building ambitions of mass communications researchers like Wilbur Schramm coinciding with the sociologists who had contributed so much in the preceding decades turning away from media (Peters and Simonson 2004).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to compare the trajectory of political communication research with that of the adjacent and overlapping field of journalism studies. Whereas the Chicago School largely disappears from political communication and is often overlooked in the broader field's historical self-understanding (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004), it provided powerful inspiration for journalism studies, directly influencing key works by Gaye Tuchman, Herbert J. Gans, James W. Carey and many others.

<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, the older generation didn't simply disappear. Some, like Lazarsfeld, moved on to other topics, others, like the Langs, continued to publish and remained important, though less and less central, figures in the field

All of these characteristics are clearly on display in the *Handbook of Political Communication* published in 1981. Edited by Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders and written in the late 1970s mostly by scholars involved in the early years of the PCD, the *Handbook* is not simply a collection of then state-of-the-art chapters on communication and politics. It is also a monument to a particular definition of what political communication research *is*. Nimmo and Sanders provide a mythological account of the genesis of the field, arguing that it has “piecemeal origins [that] date back several centuries” but “think it convenient to speak of the emergence of the cross-disciplinary field as beginning in the behavioral thrust of the 1950s” (Nimmo and Sanders 1981, p. 12, quoted in Miller and McKerrow 2010, p. 62 as the starting point for their “history of political communication”). Jumping directly from “centuries back” to 1950s behaviorism with no mention of Lippmann, Park, or Lasswell, the editors refer to a 1956 reader called *Political Behavior* as “one of the first attempts to designate something called “political communication”” (p.12). In the process, they collapse much of the work done from the 1920s to the early 1950s into the mists of pre-historic time, suggesting that it is about as relevant for the contemporary researcher as Plato and Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> The *Handbook* thus represents a clear break with the past. During the course of the 1970s, the field of political communication research was reborn, so much so that Thomas E. Patterson suggested “there wasn’t a lot out there” when he, as

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of political communication. But, as Bernard Berelson suggested in his famous 1959 essay on “the state of communication research”, published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* with replies from, amongst others, Wilbur Schramm and David Riesman, the eclectic combination of “big ideas” and diverse research methods characteristic of the 1940s and the early 1950s was increasingly giving way to more consolidated normal science with a more narrow research agenda.

<sup>11</sup> The index of the 1981 *Handbook* makes for interesting reading. Lippmann gets 9 mentions, Lasswell, (confusingly re-named “Herbert” in the introduction) a respectable 29, Bernays none at all, and Park a single entry (with his last name misspelled). The founders of the PDC are more robustly represented—Sanders gets 21 mentions in the index, Atwood the same, Nimmo 35, Graber 49, Kraus 34, and Kaid 26. Karl Deutsch and Murray Edelman, who in their *The Nerves of Government* (Deutsch, 1963) and *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Edelman 1964) wrote two of the most widely-cited books on political communication published in the 1960s, are only discussed in passing. Edelman is mentioned 13 times, Deutsch 7 times. The work of Jürgen Habermas, who published the German original version of his wildly influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962, is discussed in a chapter on “critical theory” and an appendix on “European Research”.

a young political scientist, “back[ed] in the field” of political communication.<sup>12</sup> It seemed like there was not a lot out there because only very specific things were included in the budding theoretical and methodological consensus that continues to shape the field.

The understanding of political communication research that we have inherited from the (re)founding generation of the 1970s is shaped by a specific set of disciplines, currents within these disciplines, and associated methods that have been privileged in a way that sets the contemporary field apart from the interdisciplinary and mixed-method tradition that preceded it. The shift is not a clean break. The Langs are still read, as are, at least for their historical importance, especially Lippmann and Lasswell (though less park). Qualitative work is still done. But there is a clear shift that coincides with the institutionalization of the field. The post-1970s configuration has enabled major advances in our understanding of agenda-setting, the dynamics of public opinion, and media effects, especially during campaigns and elections. It has also relegated questions concerning broader issues of organizational, social, and technological change, as well as the qualitative methods that were integral to how pioneers of the field worked—including Paul Lazarsfeld and the Langs—tried to understand such changes, to the margins of the study of political communication.

### **A new era of field research in political communication?**

Contemporary work in political communication remains deeply indebted to the set of methodological approaches that came to define the center of the field after the founding of the PCD in 1973. These methods are best suited to refining our understanding of established

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<sup>12</sup> Presentation at the roundtable discussion of ‘The Future of Political Communication Research: Where We’ve Been, Where We’re Going’ at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC, Sep. 1-4, 2005, recording available on [http://www.politicalcommunication.org/04\\_tom\\_patterson.mp3](http://www.politicalcommunication.org/04_tom_patterson.mp3) (accessed September 25, 2012).

concepts in a relatively static communications landscape, but seems to have been less useful in terms of generating new analytical categories to keep pace with changes in media and social structure. The currently dominant methodological consensus has done little to advance our understanding of political actors and their work, the growing layer of organizations mediating between politicians and the public in new ways, and citizens' social and symbolic construction of their relationships to politics and the news, or how any of these have changed over time.

The challenges for researchers are not limited to the rapid rise of new digital and networked communication technologies and the social practices associated with them, but this particularly spectacular change in the substantive nature of political communication is useful for arguing a broader point about how current methodological approaches risk failing the field when used on their own. Inherited assumptions about political actors, news media organizations, and even citizens themselves may be becoming rapidly obsolete. What "is" a political campaign at a time when outside actors such as the so-called "Super PACs" sometimes spend more money than candidates and parties, and are directed by consultants who until recently worked for those they are legally prohibited from coordinating with? What "is" a media organization in a time of widespread social media use, group blogs such as DailyKos that have more web traffic than many professional outlets, and multi-platform media celebrities like Glenn Beck? What "is" an interest group at a time of Astroturf groups, internet-assisted advocacy with loose membership requirements, and the president's Organizing for Action that pushes the legal boundaries of not-for-profits? What "is" the Internet as a medium when it is continually and rapidly evolving, from the AOL-dominant years of dial up access to the increasingly ubiquitous and always-on broadband access of today?

These are just the tip of the iceberg. Taking the case of the US, political scientists, media

scholars, sociologists, and economic historians are increasingly arguing that the last forty years represents a period of rapid and often profound change in the very nature of political parties, campaign organizations, interest groups, social movements, news media institutions, work, leisure, and family life, as well as the basic dynamics of the economy (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Neuman, 1991; Castells, 2000). Few of these changes have registered with the mainstream of political communication research, a field that often seems to operate in a sort of ahistorical generalized present. For example, while the recently published *Sourcebook for Political Communication Research* (Bucy and Holbert 2011) explicitly recognizes that the field needs to keep up with a changing political communications environment, the vast majority of the theories and methods discussed in the book derive from the same tradition of social psychological, political science, and mass communication research based on surveys, experiments, and content analysis that Bennett and Iyengar (2008) so forcefully argue have proven themselves inadequate on their own to understand the present.

Normal scientific paradigms base their progress in part on the stabilization of certain analytical categories that are then taken for granted and used continually over time. And yet, social scientists face the problem that the very nature of what they study changes, leaving basic categories unsettled. Field research in particular, and many qualitative methods more generally, excels precisely where surveys and experiments are limited: in the inductive examination of social phenomena to generate new theory. As examples of how to do this, the submerged tradition of qualitative field research (like the Langs') and mixed-methods studies (like Lazarsfeld's) holds renewed relevance for the future. Whether pursued alone in free-standing qualitative case studies or as parts of mixed-methods designs combining qualitative and quantitative elements, scholars have shown that field research is particularly well-suited for

getting close to the realities of social life, especially the workings of the otherwise half-secluded social worlds inhabited by political operatives (Howard, 2006), journalists and political publicists (Gershon, 2012; Herbst, 1998), and other actors key to more or less professionalized processes of political communication (Kreiss, 2012). Field research can provide insight onto the everyday operations of mediating institutions ranging from political campaigns (Nielsen, 2012) and parties to news media organizations (Anderson, 2013) and new types of digitally-enabled political organizations (Karpf, 2012). It offers a powerful way to discover the realities of the everyday life of ordinary people, the contexts in which political communications emanating from elites is received, and the setting in which citizens themselves engage with public affairs (Walsh, 2004).

Following Lazarsfeld's thoughts on the role of methodologists detailed above, we do not see it as our task to tell scholars what they *should* do, but to highlight what they *might* do, including:

- Supplement existing studies of campaign communications with field research examining the inner workings of campaigns and the relations between the different professional communities and organizations who collaborate formally or informally to get candidates elected or advance a cause.
- Complement existing studies of media agendas and media content with field research examining news production processes that straddles distinctions between online and offline media and details the interactions among reporters, their sources, and a growing number of "other actors" (including various media-like organizations, groups, and companies) in an ever-faster information cycle.

- Pursue through field research amongst interest groups, social movements, and new types of sometimes loosely connected political groups appearing in a changing political and technological context
- Design new studies of citizens' political behavior and media habits with closer, qualitative, examination of the everyday life contexts of political action and media use related to public affairs.
- Conduct mediated field observations focused on the hidden objects that shape media production and dissemination, but leave no obvious traces, including the proprietary algorithms that determine Facebook and Google content priority, as well as various forms of intranets and other backchannels support semi-formal elite communication.

Parallel with such work we need to generate a body of endemic methodological writings related to qualitative field research in political communication that draws on work in other closely related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology as well as science studies and media and communications research more broadly. These can help us conceptualize the 'fields' and 'sites' of politics, develop tools for observation of socio-technical and distributed practices, address ethical debates over issues like the use of pseudonyms in research, develop guidelines for training young scholars in conducting field research, and address debates over the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research.<sup>13</sup> Such collaborations should also involve forging new interdisciplinary relationships with related disciplines such as information studies and a new definition of "methodological pluralism" that includes not only surveys, experiments, and

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<sup>13</sup> Here, the field can draw on the intense debates waged over the last decade over the role of qualitative research in political science, starting with the so-called Perestroika-movement, calls for more problem-oriented and less methods-driven research, and debates over the design of mixed-methods social inquiry (see for example Shapiro et al, 2004 and Brady and Collier, 2010).

fieldwork, but also approaches to “big data” and field experiments that are now thriving outside the field.

## **Conclusion**

In our view, a new era of field research in political communication would at the very least represent a valuable addition to our empirical understanding of processes of political communication. At its best, it would help the field move past our current theoretical impasse. It would be a “new” era because it would be a return to an older tradition of interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research that was submerged when the field as we know it was institutionalized in the United States in the early 1970s around a narrow, more methodologically monocultural, set of concerns. This dominant methodological consensus is reflected today in the pages of our leading journal, *Political Communication*, the makeup of Political Communication Division panels at APSA and ICA conferences, and in the methodological training offered in leading graduate programs. It has served us well in many respects, but also seems to have run up against its limits in some ways. We believe the future of our discipline lies beyond this consensus, in a fuller embrace of the discipline’s past. We believe that responding to the challenge laid out by Bennett and Iyengar (2008) requires a reassessment and expansion of our methodological toolkits as well as our theories and concepts. And we believe now is a particularly appropriate time to pursue more inductive, fieldwork-based, and collaborative work.

As made clear from the start, our call for a new era of qualitative political communication field research does not imply a rejection of traditional quantitative techniques, nor a claim that the field of political communication ever fully excluded qualitative methods. PCD awards have been given to several scholars who have never counted words, conducted an experiment,

administered a survey, or run a regression analysis, and some qualitative work is widely respected. Our position is simply that to advance beyond the impasse identified by Iyengar and Bennett (2008), the field needs to reclaim its interdisciplinary heritage and become again, in practice, genuinely mixed-methods (like neighboring fields such as journalism studies). Political communication researchers should not leave it to sociologists (let alone journalists!) to ask the hard, timely, and necessary questions about how processes of political communication actually operate today, how elites communicate amongst themselves, how political and media actors are changing, and how people relate to them. We think we need to supplement our existing quantitative methods with both old and new qualitative tools and heed Robert E. Park's old call to "go get our pants dirty" doing field research to advance our understanding of political communication and develop new theories fit for a changing world.

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