CHAPTER 1

Mediated Democracy

An Introduction

IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO ESCAPE. When President Donald Trump goes on a tweetstorm, you might see it on Twitter. If you don't follow the president, you might see it later on your Twitter feed if someone you follow retweets or replies to the president—perhaps to praise his latest missive as the latest example of how he is draining the swamp to make America great again or to critique his 280-characters-at-a-time thread as the rantings of an unqualified monster who is destroying the political norms that weave civil society together. If you do not use Twitter, you might see a friend share the tweets on her Instagram or Facebook feeds, discuss it in a Reddit forum, joke about them on Snapchat, see them set to auto-tuned music on YouTube, or watch them lampooned by Stephen Colbert on late-night television. You might even learn about them from a more traditional source by watching a television news story or reading a newspaper article about the president's Twitter behavior. If none of these forms of communication reach you, one of your news aggregator apps like The Skimm or Apple News may relay the story to you on your phone. You might even learn about the tweetstorm via a face-to-face conversation with another person!

Democracy in the United States is mediated. This means that what happens in politics and society is not independent of what happens in the news media,[1] social media, and interpersonal communication. Mass communication shapes how we think about what we want, how we evaluate our political leaders, the ways we choose to engage in our society (and check out of it, sometimes), how we think of ourselves, and how we think about each other. [2] Historically, the news media have informed us about a relatively narrow range of issues that we decided were important or not. The way politicians and journalists' framed issues affected how we thought about issues, politicians, and electoral choices.[3] The diversity of the people we talked to contributed to whether we were hardened partisans who distrusted the other side or people who embraced engagement with a wide array of political ideas.[4] These behaviors and choices affected whether we participated in civic life and how we voted in elections.

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The twenty-first-century communication ecology looks quite a bit different than it did even fifteen years ago. Then, Facebook was cool and there was barely a YouTube. Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat did not exist. Both the instantaneousness and worldwide reach of social media communication have fundamentally upended some of what we know about how democracy works. However, and even as their share of the overall communication pie is diminished in this era, classic modes of communication like newspapers, magazines, network television news, and face-to-face conversation still affect what people believe, what their preferences are, and how they engage in civic and political participation in important ways. Unpacking these effects and applying them to your own lives is the central task of this book.

We take a contemporary, communications-oriented approach to studying the health and maintenance of democratic societies and the relationships between citizens, journalists, and political elites. Our perspective marries clear, but detailed, syntheses of both classic and cutting-edge research with practical examples and advice that explain how political communication research matters for your life. We highlight how 1) traditional and new media effects, 2) the behavior of journalists, and 3) the evolution of political institutions are directly related to your opinions on important issues, the civic and political groups you care about, and your own opportunities for civic engagement.

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What Is Political Communication?

Political communication is the study of how information flows through society, affecting politicians, political institutions, journalists, and citizens. It also reveals how various communicative platforms and behaviors—among a wide variety of actors—affect policy debates, elections, and political and social systems more generally.

Political communication research is conducted via a wide variety of strategies. Moreover, scholars conduct political communication research all over the globe, allowing for us to compare the effects of different communication strategies and platforms in a variety of political, social, and cultural contexts. The research designs scholars use in their research are often crucially important to the understanding of what their findings mean and how generalizable they are to other situations.

Some scholars use experiments to precisely estimate the causal impact of one thing on another, For example, in Chapter 6, we will look at experiments that vary 1) how different political issues are framed and

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2) the nature of the political environment in which the framing occurs (e.g., a polarized legislature vs. a moderate one) in order to learn how framing affects individual political attitudes about issues, groups, and electoral choices. In Chapter 7, we share the results of a variety of experiments that reveal how our own biases and attitudes about others shape what we think of the news media coverage we encounter.

Political communication research also uses public opinion surveys to ask people about their media use, who they talk to about politics, and what they know about politics and current events so that researchers can estimate the effects of various forms of media on opinions and behaviors. In Chapter 5, we will discuss examples of survey research that show how some individuals, often those who are the most politically engaged, choose to engage with news sources that already fit their worldview (think of the conservative who prefers Fox News or the liberal who seeks out MSNBC for political information). In Chapter 9, survey research reveals the differences in voting behavior between those who use ideologically-oriented media as compared to balanced news media, between those who talk to a diverse array of people about politics and those who prefer a more homogenous echo chamber, and between those who live and breathe politics and people who would always choose to watch Netflix over reading the newspaper. Scholars also are grappling with how the mode of the survey—in person, on the phone, or via the internet—can affect who participates in a survey, how they answer the questions, and, more fundamentally, how representative the sample is of a larger population.

Other political communication research analyzes the content of various sources of information. Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 9 attack questions like, how much issue content is available in newspaper coverage of politics as compared to network television (NBC) and cable television (CNN)? Is news coverage of presidential candidates mostly positive or negative? How ideologically or structurally biased are different news sources? What kinds of political conversations take place on Twitter and Facebook? How successful are politicians at getting their way of looking at an issue reported in the news or shared on social media? Some of this content analysis is done by human coders, but increasingly, scholars are turning to natural language processing, artificial intelligence, and other contemporary strategies to analyze larger corpuses of data. Computational approaches to political communication research allow scholars to analyze a truly amazing amount of communicative messages (think terabytes, petabytes, and exabytes), while possibly sacrificing a more nuanced, and human, understanding of the messages in the process.

Another strategy favored by some political communication researchers is one that focuses on individual and small group conversations between citizens. Sometimes, the citizens are part of naturally occurring groups that

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researchers analyze to understand how people make sense of the political world around them while in other situations researchers arrange focus groups comprised of people who do not know each other to talk politics. Other researchers talk to those who report the news or make the news. In Chapter 10, we explore some of these studies that use elite interviews to shed light on how public policies are made and stories are covered.

Researchers can also contribute to knowledge in political communication by doing theoretical work—that is, making detailed arguments about how political communication ought to be expected to work. Theoretical articles and books provide a framework from which to do empirical research—both quantitative and qualitative—by encouraging researchers to ask particular questions, apply them to specific populations or contexts, or be mindful of other factors that might be expected to mediate or moderate a hypothesized effect.

In this book, we will take time in each chapter, via our DIY Research feature, to interview a scholar of political communication, who will describe a well-known research project they conducted. The researchers will explain how they developed their research question, the theory they used to shed new light on an important problem, the data and research design they used to test their arguments, the results of their study, and how you can conduct research in the same area.

Why Political Communication Matters

While you might win points with family members at the holiday dinner table by dismissing *the media* as an awful, monolithic entity that is making our lives worse, developing a rich, nuanced understanding of how political communication works is important for several reasons. First, the study of political communication helps us understand and evaluate the functions that the news media serve. Second, a focused study of political communication helps us understand how we can apply those functions to building our own expectations of the political system, our political compatriots, and our political rivals. Finally, political communication research reveals a wide variety of important outcomes affecting all levels of our lives.

Functions of the News Media

Much of the indignation directed at *the media* stems from critiques of the ways in which news organizations perform their basic functions. Political communication pioneer Doris Graber has written that there are four major functions of the mass media: surveillance, interpretation, socialization, and manipulation.[5]

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One major function of the news media is to inform their audience of current events. This function is called *surveillance*. Since you probably did not wake up this morning, clap your hands together and ask yourself, "How do I hold my government representatives accountable today?" journalists convey to people which events are important and which are not via the topics they choose to cover. At its core, surveillance is about journalists' sense of what is newsworthy. Typically, newsworthiness is determined by how timely, proximal, familiar, conflict-filled, violent, or scandalous a topic or event is. Surveillance is closely connected to the concept of *gatekeeping*—the power the news media have to convey to the audience what is important and what isn't. Which bill working its way through the state legislature merits the most public attention? Should the public be made aware of a protest that took place in your town? Which issue positions of a candidate for president deserve the most scrutiny? What concerts are coming to town next month? Surveillance is public in the sense that it calls attention to public officials, organized interests, and their actions, and it is private in that it helps provide you an avenue to stay informed. Some critics argue media gatekeeping excessively focuses on the discourse of political elites and ignores the challenges and issues facing everyday citizens. Others accept that the news media will spend most of its attention on public figures, even if they might object to the amount of coverage some politicians, parties, and ideas receive as compared to others.

For example, in the 2016 presidential primary season, Donald Trump dominated news coverage. In scores of news articles and a growing number of scholarly examinations, the news media were criticized for showering Trump with near constant attention. Media scholar Thomas Patterson wrote, in a treatment of the volume and tone of the news coverage of Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump, "The volume and tone of the coverage helped propel Trump to the top of Republican polls."[6] *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni wrote, in a piece titled, "Will the media be Trump's accomplice again in 2020?" that the news media was seduced by covering the latest thing Trump said, to the point that they spent the Republican primaries asking other candidates to simply react to what Trump had done. He continued,

> "Trump basically ran on blowing the whole thing up," said Nancy Gibbs, who was the top editor at *Time* magazine from 2013 to 2017. "So what was it that the country wanted? It's critically important that we find ways to get at what it is people imagine government should be doing and that we really look at what kind of leadership we need." Nicknames have nothing to do with it. So let's not have much to do with them.[7]

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Many journalists, like *Time*'s Molly Ball (then working at *The Atlantic*), countered the criticism, arguing that the news organizations reporters work for do not have a vote in the primary and general elections and that media attention is not the same thing as positive media attention. Trump's attention—like that of most people running for president most of the time—was far more negative than positive.[8] Ball's counterpoint is an important reminder that choosing to cover some topics or people instead of others is not the only major function of the news media. *How* the media interprets the news matters as well.

Interpretation is the media function that puts an issue into context. While surveillance informs the audience what news happened, interpretation tells the audience what news *means*. For example, *The Atlantic*'s article "Bill Barr's Dangerous Claims" goes beyond informing readers that US Attorney General William Barr claimed that the government was spying on Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. The article argues that Barr's use of the word *spying*, which does not have a legal definition in the intelligence community, could negatively affect public perceptions of how intelligence officials and officers do their work.[9] The interpretation function was also on full display on its post-2018 midterm election analysis article, "Why Democrats' gain was more impressive than it appears."[10] The article noted how the structure of the 2018 midterms (more Democratic seats in danger in the Senate and a relatively small number of competitive seats up for grabs in the House) favored the Republican Party, but the Democrats took the majority in the House of Representatives away from Republicans. The surveillance function noted the results of the election; the interpretation function framed the election as a bigger win for Democrats than Republicans.

Returning to Molly Ball's point that the tone of coverage is important to consider when assessing the news media's campaign coverage, we can see that it was clearly the case that coverage of the 2016 presidential candidates was overwhelmingly negative. Figure 1.1 reveals that more than three-quarters of Donald Trump's media attention was negative while 64 percent of Hillary Clinton's media attention was negative. One interpretation of these results is that there was a bias that the news media had in favor of Clinton. However, a closer look at the topics that generated positive and negative coverage for each candidate reveals that the news media's interpretation of events on the campaign trail are highly predictable and largely governed by professional norms that reporters apply to all candidates.

While Clinton enjoyed more positive coverage than Trump during the general election campaign, Figure 1.1 shows why. Horse race stories—coverage examining campaign strategy and who was winning and losing in the polls—were more positive for Clinton. That is, since most polls showed Clinton in the lead among likely voters, the coverage of the polls was more positive for her. Notice that even though Clinton led in the polls for most

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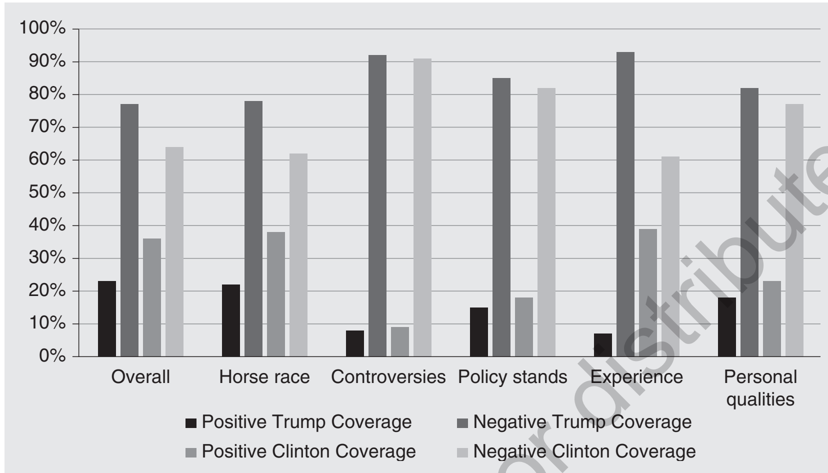
Figure 1.1 Percentage of Positive and Negative News Coverage for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, 2016 General Election



Source: Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, 2016, https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/.

of the campaign, her horse race stories were still *negative* by a 2:1 margin. When it came to stories about controversies, personal qualities, and policy stands, Trump and Clinton received very similar coverage from the news media. The other area in which Clinton had an advantage was in stories about experience. This is not surprising either as Clinton had been a US senator and the secretary of state while Trump had famously never held elective office or served in a presidential administration.

Graber's third media function is *socialization*. This is the function in which the mass media help citizens learn the core values and social behaviors that prepare them to live in their society. For example, there is no law demanding that there be only two political parties in the United States. However, the news media tend to cover the two major political parties and largely ignore third parties.[11] When third parties earn coverage, it is usually to speculate about which of the major parties might lose votes to the "spoiler" third party. News coverage helps socialize Americans to accept the two-party system of government and see important differences between the parties.[12] Broader, cultural socialization can come from the mass media as well; notable examples include changing attitudes about premarital sexual behavior, sexual orientation, gender identity, and racial attitudes. An example of socialization on display in 2016 occurred when then-candidate

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Donald Trump claimed he would not automatically accept the results of the election if he lost to Hillary Clinton.[13] After Clinton and scores of news outlets criticized Trump, socializing their audiences to expect that the loser of the election accept the results, he turned the socialization function on its head, appealing to his supporters at a rally in Ohio, "I will totally accept the result of this great and historic presidential election . . . if I win."[14]

Finally, a function of the news media is to engage in what some scholars call *manipulation*. While manipulation might mean many different things, including journalists engaging in *muckraking*, the digging up of dirt on government behavior designed to force lawmakers to "clean up their act," Graber notes that manipulation also can mean the sensationalizing of facts to try to increase an audience's interest in a story to boost ratings and profits, and it can even mean the media surreptitiously advocating for the positions of some politicians or trying to alter the preferences of other politicians. One example of manipulation occurred in 2019 when President Trump commented on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) plans to send astronauts back to the moon (as part of a plan to land a human on Mars). As seen in Photo 1.1, Trump criticized NASA's talk of going back to the moon. News outlets and social media users had a field day tweaking the president. Some outlets, like *The Guardian*, claimed that the president thought Earth's moon was a part of Mars. Others, like ABC News, CNN, and others, aired several stories about the *confusion* created by the president's tweet.

It is clear that his tweet's claim "including Mars (of which the Moon is a part)" is not claiming Mars is part of the moon itself, but that a trip to the moon is part of plan to land a person on Mars. Rather, his tweet is about what he thought NASA should be *talking about*—which, in his mind, was Mars, defense, and science, and not returning to the moon.

In some ways, we can see this tweet and the reaction to it as a way to think about how the four functions of mass media interact with each other. Some news organizations simply reported that President Trump tweeted about NASA's public communication regarding a return to Americans landing on the moon (surveillance). Outlets more critical of President Trump *interpreted* the tweet as evidence the president was unaware that the moon and Mars were not parts of each other. Other news sources *interpreted* the tweet as something that created confusion among those less familiar with the president's communication style—which often uses one word (Mars in this case) as a shorthand for a more complicated concept (the steps involved in landing an American on Mars and bringing them back home safely). The episode is an example that the public is being socialized to accept tweets from political leaders as official forms of communication. Some news organizations manipulated the public to believe the president did not understand what the moon was made of as compared to what comprises Mars.

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Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

For all of the money we are spending, NASA should NOT be talking about going to the Moon - We did that 50 years ago. They should be focused on the much bigger things we are doing, including Mars (of which the Moon is a part), Defense and Science!

♡ 125K 12:38 PM - Jun 7, 2019

Donald Trump/Twitter

Photo 1.1 President Trump's NASA Tweet That Seemed to Be Willfully Misinterpreted by Some Media Sources

Graber's functions provide us with a useful framework to approach our study of political communication and citizenship in the twenty-first century. Many scholars think about the functions of the news media with respect to whether news coverage enhances the prospects and performance of democratic citizenship. In other words, we can study whether, when, and how different media functions help to make us better or worse citizens. A number of scholars have pointed out that it may be rational for voters to ignore much of the political information around them. Rational choice theorists, following the lead of Anthony Downs, argue that the benefits derived from reaching a *correct* decision on a candidate or policy may not be worth the costs the voter must pay in order to learn the information.[15] It might take a long time to learn the details of a political candidate's health care, student loan, and foreign policy positions whereas it takes far less time to 1) learn which party a candidate represents, and 2) compare that party to the party you personally favor.

It is rational, from this perspective, for the voter to take a number of information shortcuts, such as relying on someone else's judgment or voting according to one's established party identification. Political scientist Samuel L. Popkin uses the analogy of *fire alarms* versus *police patrols* to explain how most people view political information.[16] Instead of patrolling the political *neighborhood* constantly to make sure there is not something going on that requires one's immediate attention, most citizens rely on others to raise the alarm when something truly important happens. Television news and newspaper headlines may be enough to set off alarm bells for the average citizen, signaling them that they need to spend some time looking into a story.

Michael Schudson, a sociologist of news, argues that a good citizen does not have to be fully informed on all issues of the day but that she, he, or they ought to be *monitorial*.[17] That is, good citizens scan the headlines for issues that might be important enough about which to form an opinion

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or on which to take some action. We will return to this issue later in the chapter. Political scientist John Zaller argues for a *burglar alarm* standard of media coverage in which reporters regularly cover nonemergency but important issues in focused, dramatic ways that simultaneously entertain and allow traditional newsmakers like political parties and interest groups to express their views about the issue.[18]

The Alarm–Patrol Hybrid Model

Political communication scholar Amber Boydstun argues that while the alarm-style reporting captures a great deal of the news-generation process, it does not account for everything. Her conceptualization of an *alarm/patrol hybrid model* places modes of news generation into four general categories. Sometimes, news media cover stories in a pure alarm mode, generating a brief explosion of coverage around an issue or event. A second category is a pure patrol mode. This is when news organizations produce an extended period of coverage to an issue. Beat reporting is an example of this *timed media explosion* that occurs with regularity.[19] A third category is noteworthy for the general lack of coverage an event or issue receives. In this case, neither the alarm nor patrol mode is fully engaged. The fourth model is termed the alarm/patrol mode; this style of coverage is usually characterized by short bursts of alarm reporting followed by continuing the surge of coverage for a long period of time. Boydstun calls this a *sustained media explosion.*

Thinking about these four types of coverage can help us build expectations for how different events and issues might get covered. For example, President Trump's nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the US Supreme Court was an example of pure patrol coverage. When his nomination was announced, there was a mini-explosion of coverage about Gorsuch's jurisprudence, the selection process, and reactions to the nomination. The confirmation process in the US Senate was fairly typical and there were no major bombshells that required sustained attention to Justice Gorsuch. While there was certainly strong disagreement about Gorsuch between Republicans and Democrats, compounded by Democrats' anger that Barack Obama's final nominee to the Supreme Court, Judge Merrick Garland, was not even given a confirmation hearing by the Republican-majority Senate, the coverage was routine.

On the other hand, the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the high court set off an explosion comparable to the one Gorsuch's nomination did in the beginning—but accusations that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted a woman when he was a teenager caused the initial alarm to generate explosive patrol coverage as well. Coverage reached a fever pitch and stayed there for weeks. Stories about Professor Christine Blasey Ford's wrenching testimony, in which she described her memory of how Kavanaugh tried

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to rape her, before a Senate panel riveted the nation, energizing the wildly popular hashtag #WhyIDidntReport about why people who were victims of sexual assault did not report the crime to authorities. After Dr. Ford's powerful testimony, deemed credible by lawmakers and the general viewing audience alike, Judge Kavanaugh returned to answer questions before the Senate committee. His fiery statement was widely lampooned, most famously on Saturday Night Live, when actor Matt Damon was cast as the judge, whom he portrayed as an enraged, juvenile, highly emotional beer-guzzler. Stories about Kavanaugh prompted follow-up stories that connected to the wider range of issues being discussed as part of the "Me Too" movement—spurred by the viral success of the #metoo hashtag where thousands of people shared their stories of enduring sexual violence, seeking healing from their experiences, and, often, naming their assailants.

Applying Graber's four functions to the alarm–patrol hybrid model is an example of how understanding political communication is important to how we make important decisions in our lives. Surveillance of the Judge Kavanaugh nomination and the accusations Dr. Ford raised started overnight while various interpretations of what the accusations meant[20] (Were they accurate? Should and would they sink Kavanaugh's nomination? How would voters react to the eventual outcome of the nomination?) lit up the airwaves and filled column inches of print articles. While misogyny, sexual harassment, and sexual violence in the workplace had been an issue that was often part and parcel of daily life for much of American history, the coverage of the Me Too movement appears to be playing a socializing role in American culture now, suggesting that these behaviors are no longer welcome, are likely to be reported, and are likely to have professional, if not legal, consequences. Manipulation can also be found in the Kavanaugh coverage. While Dr. Ford's testimony was widely viewed as highly credible, other people pitched reporters, sometimes successfully, with their own accusations about Kavanaugh. Even though many of these claims were less credible than Ford's, some news organizations reported them as fact before all the facts were known. Despite the power of Ford's testimony and the initial reaction to Kavanaugh's defense, most Republicans came around to believing Kavanaugh while most Democrats believed Ford.[21] The Senate behaved in much the same way, confirming Kavanaugh on a 50–48 vote. All 49 Senate Republicans voted for Kavanaugh while 48 of 49 Democrats (and independents who caucus with the Democrats) opposed him.

Examples of pure alarm coverage include the coverage given to most natural disasters. One thing that makes alarm coverage distinct is that there are typically only a few interpretations available for the event or issue. When an earthquake strikes, there are not a variety of claims coming from multiple political perspectives about the cause of the earthquake. Instead, the stories tend to focus on the size of the earthquake, who was killed or injured, what businesses were damaged, how life will immediately change,

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if at all, where the earthquake took place, and the estimated cost of the clean-up and renovations.

Recall that Boydstun's final category of news coverage in the alarm/patrol hybrid model includes stories that do not neatly fit into either category. These stories do not usually have a major triggering event, do not receive much interest from policymakers, have few available interpretations, and exist when the media agenda is already fairly congested. Most human-interest coverage fits into this category. The stories are often valuable and popular, but they typically do not cause media explosions, generate enormous public concern, and capture the interest of lawmakers. Crime stories often fit this category as well as they are typically reported on one or two times before the reporter and news organization moves onto something else.

Political Communication Helps Determine Winners, What We Know, and What We Think About

Political communication scholars have spent considerable time and attention on understanding how communication affects political outcomes. Most research into elections focuses on how party identification and the state of the economy are the most important predictors of who is victorious on Election Day.[22] When it comes to elections, political scientist Lynn Vavreck's book *The Message Matters*[23] shows that how candidates build their message around the state of the economy is an important factor in determining who wins and loses presidential elections in the United States. When the economy is strong, a president running for reelection or a candidate from the same party as the outgoing president should focus on campaign messages about the economy. When the economy is weak, the challenger should highlight the weakness of the economy in their messaging. If the state of the economy is disadvantageous to you (i.e., it is in bad shape and you are the incumbent or it is in good shape and you are the challenger), you should seek to shift focus to other issues to try and blunt the advantage the economy gives to your opponent. Vavreck finds that candidates who campaign on the economy strategically are more successful than those who do not.

Other forms of political communication matter to elections as well. Seeing campaign ads on television is associated with citizens being more knowledgeable about the election, more interested in the campaign, and more likely to vote.[24] Candidates are even rewarded by voters for being strategic in how they present their ads. For issues associated with being more feminine, voters find ads voiced by women more credible than ads voiced by men. The same is true for when the electorate has substantially more women than men.[25] We will have more to say about this in Chapter 8.

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What We Know

Using panel survey data, in which the same people were interviewed at multiple points in time, a group of political communication scholars found that both mass and interpersonal communication can improve political knowledge.[26] Moreover, the amount, breadth, and prominence of news coverage of specific political issues is associated with increases in policy-specific knowledge among citizens, even when controlling for important demographic characteristics like one's level of education. The interaction between the education level of a news user and the amount, breadth, depth, and medium (newspaper or television, for example) can often exacerbate gaps in political knowledge. Educated individuals tend to learn more from newspaper reporting than less educated people do. In South Korea, the greatest knowledge gap was between educated heavy newspaper users and less-educated individuals who read the paper.[27] In the United States, Jennifer Jerit found that when experts commentated on the news, knowledge gaps increased, but when reporters provided more contextual information (e.g., historical background) to their stories, those gaps diminished significantly.[28]

In short, news coverage we encounter and conversations we have about political issues can influence what we know. Of course, one reason we want to know things is so that we can decide what we think. It turns out that political communication can affect our attitudes as well. We will return to these issues in Chapter 3 and Chapter 9.

What We Think

Political communication has the potential to affect how we think in at least three important ways. First, news coverage and political conversations can affect what we think is important. Second, political communication can affect our actual attitude about an issue. Third, the ways political issues are communicated can influence whether and how we think about particular issues and attitudes when we are making political choices.

As political communication scholar Natalie Jomini Stroud notes, "Our attention is a fixed resource."[29] When we are paying attention to one thing, we are not paying attention to all of the other things vying for our attention. What keeps the attention of our eyeballs has the power to influence what we think is important. Classic research in political communication finds that when news organizations give more attention to a particular issue, we tend to find that issue to be more important than we did before. This *agenda-setting* effect is one of the most studied phenomena in the social sciences. In the contemporary communication ecology, groups of individuals can even set elements of the news media's agenda based upon what they are interested in searching for on platforms like Google.

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Google searches signal to news organizations what issues are on people's minds, encouraging more news coverage of those issues.[30]

While simply covering an issue helps people understand what might be important, the way that issues are framed in news coverage has the potential to affect what people actually think about the issues. Early research in framing found individuals to be quite susceptible to changing their attitudes based upon which elements of an issue were highlighted in news coverage. For example, if a proposed community rally by the Ku Klux Klan was framed as a free speech issue, people were more supportive of the KKK holding the rally than if it was framed as a public safety issue. However, as framing studies matured, exploring what happens when frames compete against each other in the same news story—as they do in real life—scholars found that framing effects often disappear . . . leaving people's prior attitudes as a strong predictor of their response to a news article with competing frames.[31] More recent work examines how bundles of issue frames appeal to Democrats and Republicans in different ways, affecting attitudes and partisanship over time. Frames that were more policy oriented were associated with changes in Democrats' attitudes while more symbolic frames were correlated with Republicans' opinions.[32] We will spend more time with framing in Chapter 6.

Who Participates

Beyond what we find important and what we think, communication plays a crucial role in both making political participation possible and motivating us to engage in it. Of course, some elements of the communication ecology influence us directly, like political conversations we have with others, while other facets, such as television watching, affect us indirectly.[33] A study of an Israeli political campaign found that those who exhibit the highest level of political interest are more likely to develop deeper political information repertoires that include using digital and traditional ways of searching for political information. Importantly, these individuals and groups engage in higher levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and participation.[34] We give these issues greater attention in Chapter 9.

Twenty-First Century Political Communication, Democratic Citizenship, and You

What does it mean to be a good citizen in a republican democracy? In the now-classic book *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson argues that, in the United States, there have been four eras of civic life, each of which had

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its own definition of good citizenship.[35] In the early years of the republic, citizens left the important decisions to political elites. Good citizens placed their faith in their leaders. In the middle of the nineteenth century, citizens involved themselves in civic life through participation in strong political party organizations in their communities. In the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, good citizenship was defined via one of two major models—one growing out of Progressive reforms focusing upon a professional, objective, nonpartisan press and experts' role in governing and the other focusing upon citizen deliberation. Schudson argues that from the 1950s forward, citizenship began becoming more *rights-conscious*. Some people focused on individual rights while others fought for collective rights.

You might have noticed that being an *informed citizen* was never on Schudson's list. In fact, he argues that while being informed is still something that folk theories of democratic politics hold in high regard, a more realistic expectation is for citizens to be, as noted above, monitorial. Some scholars argue that such a view, while reasonable, might sell the people—and by extension, democracy—short.

Beyond what is theoretically expected of citizens, you have probably heard more than one person decry *millennials* as part of an older person spewing existential angst about all that is wrong with the current generation as compared to years past. Journalistic stalwarts like *60 Minutes'* Morley Safer have called millennials "narcissistic praise hounds" while a *Time* magazine article referred to millennials as the "me me me generation."[36] Evidence about millennials' conceptualization of citizenship and participation in democratic activities tell a different story.

In East Asia, millennials are strong supporters of democratic attitudes and also participate regularly in politics, but their conceptions of citizenship differ from those of their elders.[37] In the United States, millennials' voter turnout increased from 22 percent in 2014 to 42 percent in 2018. Generation Z (who began turning 18 in 2014) turned out at 30 percent—about seven points higher than Generation X and millennial voters did when they were first old enough to vote. Together, Gen Z-ers and millennials cast a quarter of all votes in the 2018 American midterm elections.[38] Millennials are the first generation to grow up in a digital world. They, and Gen Z folks, tend to be more educated than other generations, dislike hierarchy, and are unusually focused on transparency.[39]

So, if the younger generations are not taking us all to hell in the proverbial handbasket, what might we expect from them, and all citizens in a twenty-first-century communication ecology? Typically, scholars think about four key agents of socialization in public life—family, school, media, and peers. Each of these groups help teach people what mass communication scholar Dhavan Shah and colleagues call communicative competencies. Communication competencies help to socialize young adults into democratic public life, teaching them to navigate the swamps, chasms, and

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barricades facing those seeking to practice democratic citizenship. These groups help young people explore and engage with new ideas, process information, and think about public affairs, and develop within them the ability to form arguments, share opinions, disagree, and see the world in more complex ways. Shah and colleagues claim that these skills are required to effectively engage in civil society.[40]

Communication competencies develop early and are guided by the ways in which parents and children tend to communicate. The information and behaviors students learn in school have been shown to affect communication skills and civic attitudes. For example, being exposed to the teaching of controversial public issues can increase students' engagement in politics.[41] If you worked at your school paper or participated in extracurricular activities like student council, you are more likely to participate more in democratic life. Why? To participate in these kinds of activities, you had to monitor current events, discuss potentially contentious issues, and find solutions to challenging problems. You were also more likely to encounter adults who were high participators. Honestly, choosing to take the class that has you reading this book probably means you are more informed and participatory, on average, as compared to your fellow students.

In general, open, active parent–child communication and deliberative, civically oriented school activities help to foster the internal motivations and outward skills necessary for engaging in effective political information acquisition, expression, and exchange—that is, communication competence. Discussions about controversial issues with family members are foundational to both students' participation in deliberative discussion in the classroom and interpersonal political talk about politics with family and friends.

Communication and Civic Competence in the Twenty-First Century

While these socialization patterns were shown to play an important role in developing communication competence and civic competence in the 1990s, times have changed. The contemporary media ecology affords people the opportunity to deeply engage in the news that affirms their worldview, use news that challenges their opinions, or choose to avoid civic news altogether. Recent research led by Stephanie Edgerly finds that more than 50 percent of 12-to-17-year-olds tend to ignore news content, whether it is from traditional news sources, both online or offline.[42] They also tend to eschew news available on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Not surprisingly, those who avoid the news are less interested in politics and participate less in political activities. If these young people

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do not find a route into communication and civic competence as they age, the likelihood diminishes that a robust democratic society will persist.

On the other hand, about half of young citizens are really into the news. Edgerly and her colleagues found that they clustered into three distinct groups. Some youths prefer traditional news—television, print, and online news. Individuals who prefer these sources tend to be younger and are more likely to be interested in politics. Other teens use a great deal of curated news that caters to their particular interests. Other young people are news omnivores; they seek out news across all kinds of platforms. News omnivores tend to be the most participatory.

Clearly, the news young people use is critically important to what they know, what they think, and how they participate in democratic life. The contemporary media ecology affords a variety of new ways to participate that weren't available when the Shah study was conducted. Now, news organizations and civic groups can get immediate feedback from their audiences on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

This ability has fundamentally changed elements of how political communication operates in democratic societies. Political communication scholar Chris Wells argues that organizations using digital media to communicate with young citizens about civic action face interesting challenges about how to encourage participation.[43] Recall that millennials and Generation Z generally do not like hierarchies. Wells argues that hierarchical modes of communication from civic organizations (such as using Facebook to tell people how they can participate) are communication strategies that can leave young people feeling disaffected and disconnected. Movements like Occupy Wall Street, which began in 2011, used digital technologies to self-organize, seek advice from would-be participants, share information, and deliberate. Many young people were drawn to engage in courageous civic behavior via modern communication platforms.

Figure 1.2 reveals generational differences in the communication tools used by different generations. Data from the Pew Research Center showed that more than nine out of ten millennials (92 percent) own smartphones, compared with 85 percent of Gen Xers (aged 40 to 55), 67 percent of baby boomers (aged 56 to 74), and 30 percent of the Silent Generation (75 and older). Not surprisingly, having the tools of the modern communication ecology correlates with using the platforms of twenty-first-century communication. A large majority of millennials (85 percent) say they use social media. Moreover, significantly larger shares of millennials use relatively newer platforms such as Instagram (52 percent) and Snapchat (47 percent) than older generations have.

That same Pew study found that no matter the generation, the vast majority of those who go online think the internet has been good for them. *However,* younger internet users are a bit more likely than older Americans who use internet to say the internet has had a positive impact on society

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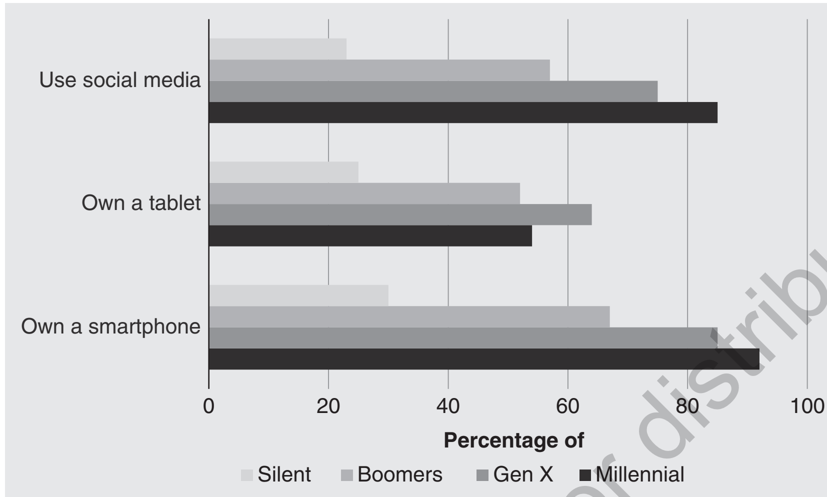
Figure 1.2 Generational Use of Contemporary Communication Tools



Source: Pew Research Center: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/02/millennials-stand-out-for-their-technology-use-but-older-generations-also-embrace-digital-life/

as a whole: 73 percent of online millennials say that the internet has been mostly a good thing for society, compared with 63 percent of users, still a solid majority, in the Silent Generation.

The "How Can I Help?" feature in each chapter engages in a lively Q&A with a citizen engaging in practical communication research. Political operatives like Brian Reisinger, who helped Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson shock the political world by winning reelection in 2016 despite being behind in all of the polls from the summer to Election Day, will talk about political communication and the practice of running political campaigns in the twenty-first century. Katie Harbath, who works for social media giant Facebook, will discuss how political leaders are learning to use contemporary social platforms to communicate with voters. This feature is designed to give you an idea of the many different careers for which a deep understanding of political communication will be professionally valuable.

From Research to Real Life

The modern communication ecology is huge, unwieldy, immediate, cloistered, cross-cutting, and polarized. People can select from a near-infinite number of news sources that reinforce their own views, while people who

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do not live and breathe politics can easily avoid politics altogether on their phone, laptop, and television. Politicians keep trying to find new ways to influence us to change our attitudes and participate. Our own partisan glasses color what we know, what we do, and who we trust. This book is designed to help you use both cutting-edge research and practical professional skills to skillfully navigate the information environment so that you can be as productive a citizen as possible.

One way in which this book can be useful to you is as an inoculation of sorts. If you become more acutely aware of how various communication effects operate, you might be more likely to use your awareness of potential effects to potentially mitigate the substantive outcomes of them. Additionally, building a broad base of knowledge about mass communication effects can help you to more effectively and efficiently communicate with others to advance your own social and political goals. Finally, simply becoming more aware of what broad claims people often make about *the media* are true and which are empirically suspect or outright false should help you become a more critical, careful, and useful citizen.

DIY Research

Regina Lawrence, University of Oregon

Dunaway, J., & Lawrence, R. (2015). What predicts the game frame? Media ownership, electoral context, and campaign news. *Political Communication, 32*(1), 43–60.

Regina Lawrence is among the most respected and productive scholars of political communication in the world. She is the associate dean of the School of Journalism and Communication Portland and the director of the Agora Journalism Center. Her research examines political communication, civic engagement, gender and politics, and the role played by the news media in public discourse about politics and policy. She has won the Doris A. Graber Outstanding Book Award from the American Political Science Association's Political Communication section and has served as chair of that same section. She has also been a research fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Her article, coauthored with Johanna Dunaway, examines the factors that predict the news media's use of the *game frame*—a style of news coverage that treats politics as a game, eschewing more substantive coverage.

(*Continued*)

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(Continued)

Wagner and Perryman: Your coauthored article about what predicts the game frame finds that "news organizations' choices to rely heavily on game-frame election stories are dependent on both news-making and political contexts." What do you mean by that and how does that affect how readers of this book should evaluate game frame news coverage?

Lawrence: One point Johanna and I wanted to make with that study was that game-framed coverage is "over-determined": There are many factors that lead news outlets to produce so much game-framed coverage of elections. News-making factors include the degree of competition an outlet is facing (in highly competitive news markets, there may be more perceived pressure to produce "entertaining," poll-driven coverage) and budgets (in newsrooms with shrinking staff and budgets, game-framed coverage is relatively cheap and easy to produce compared with analysis of candidates' policy ideas). Political factors include the competitiveness of electoral contests: Highly competitive races (note how we all use that term "races"!) readily lend themselves to lots of coverage of who's pulling ahead and falling behind.

The purpose of focusing our research on game framing is to remind us all that this is not the only form of election coverage that's possible—it's often just what's easiest and cheapest to produce.

Wagner and Perryman: What are the next big things for scholars and citizens to be mindful of, when it comes to political communication in democratic societies? What will the Agora Journalism Center be doing to apply these lessons in ways that help us civically engage in the future?

Lawrence: I think the 800-pound gorilla in the room is the evolution of the "post-truth" era. So many of the assumptions that grounded political communication scholarship for decades don't hold anymore. We can't assume, for example, that presidents seek to communicate via the news media in order to bolster their policy agendas and their own legitimacy: Today we have a president who plays jujitsu with the media to further his own particular brand, and seems almost completely uninterested in winning over a solid majority of voters to support his policy agenda. And in a larger sense, the whole notion of truth is under assault. Meanwhile, public trust in the news media has steeply declined and it's not clear how journalism is going to regain the authority and legitimacy it once enjoyed. The contribution I hope Agora's work can make is to help solve that puzzle: How can we reboot the relationship between journalism and the public, not by exhorting the public to simply trust the media, but by fundamentally reforming how journalists go about their work?

Wagner and Perryman: For students reading this book who have an interest in conducting research in political communication, what is your advice for how they should get started?

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Lawrence: Start with something that intrigues you, something that puzzles you, something that bugs you about the way we think and talk about politics. Lots of good research begins with intuition.

Wagner and Perryman: Over the course of your career, what are some of the behaviors that you have noticed that the best students do when learning about political communication and applying the lessons from those classes over the course of their lives?

Lawrence: Curiosity is important, of course. If you don't remain curious, you'll get bored with your research—and your research will become boring! Resisting the temptation to give up when it gets tough is another important quality in successful students. Empirical research rarely works out as neatly as we imagine, and every project will present unanticipated challenges. Being a ravenous reader and learner is also important: The best students, in my experience, keep training themselves over the course of their careers and are constantly improving their work by incorporating new ideas. Finally, in my opinion, keeping an eye on the practical impact of your work can be really important, to keep your research grounded, and to hopefully make some difference in the world.

Wagner and Perryman: How do you think about the ways in which your scholarship is connected to the mission and activities of the Agora Journalism Center?

Lawrence: The opportunity to lead the Agora Journalism Center was very attractive to me precisely because it offered a way to do work that might make a difference in the world. Building a research agenda at the same time as you are trying to learn about and develop new approaches to doing journalism can be tough, however. Practitioners and scholars often don't speak the same language, so there's a lot of translation required. And scholarly journals aren't always interested in research that is grounded in practice.

With that said, my long-term goal is to connect the threads in my own academic career in ways that matter. I've always been deeply interested in the power that news has to shape the public's perceptions of the world and to either amplify or marginalize different societal voices. I've moved from looking at news purely from the outside, as an academic, to gaining much more insight on how journalists go about doing their everyday work. I've moved from focusing on national politics to looking at how local journalists cover their communities. And I now have the opportunity to help learn from and shape the work of journalists around the country who are trying to fundamentally change daily news practices. The common thread is the question of power: The power to speak, to be heard, and to represent.

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How Can I Help?

Michael W. Wagner, University of Wisconsin-Madison

A former journalist and congressional campaign press secretary, Wagner (one of the authors of this text) is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A winner of five teaching awards and two awards for public outreach, Wagner regularly gives dozens of talks a year to community organizations and in public forums where he discusses his research examining politics and the media. Wagner also edits the Forum in *Political Communication,* which aims to connect scholarly research to wider audiences and is an expert source for hundreds of political journalists around the globe. He is the founding director of the Center for Communication and Civic Renewal at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Funded by the Knight Foundation, the center seeks to improve understanding of how communication can improve democracy at the local and state levels.

Perryman: So, why are we interviewing you? Not getting enough say as a coauthor of this book?

Wagner: Ha! We thought it was important for our readers to know about the value of taking the knowledge learned in these pages, and from other relevant experiences and studies, and bringing them back to the community. Where I work, and where you earned your PhD, we believe deeply in something called the Wisconsin Idea: the notion that what is learned within the confines of the university should be spread throughout the community, state, nation, and world in order to help improve society. Living that idea is why I give a few dozen public talks—usually fifteen to twenty in Wisconsin and another ten to fifteen around the world—each year. It is also why I try to be responsive to reporters seeking expert sources on issues related to American politics and the news media. So, we want students to know that a career path in the academy can be an opportunity to share what you know with broad audiences. We also want students who go on to other careers to consider that giving back your knowledge and expertise to others is a great way to spend some of your time.

Perryman: What have you learned about the value of sharing research, like the research students will read in this book, with community audiences?

Wagner: I've learned that even in a deeply polarized country, there are lots of people clamoring to not only make sense of it all but seeking to figure out what they can do to help make things a little bit better. Coming together on

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a rainy weeknight to talk about how well our republican democracy works and what we can do about it can be inspiring . . . and it always teaches me something that I didn't know before. I bring what I learn back to my classrooms and my own research.

Perryman: Is there any evidence that giving these sorts of talks, where you share research findings about politics and the media, has any effect on the people who come to listen and share their own ideas with you in the Q&A?

Wagner: Yes. For the past few years, when I give a public talk, I also give some of the attendees a survey about their experience. Of course, people who come to talk politics and the media on a weeknight are already highly likely to be voters, so these talks don't seem to have any effect on voter turnout. However, people who come to the talks report a greater willingness to talk to people who hold different ideas than they do about politics, volunteer in their communities, and share their own opinions about politics on social media.

Perryman: What should readers of this book take away from what you have learned while giving talks across the country and the world?

Wagner: First, I think students reading this book should think about how their own life path might carve out time to find a way to take what they learn in this book to pay that knowledge forward. Helping your friends be more critical consumers of information, more tolerant deliberators, and more engaged citizens has a real value that pays off over and over again. Helping people think about what kind of country they want to live in is a worthwhile thing to do. Second, I hope readers of this book come to see the value of talking with those who are different than you. The goal of conversations with people who are different than you should not always be to persuade them to your way of thinking. Rather, talking with others is a chance to share *and* to listen. We learn a lot when we listen. Whenever I give a talk, I insist on having the same amount of time for a conversation with the audience as there is for my talk itself. The real learning, in my view, happens in the exchange of ideas, not in the preaching from one side to another.

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