

Conversation is the soul of democracy: Expression effects, communication mediation, and digital media

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Abstract

A sizable body of empirical evidence indicates political conversation—both face-to-face and online—drives participatory engagement. Digital, social, and mobile media provide new avenues and tools for political talk, with affordances that may be particularly conducive to expression effects—that is, the impact of message production on the sender. This essay contends that an emphasis on deliberative democracy has limited attention to the psychological implications of political expression and creative production via information technologies and digital media.

Keywords

Democracy, digital media, media effects

Conversation is the soul of democracy. Contrary to Schudson (1997), a now sizable body of empirical evidence indicates that spontaneous yet sometimes uncivil and ungoverned conversation—both face-to-face and online—is critical to sustaining democratic life or at least participatory engagement. Political conversations and appeals among friends and family, over social media, and via mobile technologies contribute to civic volunteerism and political participation (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah et al., 2007; Valenzuela, 2013). Political expression matters, although maybe not only for the reasons that democratic theorists would lead us to expect.

Casual political exchanges over email and social media are not the high-minded modes of public deliberation that many laud as essential for civic society (Fishkin, 2009; Habermas, 2006). They are not always grounded in facts, balanced in orientation, or

committed to turn taking and completeness. Nonetheless, evidence continues to accumulate that the Internet provides meaningful discursive opportunities (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). This work shares the view that all political talk, whether casual discussion, serious debate, or formal deliberation, “provides the opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern” (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004, p. 319).

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In this essay, I consider another possibility for why political talk, especially online expression about politics, is so consequential: the impact of message composition, posting, and subsequent interaction on the sender (Pennebaker, 1997). That is, rather than simply conceiving of the value of political talk through the lens of deliberative theory and interpersonal ties, I argue for a more psychological and intrapersonal account of what happens to people when they express themselves. This perspective recognizes, as Pingree (2007) asserts, “that the act of expression might change the message sender, that expressed ideas often do not exist intact, if at all, in the sender’s mind prior to expression” (p. 439). Looking beyond the idea that communication effects—and deliberative outcomes—result from information exposure, reception message, and selective consumption (i.e. a reception-effects paradigm), I contend that the mental processes underlying the composition of language, the commitment associated with articulating ideas and creating content, and the anticipation of accountability and future interactions also shape participatory engagement and merit greater attention than the emphasis on deliberative democracy as a theoretical framework has fostered.

Communicative democracy and expression effects

In contrast with the reasoned formalism of Rawls (1993) and the discursive proceduralism of Benhabib (1996), the conception of communicative democracy advanced by Young (1996) considers a wider range of discursive interactions as politically meaningful, including greetings, rhetoric, and storytelling (see Enslin, Pendlebury, & Tjiattas, 2001). In this respect, her approach reflects the breadth of Dewey’s (1984/1927), concern with “debate, discussion, and persuasion,” not only deliberation. She also recognizes how the act of composition and expression, whether generating a thoughtful argument or sharing an impassioned story, transforms the sender. As Young (1996) writes, “in this process, people’s own initial preferences are transformed from subjective to objective claims and the content of these preferences must

also change to make them publically speakable” (p. 125). Putting ideas into words is psychologically demanding and mentally clarifying.

In contrast to passive modes of knowledge gain through the reception of facts and figures, the active engagement with ideas implicated in language composition and expression lies at the core of Dewey’s (1938/1997) pragmatic approach to education and can be traced to Seneca’s dictum *Docendo discimus* (“by teaching, we learn”). Even anticipation of accountability for one’s views yields cognitive benefits (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), as does reflection on prior media use and discussion (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). And, of course, expressive acts on social media predict participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014).

But why should expression matter? Freud’s psychoanalytic approach, centering on a “talking cure,” emphasized the idea of personal insight through self-expression. The act of writing about traumatic experience has also been found to result in improvements in physical and emotional health (Pennebaker, 1997). The benefits appear to be a function of translating experiences into linguistic expression. Writing about emotional experience for 15–30 minutes per day for 3–5 days had tangible health benefits (i.e. immune function, antibody response, and autonomic activities) and improvements in mood and well-being compared to those who did not write about emotional experiences. This *writing paradigm* is quite powerful.

Computer-aided content analysis of the writing produced during these interventions found certain linguistic factors consistently predict positive effects. Beyond the use of positive and negative emotion words, an increase in both causal and insight words over the course of writing was linked with improved health outcomes (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Furthermore, the degree to which individuals form narratives, as opposed to just listing ideas, also explained beneficial outcomes (Smyth, True, & Souto, 2001). These findings have substantial implications for the effects of expression on civic and political engagement, for making causal connections, generating novel insights, and telling stories are all features of digital, social, and mobile media messaging and posting about politics.

Communication mediation and digital media

According to Dahlgren (2005), “democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other” (p. 149). Yet, political talk often begins with citizens’ sense making and interpretation of media content, which provides the basis for civic interactions, whether in dyads or large groups (Katz, 2006; Tarde, 1898/1969). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) often combine opportunities to gather and reflect on information with the prospect of social interaction and personal expression. However, as Muhlberger (2005) observes, given that use of the Internet is inherently driven by interaction, such discursive engagement is ultimately a function of individual motivation.

The communication mediation model consolidates motivation, information, and expression in a single framework explaining civic engagement. It details the process by which news consumption and political discussion, whether offline or online, channel dispositional influences on civic and political participation (Shah et al., 2005). Of course, both news consumption and political conversation can spur reflection about public affairs, indicating the importance of mental processing for understanding influence processes (Eveland et al., 2003). In summarizing and advancing this work, Shah et al. (2007) write,

The impact of messages may involve a range of processes (e.g., exposure, attention, priming, cueing, framing) and come from various sources (typically media such as newspapers, TV, and the Web, but also from conversation with peers and opinion leaders). These stimuli [may then foster] reflection on media content (Mutz, 2006), anticipation of conversation (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005), composition of ideas for expression (Pingree, 2007), or integration and understanding (McLeod et al., 2001).

This framework complicates the question of reception and expression, treating news and talk as sources of information and the triggers for reflection about existing knowledge, anticipation of future interactions, and composition and creation of communications. As such, communication mediation

provides an important corrective to the reception-effects paradigm, which mainly understands communication influence in terms of message consumption, not production.

There is strong support for this approach, which places expression, both face-to-face and online, at the center of democratic engagement, but recognizes that observing conversation does not have the same impact of speaking out. Indeed, research by Price, Nir, and Cappella (2006) finds that the influence of hearing others’ arguments on post-discussion opinion is mediated by one’s own expression.

Political messaging and social media

Whether studying opinion formation, knowledge gain, or political participation, communication phenomena such as news consumption, political conversation, and media reflection are increasingly treated as essential antecedents. Grounded in advancements of the communication mediation model, recent work proposes that informational media use does not directly influence citizen learning and participatory behaviors, but rather works through political discussion, which also channels the effects of background dispositions and orientations (Shah et al., 2007; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). This work sees political conversation as a key conduit to engaged citizenship, without which participation would be curtailed.

It is therefore critical to understand the role of conversation, whether interpersonal or computer-mediated. Much has been written about face-to-face political talk (see Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), and a growing body of research is attending to various forms of digital messaging. Such online political talk allows sharing perspectives and concerns at any time with a large, geographically dispersed audience. Digital affordances also permit self-paced, asynchronous communications, which may promote deeper reflection than the immediacy of face-to-face interactions. Cho et al. (2009, p. 71) offers another reason political messaging may be such a powerful conduit to civic engagement:

Such messaging is also largely textual rather than verbal, and as such may produce stronger compositional effects associated with preparation for communication (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999) and writing about one's own perspectives (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Social media may demand even deeper information processing and reasoning than other digital media forms. There is a more complex and multifaceted audience to consider before posting to social networking sites (SNS). The composition of the post often involves the generation of verbal and visual elements and frequently contains links to associated content. Insightful disclosure and narrative immersion are usual features of user-generated content (UGC), and anticipation of interaction is expected. In one recent study of protest behavior, the use of social media for opinion expression was found to be the key mediator of effects onto participatory engagement, even more important than the use of social media explicitly for activism (i.e. joining causes on SNS) (Valenzuela, 2013).

These same relationships have been observed among adolescents. Research examining the processes of youth socialization in active citizenship has found strong support for both a general communication mediation framework (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013) and political SNS use (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014) for civic and political engagement among Millennials. Notably, for this generational group, political expression via digital channels far outpaces face-to-face talk as a driver of engaged citizenship, explaining both the level of and growth in participation.

UGC and creative production

Younger generational groups are also the most facile with UGC and creative production, forms of expression that demand more of the message producer. UGC can take many forms, ranging from commenting, generating text posts to uploading multimedia productions (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). Again, this implies active engagement with the content, well beyond passive reception. In fact, Chadwick and Howard (2009) define UGC in terms of individuals'

ability to interact with the content. Along these same lines, Leung (2009) asserts that "psychological empowerment can be enhanced by one's degree of content generation online" (p. 1327). In this respect, all UGC has the potential to influence the generator parallel to expression effects on senders.

Of particular interest among forms of UGC is creative production, which Ekström and Östman (2015) define in contrast to the informational and interactive uses of digital media. Informational uses encompass searching, selecting, and processing information, whereas interactive uses include the range of tools designed to support interpersonal communication. Creative production differs from these two in its focus on rich content generation. What was once restricted to fan cultures, performance artists, and political activists (Garlough, 2013; Jenkins, 1992), the active participation in the production of content is now available to all with access to basic digital tools on laptops, tablets, and smartphones. From the more mundane aspects of blogging and video posting to high-end multimedia productions and web publishing, digital media provide affordance that make creative production widely available (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008).

Ekström and Östman (2015), extending work on the communication mediation model, find that informational, interactive, and creative uses of the Internet promote democratic engagement. Their findings, among Swedish adolescents, replicate the major components of the communication mediation framework, with indirect influences of informational media use through face-to-face and online political discussion on political participation. More important, their analysis reveals a strong direct effect of creative forms of Internet use on political participation among adolescents. As they write (Ekström & Östman, 2015), these results are consistent with the view "that the expressive features of online creative production have the potential to encourage youths' participation" (p. 812).

Survey evidence of expression effects among US adults is also quite compelling. Using multi-wave panel data to assess whether politically expressive behaviors on social media explain political participation, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) find that posting personal experiences about politics; sharing

thoughts, photos, or videos; and forwarding content channel the effects of social media news use onto political participation. Observed in concurrent and lagged models, they provide three possible accounts for these relationships: the expectation of future expression, the effort associated with composition, or the strengthened commitment to a publicly posted message. They write,

All three mechanisms ... are potentially influential in the realm of social media, where there is always an audience (and therefore an expectation of expression) for whom messages can be composed and to whom they may easily be released. Indeed, social media may facilitate the process of expression by providing a convenient platform for it. (p. 615)

Unfortunately, survey data, even with panel designs and testing with lagged and change models, do not address the specific mechanisms at play.

Future directions

A reorientation of research toward the psychological implications of political expression—that is, the processes underlying language composition, insightful disclosure, narrative construction, creative production, and communication accountability—is sorely needed. Much of this work should focus on digital media, particularly social and mobile media, which afford ubiquitous access to tools that facilitate political expression and UGC.

Some of this work will need to employ experimental or clinical methods, comparing treatment and control groups to isolate the factors thought to account for expression effect. For example, research should alter the conditions of message composition, accountability for expression, or the features of the expected audience. Building on the *writing paradigm* work pioneered by Pennebaker (1997), communication scholars should test what specific aspects of the process of expression account for the relationships repeatedly observed in survey studies.

This might also require some rethinking of dominant theoretical approaches. As Ekström and Östman (2015) note, expression and creative production are not well integrated into traditional models of media

use and gratification because although this theory acknowledges and advances the view of an active audience with regard to selection and reception, it does not consider expression or production. Likewise, the long-standing dominance of the reception-effects paradigm in communication must allow for work on expression effects, recognizing how message production both reflects underlying traits and indicates active processes.

Researcher must also be open to adopting new methods to study these questions. Recent work on health communication, drawing on Pennebaker's (1997) theoretical insights and methodological innovations, has begun examining message reception and message expression in intact social networks. This work relies on computational social science approaches, with computer-aided content analysis tools used to code every message post produced and consumed within online health support networks (see Han et al., 2011; Namkoong et al., 2010). These coded posts are then linked to server log data to determine who write and read each message. In this way, message reception can be distinguished from message expression. These scholars have found consistent evidence of expression effects that have important implications for civic life. As Pingree (2007) provocatively states,

Expression, not reception, may be the first step toward better citizenship. Its mere expectation can motivate ... elaboration of media messages, and the act of message composition is often much more effective at improving understanding than any act of reception. (p. 447)

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