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Revising the Communication Mediation Model for a New Political Communication Ecology

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A long tradition of research focuses on conversation as a key catalyst for community integration and a focal mediator of media influence on participation. Changes in media systems, political environments, and electoral campaigning demand that these influences, and the communication mediation model, be revised to account for the growing convergence of media and conversation, heightened partisan polarization, and deepening social contentiousness in media politics. We propose a revised communication mediation model that continues to emphasize the centrality of face-to-face and online talk in democratic life, while considering how mediational and self-reflective processes that encourage civic engagement and campaign participation might also erode institutional legitimacy, foster distrust and partisan divergence, disrupting democratic functioning as a consequence of a new communication ecology.

A now well-established research tradition in political communication integrates mass and interpersonal processes, treating conversation as a key catalyst for community integration, a focal mediator of media influence on participation, and an important source of expression effects where message producers influence themselves. Political conversations among friends and family, over social media, and via mobile technologies are thought to work alongside news consumption to encourage civic volunteerism and political participation (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah et al., 2007), with the Internet providing opportunities for dialogue that parallel face-to-face talk in terms of potency on participatory outcomes (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Political talk, from this perspective, can take the form of casual discussion, serious debate, or formal deliberation (Rojas et al., 2005; Shah, 2016), each providing "the opportunity

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for individuals to develop and express views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern" (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004, p. 319).

Yet despite this seemingly broad set of concerns, much of the work integrating mass and interpersonal processes has focused on knowledge and participation, given considerably less attention to the awareness of opposing viewpoints, social tolerance, political trust, confidence in institutions, and democratic legitimacy (cf. McLeod & Shah, 2015; Mutz, 2006). This emphasis on informed engagement can be traced, in part, to Putnam's thesis of the influence of television on civic decline (Putnam, 1995), and the waves of political communication research responding to it. Nonetheless, the lack of attention to tolerance, trust, and legitimacy feels conspicuous in light of changes reshaping media and politics that may be amplifying partisan differences, heightening social cleavages, and contributing to a misinformed electorate. In this article, we argue that any theory concerning communication and civic engagement must also contend with the likelihood that changing patterns of news and talk erode institutional legitimacy and foster social distrust, disrupting democratic functioning in this new communication ecology.

Merging mass and interpersonal communication

Scholars associated with the University of Wisconsin have figured prominently in forging theories concerning the role of media, conversation, and reflection in democratic functioning. Discussion among citizens has been central to work on (a) the co-orientation model (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973), (b) media orientations and communication utility (McLeod & McDonald, 1985), (c) multilevel approaches to mass communication research (Pan & McLeod, 1991), (d) communication and community integration (McLeod et al., 1996; Friedland & McLeod, 1999), (e) the communication mediation framework (McLeod et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2005), (f) the citizen and campaign communication mediation models (Cho et al., 2009), and (g) the theorizing of expression effects, particularly within the context of social media convergence (Cho, Ahmed, Keum, Choi, & Lee, 2016; Pingree, 2007; Shah, 2016). Consistent with Chaffee and Mutz (1988), this work sees mass and interpersonal communication as highly interdependent and complementary.

In recent years, much of this research has tested and advanced the *communication mediation* model, which recognized that political talk often begins with individuals interpreting and making sense of media content. This places conversation in a mediating position between news consumption and civic engagement, theorizing that use of informational media does not directly influence citizen learning and participatory behaviors, but rather works through political discussion (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). The communication mediation model combines motivation, information, and expression in a unified structure. News consumption and political discussion, whether conventional or online, are postulated to channel demographic, dispositional, and contextual influences on civic and political participation (Shah et al., 2005, 2007).

Both news consumption and political conversation also spur reflection about public affairs, highlighting the importance of active processing for media effects, stressing intrapersonal processes alongside the interpersonal (Cho et al., 2009; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003).

Along these same lines, *expression effects* have become another major strand of work on communication and engagement. This theory emphasizes message production over message consumption when conceiving communication effects, recognizing that using media or observing conversation does not have the same impact as composing and sharing one's own perspective (Pingree, 2007). Consistent with Dewey (1938), the passive reception of facts and figures has limited impact compared with the active engagement required for language composition and expression. In addition, opportunities for expression are more prevalent than ever with online messaging, the rise of social media, and the growth of user-generated content (Cho et al., 2016; Shah, 2016; Valkenburg, 2017).

Yet these theories of communication mediation and expression effects are overly focused on cognitive and behavioral effects, while some of the most consequential questions concerning the contemporary media system and political environment center on growing social mistrust, rising intolerance, and declining institutional legitimacy. Marked changes to communication systems, the political climate, and the public's relationship to media and politics have pushed these theories to a crossroads.

An early 21st-century communication ecology

Political communication research of the 20th century largely adopted a model that treated mass-media effects as top-down, unidirectional processes as political elites initiate messages filtered through mass-media channels to influence the public. Though the notion that interpersonal communication had the power to moderate media effects can be traced as far back as the "two-step flow" from Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), media effects researchers in the second half of the century largely discounted or ignored the role of interpersonal communication. Toward the end of the last century, however, spurred in part by the research noted above, scholars of political communication exhibited a renewed interest in the intersection of mass and interpersonal factors and began to provide an important corrective that recognized that media influence is mediated by message flows among the audience, both face-to-face and online.

Nevertheless, the media system has shifted in ways that necessitate a more significant reformulation of the nature of mass communication effects than the late 20th-century work anticipated, demanding greater consideration of interpersonal communication processes. The emergence of the Internet and social media ranks among the most important changes to the communication ecology, influencing patterns of news content, the nature of media effects, and, perhaps most importantly, audience members' ability to generate content. As Chaffee and Metzger (2001, p. 370) noted, the potential of digital media users to become content producers shifts the

focus of mass communication research from a "what media companies are doing *to* people" to "what people are doing *with* the media."

In recent decades, the nature of what constitutes news media has changed in a number of significant ways as well. Reinforcing a trend that was fueled by the transition from print-dominated to broadcast-dominated news in previous decades, online media have further shifted the emphasis of news media from providing information toward providing entertainment and opinions (Graber & Dunaway, 2015). For example, television news media, driven by business demands, have transitioned away from producing traditional TV news packages toward formats featuring live discussion among partisan advocates and experts (Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009).

These trends have resulted in a host of changes regarding media practices and their political implications. The once-clear distinction between mainstream and alternative media that characterized the 20th-century model is now blurred. The news media have largely shifted from serving mass audiences to niche audiences (Stroud, 2011), with their content morphing away from inclusive, consensus-oriented messages to exclusive, conflict-oriented messages (Mutz, 2015). Many news organizations have at least partially abandoned norms of news objectivity, neutrality, and factuality in favor of an emphasis on partisan opinion, ideological expression, and overt conflict (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Where once media could be criticized for failing to adjudicate the truth (Pingree, Brossard, & McLeod, 2014), many news outlets, especially those on the far right and left, now actively construct the "truth" to align with their partisan leanings. The media's power has become decentralized, with political blogs' content and audiences' search patterns helping to set the news agenda (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2016; Lee & Tandoc, 2017).

As the media system and content has evolved, the nature of media audiences has changed as well. In the 20th-century media system, audience members were largely receivers of information, operating within a limited number of choices of news outlets and programs that generally provided a shared common knowledge base. Typically, audience members received messages in isolation from other audience members and their responses were largely passive, with limited opportunities to provide feedback to the content creators. In contrast, current media exposure is more fragmented and selective as audience members actively seek content that fits their motivations and predispositions (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Moreover, media content is more commonly experienced online, with audience members reacting and sharing their interpretation of events in real time, and news media tracking and responding to these dynamics (Wells et al., 2016). Active information seeking, selective exposure, and social sharing—all factors that influence engagement—have replaced simple reception within a limited choice set (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Audience members now create and send messages to one another, solidifying relatively homogeneous social networks (see Neubaum & Krämer, 2017, for review).

While these developments inspire greater audience involvement, they also raise concerns. The growing array and partisan nature of news media, coupled with a greater potential to exercise selectivity, has led audience members to tailor their news

repertoires to messages that are consistent with their own political predispositions (Edgerly, 2015). As the media choices and content exposure of audience members have withdrawn into more ideologically homogeneous niches, divergent realities have emerged. Under the 20th-century media system, audience members from different ideological perspectives shared a basic set of facts that constituted reality, diverging mostly in terms of policy preferences connected to a largely shared reality. This consensus has eroded as media and audiences pursue their own ideologically cloistered versions of reality (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Partisan audiences continue to view balanced coverage as hostile to their views, presuming influence on others (McLeod, Wise, & Perryman, 2017).

While the technologies and the structure of the new media system have afforded audiences greater access to diverse ideas and opinions, consumers of niche news seek like-minded media, muting the potential benefits of the diverse 21st-century media ecology. In some cases, niche news users develop more extreme views as a consequence of engaging with the ideologically oriented information silos they self-select (Stroud, 2011). This is coupled with the fact that recent decades have also seen greater social sorting *and* online sorting, with network homogeneity hastened by social media (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). Though individuals may encounter some diversity of perspectives in online settings, a tendency toward homophily limits exposure to cross-cutting content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). However, the siloed pattern of information exposure may also activate collective action networks (Centola & Macy, 2007). Before the turn of the century, social movements were grounded in the efforts of advocacy organizations coordinating collective action. Now, ideologically homogenous mass communication content, enhanced by like-minded information flows through social media, expedites citizen mobilization, especially among the most partisan individuals. This media landscape affords opportunities for individuals to become more polarized, expressive, and participatory (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

Previously, political elites, who were connected to political parties and followed party-established platforms, disseminated information and set the social agenda (Bennett, 1990). That said, the political parties were relatively cooperative in working toward bipartisan goals. In recent decades, this also has changed (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). The erosion of bipartisanship has devolved into political gridlock. Rather than avoiding online interactions as they once did (Stromer-Galley, 2000), politicians now cultivate and mobilize online followers to amplify their message (Wells et al., 2016). Changes to the media system have inverted the linear Lasswellian model of communication effects, reorienting its components as reciprocal and interconnected. The Internet has enabled greater access to new information sources and encouraged users to create and post their own content, whereas the flow of communication was once top-down and unidirectional, it can no longer be characterized so simply.

Centralized gatekeeping and agenda setting have been replaced by more decentralized and multifaceted processes that shift power away from mass media as the

primary arbitrators of objective reality toward a system governed by partisanship, selective exposure, activism, and conflicting realities, whereas political communication researchers once focused on mainstreaming effects, polarization now holds sway. Expression and participation, once seen as media use consequences, must now be understood as both cause and effect in reciprocal relationships with media. As a result, it is time to rethink core theories and effects processes merging mass and interpersonal communication.

Rethinking communication mediation

These shifts demand a rethinking of the communication mediation model and how expression influences not only the receiver, but also the sender. The modes of media delivery are increasingly less important, as news forms have converged across platforms and presentations. Rather, the ideological diversity of media options that range from the extreme left to the extreme right and the audiences these outlets attract are now the focus of scholarly research. This is matched by a discursive space available due to social sorting and social media that allows for ideological homogeneity to flourish. This is not to say that individuals do not encounter diversity in online settings, but that their draw toward homophily may overwhelm these information flows. As a result, rather than a pathway from news to talk, the relationship is now more clearly reciprocal and interdependent, with social media dynamics shaping news content and interpretation, just as news shapes social media reactions and discussion. Figure 1 presents our revised model.

This revised model still predicts that the interplay of mass and interpersonal communication shapes participation, but now expects that the increasingly partisan political communication ecology amplifies the tendency to participate along ideological lines based on more homophilous environments. This communication ecology contributes to acceptance of ideologically consistent facts, and rejection of those facts that do not comport with a skewed social reality. More troubling, the interplay of mass and interpersonal communication may reduce trust, especially toward social groups and institutions seen as aligned with particular ideological perspectives, with corrosive effects on democratic legitimacy. So while the convergence of mass and interpersonal communication may still drive certain forms of participation, it also likely contributes to political extremity, distrust, and delegitimacy of the overall political system.

The proposed revision reflects an ongoing evolution of the communication mediation framework, yet also suggests a failure of this theoretical account to look beyond participation as a focal outcome. In the initial and subsequent conceptualizations of the model, mediated content was understood as a precursor to intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal conversation, both leading to engagement (Cho et al., 2009). While feedback loops from interpersonal communication to media consumption were accepted (Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009), online social arrangements that link news distribution to social contacts (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) and the development of platforms that allow for citizen engagement with media content in
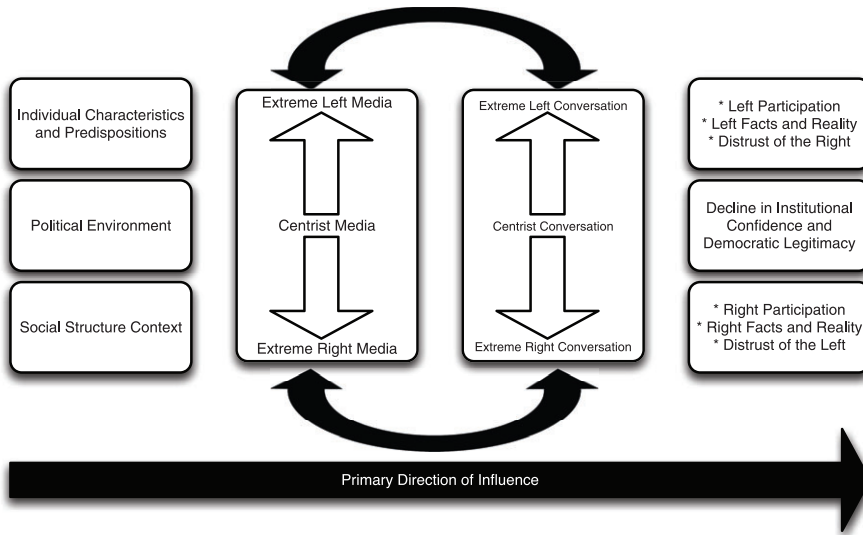
Figure 1 Revised communication mediation model.

the form of commentary and critique (Bruns, 2005) have flattened, even inverted, the presumed relationship between news and talk.

Indeed, some theorists have returned to earlier conceptualizations of the inter-relationship between mass and interpersonal communication (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988; McLeod et al., 1996), treating news and conversation as highly integrated and reciprocal. Work that adopts this view regards information and discussion as occur-ring concurrently (Rojas, Shah, & Friedland, 2011) and advances the perspective that expression effects may recursively reshape the sender of messages—that is, expression effects (Pingree, 2007). Recent theorizing expands this view, arguing that the focus on deliberative outcomes of conversation resulted in limited attention to more basic effects of expression, such as those resulting from the mental elaboration, cognitive integration, and self-monitoring involved in message composition and articulation (Cho et al., 2016; Shah, 2016).

Pursuing this line of reasoning further, we suggest that in the current communica-tion environment, conversation is no longer just influenced by mediated content, nor is it enough to place conversation side-by-side with media consumption, but rather that face-to-face and online conversations may be drivers of news. In this revised model, social media interactions can shape news consumption (Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006) and news production (Gruszczynski & Wagner, 2016; Lee & Tandoc, 2017; Wells et al., 2016) in a networked public sphere. This public sphere, however, may not contribute to tolerance of opposing viewpoints, rationality of discourse, or informed participation (McLeod & Shah, 2015). Indeed, this public sphere can even erode the ability of conversation among citizens to bridge political and social differences (Wells et al., 2017).

The uncoupling of civic discourse from the boundaries that news norms provided has resulted in extreme positions becoming more visible. This discourse polarization does not happen uniformly across political systems. In the United States (Parker & Barreto, 2014) and some European countries (Betz, 1990), it is more prevalent on the political right; in other parts of the world, such as in certain Latin American countries, the political left appears to promote it (Castañeda & Morales, 2009). Notably, the United States has also seen a rise in affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012), with Republicans and Democrats expressing greater dislike for political opponents, their loathing promoted by exposure to political campaigns.

Campaign mediation and democratic divergence

As this research suggests, any reconsideration of the communication mediation model and expression effects also forces some reflection on the role of political campaigns in civic life. Much research has examined the influence of political advertising on democratic citizenship, finding exposure increases campaign knowledge, spurs expression, and encourages turnout (Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein, 2004). Building on this research, the communication mediation model has been extended to include campaign advertising as an exogenous factor (Shah et al., 2007), with news and talk as intermediaries between ad exposure and participatory outcomes. Evidence from the integration of ad placement and content coding into national survey data indicates that the volume of ad exposure leads to news consumption, which in turn encourages face-to-face and computer-mediated talk and civic and political participation.

Yet, this scholarly focus on citizen participation only provides a partial understanding of the broader consequences of campaigns. It fails, for example, to consider that negative ads may also induce cynicism and suspicion (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), and that attack ads activate partisan identity and foster stereotyping of out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2012). Research also shows (a) that campaign negativity suppresses consumption of conventional news, suggesting disengagement from factual information (Shah et al., 2007); (b) that attack advertising encourages homogeneous political talk and elicits anxiety about political opponents (Cho, 2013); and (c) that cumulative ad exposure, as measured as the sum of estimated exposure to ads aired across multiple election cycles, while encouraging political conversation, also contributes to political cynicism and social mistrust (Gotlieb, Scholl, Ridout, Goldstein, & Shah, 2015).

The avoidance of conventional news consumption and erosion of social and political trust is likely amplified by a communication ecology that supports and encourages selective exposure and processing (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). The fragmented online communication environment, where citizens are easily able to seek like-minded sources of information and social interaction, likely intensifies tendencies promoted by negative campaigning. Even if individuals encounter differing viewpoints, most conversation reinforces, rather than challenges, political preferences (Mutz, 2006; cf. Brundidge & Rice, 2009). This hardening of political

predispositions translates into active but highly opinionated participation, closed to differing viewpoints.

Given these effects of political ads, it is likely that the long-term impact of campaign messaging is further segregation and polarization along political lines. That is, these divisive campaign strategies contribute to a rising partisan animus both directly — leading citizens to cast opponents in a suspicious and negative light — and indirectly — heightening selectivity in information seeking and discussion. This partisan divide is more of a concern given the increasing prevalence of attack advertising, partially fueled by media attention and the potential of "going viral" (Fowler, Franz, & Ridout, 2016). Overall, the convergence among mediated campaigns, information sources, and online homophily likely cultivate social divergence and the erosion of democratic norms.

Conclusion

The dynamic we describe may be contributing to a crisis of democratic functioning and social disintegration in the United States and around the world, with a perceived lack of legitimacy of political processes and growing social distrust among vast numbers of citizens. For citizens to participate in and legitimate the civic culture and democratic processes that shape governance, they need to believe the following: that their fellow citizens merit tolerance and trust; that institutions are responsive and treat them with fairness; and that all citizens are seen as having equal social standing. Much of this legitimation occurs in civil society, where citizens encounter one another — through media, via social networks, in community and work groups — and have the opportunity to learn about others, encounter different viewpoints, and resolve disagreements.

Political communication research must move beyond a focus on participatory outcomes to consider a wider range of democratically consequential process variables. We should renew our attention to social trust, including for specific subgroups of citizens aligned with particular political parties (e.g., racial and ethnics groups, religious affiliations, and educational strata). We should also consider institutional confidence, with particular attention to partisan fault lines (e.g., police, universities, judicial system, news media, corporations, and government). We should examine processes related to the acceptance of facts that are ideologically contested on either the political right or left. Another important variable is the perceived legitimacy of democratic outcomes, including faith in the electoral process. Finally, researchers should examine factors related to interpersonal discussion including exposure to cross-cutting talk, tolerance for opposing viewpoints, and the closing off of talk due to political disagreement.

Expanding attention to these areas could also accomplish at least three broad goals. First, it could reinvigorate and reintegrate the study of the normative dimensions of democracy and civil society within the empirical study of communication. Empirical knowledge that focuses exclusively on micro processes, individual behavior, and

social cognition to the exclusion of the social and political contexts—including the mesolevel public discourse and the macrolevel social structures that promote civility and legitimacy—not only fails to wrestle with how things ought to be, but also ignores the multilevel framework that brings mass and interpersonal aspects of communication together (see Pan & McLeod, 1991). The only way to advance the study of democratic and civil communication is to integrate the normative and empirical.

Second, we might broaden our analytical canvass and our methods. We need to expand our understanding of complex communication ecologies—systems that span individuals, their social interactions, and the media and technologies that encompass them—to examine processes and mechanisms that have been taken for granted. Studies of political trust that focus on the outcome of participation should be expanded to understand confidence in major social institutions—governance, science, security authorities, and knowledge—and the reasons for declines in their perceived legitimacy. Trust in fellow citizens is necessary for a civil society, but talk within groups coupled with distrust across groups can divide as well as unite. These dynamics must be examined in context, with studies that consider multilevel communication ecologies.

And finally, as communication pervades the processes of legitimation, civil discourse, trust, and the structure of a networked public sphere, all of these processes should be reintegrated into a larger empirically grounded communicative theory of democracy. Democracy and its challenges must move to the center of the field of communication. It is not that communication, and its efforts to understand the merger of mass and interpersonal processes, should stop attending to participatory outcomes, but it must do so with a clear normative orientation toward what makes democracy work.

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