



New Approaches to Method and Measurement in the Study of Political Communication Effects

Yanna Krupnikov & Kathleen Searles

To cite this article: Yanna Krupnikov & Kathleen Searles (2018): New Approaches to Method and Measurement in the Study of Political Communication Effects, Political Communication, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2018.1526239](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1526239)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2018.1526239>



Published online: 05 Nov 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



New Approaches to Method and Measurement in the Study of Political Communication Effects

YANNA KRUPNIKOV and KATHLEEN SEARLES

KEYWORDS methodology, measurement, political communication

In 2008 Bennett and Iyengar (2008) called on us to rethink the relevance of existing theoretical paradigms amidst a rapidly changing communication environment. Building on this call, Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010) argued that the study of political communication can only grow if scholars constantly assess the state of the field through systematic empirical research. Since this exchange—which initiated a debate that brought self-conscious reflection and more than 1,000 citations—there have been many advancements in the field of political communication. Many of these advancements have attempted—as Bennett and Iyengar (2008) urged—to make sense of political communication’s role in a world where information is more plentiful than ever before. Chief among these advancements have been new methodological approaches. Indeed, political communication scholars have not abandoned old theoretical paradigms but drawn on innovations in design (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013;; Klar & Shmargad, 2017), measures (Anderson, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2016), data sources (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017; Munger, 2016), automation tools (Dietrich & Juelich, 2018; Margetts, Peter, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015), and access to technology (Dunaway, Searles, Sui, & Paul, 2018; Ohme, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2017) to better answer questions during this “new minimal effects era” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Rather than shrink at the difficulties of measuring exposure to media, for example, given endogeneity issues presented by today’s fragmented media audience, researchers have innovated. These types of innovations have changed the landscape of political communication, and this symposium presents a series of new methodological approaches to further build the way the field conducts empirical research. The authors whose work is included in this symposium are, much like the scholars who came before them, seeking to understand the role of media and communication in complex and changing political and social contexts (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lasswell, 1927; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1971). And while much has changed in the decades since Lang and Lang (1953) suggested the affordances of television exert distinct effects on viewers, the role of communication technology in structuring people’s exposure to political information remains relevant (Epstein, 2018; Prior, 2007). The key difference is that contemporary political communication research has now become more focused on the relationship between concepts and methods.

Yanna Krupnikov is an Associate Professor of Political Science, Stony Brook University. Kathleen Searles is an Assistant Professor of Political Communication, Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University.

Address correspondence to Kathleen Searles. E-mail: ksearles@lsu.edu

To argue that method is pivotal is not to deny the importance of theory. Rather, it is to suggest that the inferences we make are often a function of the methods we have chosen. Indeed, our perspective on the role various forms of information and communication strategies play in political and democratic processes depends largely on our ability to capture the (often fleeting) interaction between political messages and individual responses (Brader, 2005). Ultimately, arguments about the relationship between political communication, individual political behavior, and broader political outcomes depend on scholars' confidence in the validity of methods and measures used in the analytic process. This interest in understanding whether communication changes politics motivated our focus on innovation in methods and measures in political communication in this symposium.

Measurement and method have always been pivotal to the study of political communication (see de Vreese & Neijens, 2016, for review). Indeed, many long-running debates in the study of political communication have hinged on questions of methodological approach. Issues of method and measurement, for example, are at the root of both the disagreements about the effect of political advertising on voter turnout (Lau et al., 2007) and the debate about the extent to which exposure to news media affect political positions (Anderson et al., 2016; Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013; Goldman, Mutz, & Dilliplane, 2013; Prior, 2013).

More recently, the context of political communication has grown even more complex. Innovations in information communication technologies and changes in modes of citizen political deliberation (Van Aelst et al., 2017) have exponentially increased the tide of (real and fake) political information that people (Webster, 2005) and newsrooms must tame (Boydston, 2013; Usher, 2016). The proliferation of communication modes is only matched by an increasing diversity in the types of people that communicators are trying to reach and persuade to take on some form of political engagement (Fowler, Ridout, & Franz, 2016; Hendricks & Kaid, 2014;; Ramirez, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2013; Whitten-Woodring, 2016). These changes have produced a need to "rethink what kinds of effects we want to measure and how we might go about measuring them" (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 711). In response, scholars have turned to new and creative methodological approaches that attempt to leverage the changing media environment to track the process by which communication can move political outcomes (e.g., Chadwick, 2017; Karpf, 2016; Van Duyn, 2018; Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016; Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Zelizer, 2010). The purpose of this symposium, then, is to highlight the advances in method and measurement that bring scholars closer to understanding how various types of political communication shape modern political reality. Jointly, this diverse set of articles addresses questions that are at the core of the study of political communication by both presenting novel methods and building upon more traditional approaches.

In their article, Soroka and colleagues introduce physiological measures, arguing that these types of biopolitical measures play a critical role in how we understand individual responses to media stimuli. Addressing how people relate to politics from a different perspective, Guess and colleagues link survey responses to individuals' social media activity during the 2016 election. Their approach addresses longstanding questions of the validity of self-reports in surveys of political interest and engagement. Turning to another long-analyzed question—the effects of media on individual behavior—, Gross and colleagues present a method for implementing multiwave, low-cost field experiments of media effects via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The method they suggest balances

concerns of causality and external validity with feasibility and the growing costs of conducting research.

While conjoint designs have been validated in a number of research contexts, Knudsen and Johannesson bring the method to the study of political communication. They demonstrate how conjoint designs can track people's experiments on media trust and selective media exposure. Similarly, Andersen and colleagues motivate the dynamic process tracing environment (DPTE), a Web-based experimental design platform oft used in voting behavior studies, for the study of complex political communication environments. Turning to the study of text, Muddiman and colleagues focus on context-dependent incivility. The authors present what they term "manually validated and organic dictionaries" and demonstrate their approach by analyzing comments on news articles. Majo-Vazquez and colleagues look at media audiences broadly to study audience fragmentation. They then use their measure of audience structure—which relies on networks—to track media audiences across countries.

This symposium comes at a pivotal time in the study of political communication and it is our goal to bring more scholarly attention to methodological and measurement issues in both political science and communication. At a political moment when questions of power and truths are debated worldwide, we hope this symposium underscores that questions of methods are not merely academic but are of critical importance to understanding how information spreads and when messages persuade. At the heart of this symposium is the belief that, through careful measurement and design, we can better understand the connection between changes in political communication and the political fates of nations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Anderson, K., de Vreese, C., & Albæk, E. (2016). Measuring media diet in a high-choice environment – Testing the list-frequency technique. *Communication Techniques and Measures*, 10(2–3), 81–98. doi:10.1080/19312458.2016.1150973
- Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing minds or changing channels? partisan news in an age of choice*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Bennett, L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? the changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, 58(4), 707–731. doi:10.1111/jcom.2008.58.issue-4
- Boydston, A. E. (2013). *Making the news: Politics, the media, and agenda setting*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Brader, T. (2005). Striking a responsive chord: How political ads motivate and persuade voters by appealing to emotions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(2), 388–405. doi:10.1111/ajps.2005.49.issue-2
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- de Vreese, C. H., & Neijens, P. (2016). Measuring media exposure in a changing communications environment. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 10(2–3), 69–80.
- Dietrich, B. J., & Juelich, C. L. (2018). When presidential candidates voice party issues, does Twitter listen? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 28(2), 208–224. doi:10.1080/17457289.2018.1441847

- Dilliplane, S., Goldman, S., & Mutz, D. (2013). Televised exposure to politics: New measures for a fragmented media environment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 57, 236–248. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00600.x
- Dunaway, J., Searles, K., Sui, M., & Paul, N. (2018). News attention in a mobile era. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(2), 107–124. doi:10.1093/jcmc/zmy004
- Epstein, B. (2018). *The only constant is change: Technology, political communication, and innovation over time*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, E. F., Ridout, T. N., & Franz, M. M. (2016). Political advertising in 2016: The presidential election as outlier? *The Forum, A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics*, 14(4), 445–469.
- Goldman, S., Mutz, D., & Dilliplane, S. (2013). All virtue is relative: A response to prior. *Political Communication*, 30(4), 635–653. doi:10.1080/10584609.2013.819540
- Hendricks, J. A., & Kaid, L. L. (2014). Shaping the new presidential campaign. In J. A. Hendricks & L. L. Kaid (Eds.), *Techno politics in presidential campaigning: New voices, new technologies and new voters* (pp. 3–10). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Holbert, R. L., Garrett, R. K., & Gleason, L. S. (2010). A new era of minimal effects? A response to Bennett and Iyengar. *Journal of Communication*, 60, 15–34. doi:10.1111/jcom.2010.60.issue-1
- Karpf, D. (2016). *Analytic activism: Digital listening and the new political strategy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Klar, S., & Shmargad, Y. (2017). The effect of network structure on preference formation. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(2), 717–721. doi:10.1086/689972
- Lang, K., & Lang, G. E. (1953). The unique perspective of television and its effect: A pilot study. *American Sociological Review*, 18(1), 3–12. doi:10.2307/2087842
- Lasswell, H. D. (1927). The theory of political propaganda. *American Political Science Review*, 21(3), 627–631. doi:10.2307/1945515
- Lau, R. R., Sigelman, L., & Rovner, I. B. (2007). The effects of negative political campaigns: A meta-analytic reassessment. *The Journal of Politics*, 69(4), 1176–1209. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00618.x
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1971). Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action. P. Marris & S. Thornham (dir.), *Media studies: A reader* (2nd ed. pp. 18–30). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Margetts, H., Peter, J., Hale, S., & Yasseri, T. (2015). *Political turbulence: How social media shape collective action*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Muddiman, A., & Stroud, N. J. (2017). News values, cognitive biases, and partisan incivility in comment sections. *Journal of Communication*, 67(4), 586–609. doi:10.1111/jcom.2017.67.issue-4
- Munger, K. (2016). Tweetmet effects on the tweeted: Experimentally reducing racist harassment. *Political Behavior*. doi:10.1007/s11109-016-9373-5
- Ohme, J., de Vreese, C. H., & Albaek, E. (2017). The uncertain first-time voter: Effects of political media exposure on young citizens' formation of vote choice in a digital media environment. *New Media & Society*. doi:10.1177/1461444817745017
- Prior, M. (2007). *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Prior, M. (2013). The challenge of measuring media exposure: Reply to Dilliplane, Goldman, and Mutz. *Political Communication*, 30(4), 620–634. doi:10.1080/10584609.2013.819539
- Ramirez, R. (2005). Giving voice to Latino voters: A field experiment on the effectiveness of a national nonpartisan mobilization effort. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 601, 66–84. doi:10.1177/0002716205278422
- Stromer-Galley, J. (2013). *Presidential campaigning in the internet age*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Usher, N. (2016). *Interactive news: Data, code, and hacker journalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

- Van Aelst, P., Stromback, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., Vreese, C., Matthes, J., ... Stanyer, J. (2017). Political communication in a high-choice media environment: A challenge for democracy? *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 41, 3–27. doi:10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551
- Van Duyn, E. (2018). Hidden democracy: Political dissent in rural America. *Journal of Communication*. doi:10.1093/joc/jqy042
- Vraga, E., Bode, L., & Troller-Renfree, S. (2016). Beyond self-reports: Using eye tracking to measure topic and style differences in attention to social media content. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 10(2–3), 149–164. doi:10.1080/19312458.2016.1150443
- Weeks, B. E., Ardèvol-Abreu, A., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2017). Online influence? Social media use, opinion leadership, and political persuasion. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 29(2), 214–239.
- Webster, J. G. (2005). Beneath the veneer of fragmentation: Television audience polarization in a multichannel world. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 366–382.
- Whitten-Woodring, J. (2016). News about her: The effects of media freedom and internet access on women's rights. *Journal of Human Rights*, 15(3), 383–407. doi:10.1080/14754835.2015.1123087
- Zelizer, B. (2010). *About to die: How news images move the public*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.