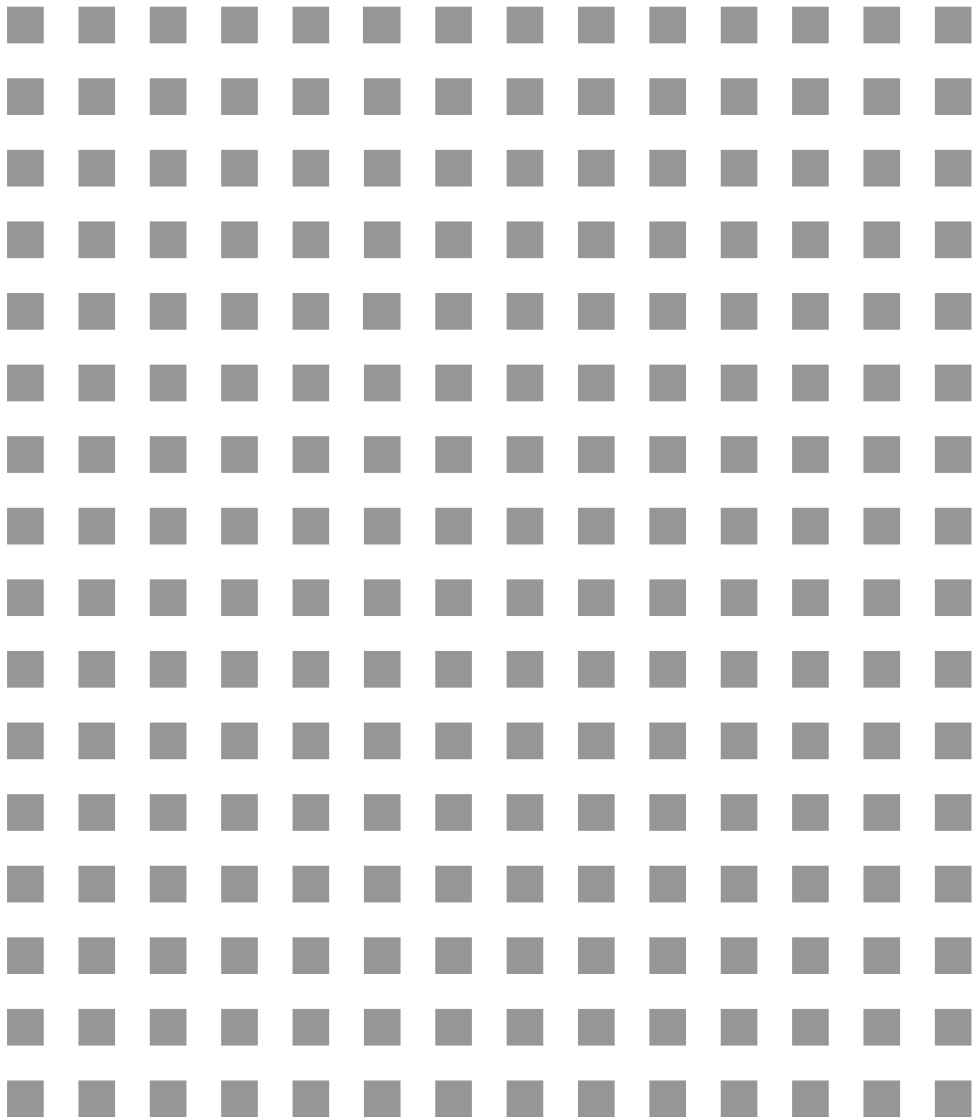




Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies



Guest Editor's introduction: Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies



Barbara Pfetsch

FREE UNIVERSITY IN BERLIN, GERMANY

I

This volume deals with political communication in the era of new technologies. For any scholar in the field, this title easily connects with a vast range of overt questions and research desiderata. For instance, we think about the impact of new technologies on the style, content, and effects of public debate; how traditional modes of campaigning have changed; how political actors and parties use and exploit the potential of Web 2.0 communication; or how the linkage between government and citizen has changed in light of the enormous potential of the interactivity of the Internet. These questions directly link to the obtrusive changes of political communication, which force us to revisit the theories, concepts, and research tools that have been applied under “old” conditions. In light of the former state of the art, we need to reconsider the nature and the consequences of new forms, unprecedented quantities, and innovative qualities of information due to new technologies. We also need to raise the question of whether our methods and research tools are still adequate for empirical investigation of new communication technologies and their impact on political communication. These issues of reflection are fairly obvious.

There is, however, a second unobtrusive dimension in the study of political communication under new technological premises. The vast changes in the mode of communication technology reverberate not only in direct ways with political communication, but also indirectly. New technologies create such a communication environment altogether that this also plays out in areas that at first glance have not been affected by the introduction of new media. However, the claim of the studies in this issue is that nothing in political communication remains the same: Even the development of old media that is seemingly untouched by new media takes a new direction. The investigation of political communication in the era of new technolo-

gies attains a higher complexity, because in addition to the obvious and easily observable impact of new technologies, the indirect effects and consequences that arise from the changes of the “old” media environment and the interaction of both modes of communication must be discerned. Since old and new communication technologies are not homogeneous entities but enormously differentiated and dynamic to start with, we are not discussing trivial simple relationships. Instead, we are confronted with an exponential augmentation of complexity. This reflection is at the core of this volume, which collects studies that tackle different aspects of political communication in the era of new technologies.

II

Two sets of articles were selected for this issue: (i) studies about the impact of new media on the style, content, and the manner of election campaigns, but also on the communication with citizens in local government; (ii) studies about the problems and developments of political communication focusing on old media and their relations with politics. The articles are organized in the sequence of the communication process. The issue starts with studies on the production and processing of political messages by parties and politicians and it ends with investigations on how new communication technologies impact on citizens.

The first and the second article shed light on how politicians and parties in old and new democracies use new media options for their campaigns. The implementation of Web 2.0 solutions as well as the application of regular websites is nicely demonstrated for Sweden and Hungary. Jakob Svensson in his qualitative study “Nina on the Net” accompanies a politician on the campaign trail and observes and registers in detail how social networking sites are integrated in campaign communication and for what purposes. Interestingly enough, the study demonstrates convincingly that Web 2.0 applications do not cater to the need for information, nor comment on campaign issues or link up with voters. Instead, the deeper meaning of these forms of communication refers to symbolic politics, namely in negotiating a politician’s political identity within his or her own party and in the online community that follows the candidate. Another feature of the use of new media in election campaigns is nicely depicted by Norbert Merkovity of Hungary, where the parties have changed their approach over time: they reduced the information content of the websites in favor of symbolic functions such as ideological community building and material functions such as fundraising. Party websites in Hungary have become money-generating machines and platforms to recruit activists for the campaign. The research of Svensson and Merkovity contradict earlier naïve hopes that the parties’ use of internet communication in campaigning would contribute to more, better, and faster information about candidates’ profiles and their political options.

The studies in the issue also describe a broad tendency of professionalization and political marketing among Central European parties. This has been apparent

not only in the application of online communication in campaigns but also in other strategic areas such as political consulting. Bartłomiej Biskup demonstrates in his analysis that in the new democracies such as in Poland we observe a tendency that political consulting has more in common with the American approach than with the Western European model. If he is right in his prognosis, the parties in new democracies in their development of political communication leave out the period of modern communication that Western European parties have gone through over many years.

On the supply side of political communication we see a clear tendency of professionalizing the tools and strategies of communication. All channels of old and new media have been used for political marketing and adapted to the needs of political publicity. On the demand side of these processes, however, there seems to be less enthusiasm about the new channels and new modes of communication. The studies that are devoted to the electorate and public opinion demonstrate strikingly that citizens are rather reluctant to fall into the parties' "communication trap" easily. For instance, the study of Annika Bergström on the Swedish electorate's use of the web demonstrates impressively that internet users are not at all keen to associate themselves with politicians via Web 2.0 applications. It seems that the Web 2.0 users are less interested in getting involved with politics and politicians. Even in social media people still do expect information from parties and candidates.

If we seek an explanation for the discrepancy between the supply side of political communication and the expectations of citizens, we might follow Robert Szwed's argument that there is no shared understanding of actors about the most basic categories of political communication. Instead, they are subject to contradictory interpretations and depend on the strategic position of actors. For Poland, Robert Szwed's study about the construction of public opinion shows impressively that different stakeholders of politics have different notions of the meaning of public opinion and different perceptions of who is to represent the will of the people. From this study it becomes obvious that political communication does not rest on a shared common understanding about what democracy and public opinion are about. It is alarming that lay people in particular hold rather disillusioned views about politics and governance. While the average citizen seems to believe that politics is a spectacle of the elite to gain political power, the politicians themselves seem to believe that they know about public preferences by observing surveys and polls. It also says much about the state of political communication that disenchanted journalists stand by and observe the mutual misconceptions.

The disillusionment with politics does have its downside when it comes to political media reality. Here the prevalence of television as a source of political information comes into play. The study of Dorota Piontek about news programs on Polish television presents a rather sobering picture about the portrayal of politics in the most important of the "old" media. In fact, media reality has been subject to increasing tabloidization. The research finds evidence for the predominance of per-

sonal conflict, fragmentation, decontextualization, overdramatization, and emphasis on emotions in television programs. These features of the news content are predominant in commercial channels, but they are also visible in coverage of public stations. Polish news programs portray politics as the business of a closed power circle in Warsaw, which is far away from the understanding and the circumstances of everyday citizens and their everyday lives.

Both studies on Poland point to important undercurrents of political communication that might be paradigmatic of young democracies in Eastern Europe. An instant conclusion from this research seems to be that post-communist political communication regimes by no means take the form of Western European party democracies, but rather resemble the American model of professional political marketing. This insight comes as no surprise, as neither a fully-fledged democratic political culture nor a democratic journalism culture has had the chance to grow. The tradition of political surveillance through the media and public spheres has not developed for many reasons, neither in the old nor in the new media environment. The character of political information in the media instead has been the light fare of tabloid news while leaving citizens behind in their belief that politicians are engaged in their selfish interests and internal power games.

Only one study in this issue of the *Central European Journal of Communication* departs from the generally rather pessimistic picture about contemporary political communication. It shows that the new media environment does have a profound and also positive impact, which plays out on the local level of politics. In a study that compares Polish and Norwegian cities, Ilona Biernacka-Ligieźa shows that digital services facilitate the flow of information and communication between local administration and citizens. The study observes the rapid growth of these services; however, ICT technology is used for information concerning administrative regulations. While technology can be seen as a huge improvement for the observation of what is going on in the local community, its vast potential for political participation and political debate is left unexploited. Interestingly enough, the ICT governance is not linked in either of the two countries in finding information about local political parties, which are not visible on the local sites. But while Norwegians are supplied with this kind of information through their local newspaper, in Poland, people do not seem to be interested in this information at all. With respect to the future of political communication in the era of new technologies, we can conclude that there is still enormous potential for communication and political debate, which has not nearly been touched upon enough by political actors.

III

The studies in this issue support the assumption that the high hopes of a new stage of political communication and more democracy through new means of communication have not yet come true. This is particularly obvious as regards campaign

communication, an area in which high expectations were fuelled after the successful Obama campaign. Even though the technology has been available in Europe, there seem to be breaking forces that curb the speed and the effects of new technologies. It seems that in European democracies — and even more so in the post-communist countries — the new media intensifies and speeds up the already existing developments of contemporary political communication for better or worse. Eventually, we may not expect that a new media environment relieves us from the pathologies of political communication that prevailed in the era of “old” technologies. Instead, new technologies create an environment of political communication that aggravates the existing problems and complexities. Of course, this conclusion has been rough and it must remain preliminary, since the few studies in this issue do not provide enough detail and evidence for such a far-reaching perspective. However, the research marks the beginning of an empirical inquiry into the state and the problems of current political communication in a period when old and new media technologies provide for new conditions of the interaction of citizens and politics.

Another conclusion of the work that has been collected here is that we need to establish whether the findings that relate to specific countries are typical and representative beyond the single case and country. Therefore, comparative research is needed in order to discern general patterns and directions of political communication under the condition of new media from national idiosyncrasies. Only comparative studies can produce evidence that the tendencies and trends that we observed are systematically linked to the advent of new means of communication. The articles that have been chosen for inclusion in this issue already indicate the dimensions of comparative work that is necessary in the future: In addition to comparing countries, new media environments must be compared with old media environments, past developments should be contrasted with current tendencies, and old democracies need to be distinguished from new democracies.

Finally, one of the problems of the studies of this issue is that they remain for the most part descriptive. Thus, most of the researchers have so far not taken the chance to dig deeper into their material and seek answers and explanations for the phenomenon of political communication that they have described. The reasons for these weaknesses lie in deficits in theoretical frameworks and in methodology. One particular problem refers to the level and the rather poor quality of data that has been collected. However, only by succeeding in overcoming these weaknesses and as a consequence implementing more refined theories and methods in our research will we be able to not only describe but explain the general turns that political communication will take in the era of new technologies.

