

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Daron R. Shaw. *Communication in U.S. Elections.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. ix + 254 pp. \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-0068-6; \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-0069-3.

Bartholomew H. Sparrow. *Politics, Discourse, and American Society.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. xi + 268 pp. \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-0070-9; \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-0071-6.

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Published on H-Pol (February, 2003)



If Political Communication Is Misunderstood, Could It Be the Fault of How We Study It?

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The task of reviewing a set of conference papers—particularly one that takes two volumes—is daunting. There are areas where the reviewer must admit his/her ignorance, especially when the conference is designed to feature “young scholars” with “new agendas” on the subject. Still, hopefully one can recognize interesting suggestions for new “agendas” in political communication research. As with this type of conference and books, there is an unevenness to the volumes.

The first volume, *Politics, Discourse, and American Society*, is specifically set as a portion of the conference that will put political communication “in its larger context” (p. 7). I suppose it does that, but at considerable expense to understanding communication in politics. It is by far the weaker of the two books.

The volume begins with a summary of the topics by Sparrow. He begins with the requisite bow to de Tocqueville (the conference was about civic participation and engagement) with little understanding of what he really said. The only reference is to *Democracy in America*, and while it does mention some of de Tocqueville’s shortcomings in overlooking developing industry and its im-

plications, it also overlooks de Tocqueville’s fundamental conservatism and aristocratic feelings about America, as if the author had not bothered to consider his other works and actions. Conservatives will like the chapter and it does summarize the other papers’ main topics, though with an equality of evaluation that is both misleading and indicative of a less-than-stringent understanding of the importance of some of the papers.

The first two papers focus on presidential communications. Beasley argues that popular culture—things such as the television show *West Wing*—show a desire by the population for a view of the presidency that breaks the “contextual constraints” and gives people a chance to see the presidency in a “bigger than life” manner. There is no real data in the piece and it seems uninformed by the papers that come later by Jones and Parry-Giles. The second paper on the presidency by Crocket has many important contributions. Focusing on historical and organizational constraints upon the presidency, it shows in a most fruitful comparison of Eisenhower and Clinton that agendas set by external forces must be acknowledged by a successful president. It puts presidential communication in a modern context, without a concern for rhetorical analysis. This appears a fruitful avenue for additional research.

The next three papers seem to focus, in general, on the ways in which meaning is constructed by both communicators and situational constraints. Edy commends us to pay attention to the importance of history and the “negotiated collective memory” that allows the development of consensus in meaning with two case studies, the Watts riots and the 1968 Democratic Convention. The paper anticipates the kind of challenges to a constructive collective memory that have occurred recently with Roberts’s publication of new materials on the Rosenberg case.[1] Beyond the normal concept of framing, the paper points out the importance of time as a dimension in political communication. Bunger, with an in-depth analysis of several law reviews, shows how the issue of “rights” (both positive and negative) is part of our national discourse. While the choices are admitted as selective, the paper shows some important new areas for research and is an admirable source for scholars seeking to learn how things such as litigation may communicate national identities. I wished for more as I read this chapter.

Lawrence tackles a related issue (though the editors do not package it in that fashion), the construction of national identity by media presentation. Focusing on media reports of the Columbine High School shootings, the author attempts to show how the media constructed that event as a commentary on late twentieth-century American culture. Unfortunately, the author relies on Gans’s description of decisions about what is news.[2] Having worked in the media for over twenty years I can say, unequivocally, that Gans is simply in error! That is not how it works and acceptance of Gans as a fact causes the paper to wander into error. The data show the usual heavy use of official sources by the media and does not answer the author’s concern about event-driven versus institutionally driven news biases. I wish the author had used additional cases to strengthen the case, e.g., Clinton and Lewinsky or Gary Condit. It is clear the data reported supports the multiple interpretations of the events by the media and not the singularity implied. Moreover, the author misstates Newport’s 1999 work reporting on public perception of media portrayals of violence.[3] This third paper did not produce anything “new” as the editors asserted.

Snider’s paper, focusing on the Telecom Act of 1996, asserts that local broadcasters influence information policy. The paper is unconvincing. Local media personnel know little about the activities of their national corporate owners and their lobbying. They are unlikely to report a complex policy story such as the Telecom Act simply because the public neither understands nor cares about

it. There is no probative evidence of the alleged conspiracy by the local media asserted by the author, even with reported interviews of “insiders,” who are never defined clearly. Snider simply sees reporters and producers as more aware than they really are in an age when looks rather than intellect dominate the selection of personnel in local news.

The next two papers—labeled as “Enlarging the Public Sphere”—are two of the most disappointing in the collection. The first, by Lipari, shows a disturbing lack of awareness of survey research. Just because researchers use survey data does not mean they understand the process and its meaning. This paper really enforces that interpretation. Concentrating on a selection of “polls” that use the word “welfare” in questions, the author shows no awareness of research showing that the use of the word creates biased results. This paper appears to be a case of the Drunkard’s Fallacy—a drunk loses his keys in the middle of the block but he looks for them under the light at the corner. The evidence the author uses fits her case because she looked for things that would, but I am not sure it is relevant. The author asserts a survey respondent is “more constrained than witnesses” in court. Again, this is extremely naive at best and certainly inaccurate. The errors result from a reliance on dated material on survey research. The second paper in this section, by Waldman, is stronger, but seems more an ideologically based brief than a scientific research paper. The issue is whether people do or do not talk politics and learn from the communication. With appropriate acknowledgment of Fishman’s “deliberative democracy” project, the author tries to show what that means in practice. The first thing I noted was the omission of acknowledgements of the low information level of citizens such as Delli Carpini and Keeter’s 1996 work or Jamieson’s 2000 comprehensive survey of campaign practices and communications.[4] The paper operates on stereotypes (and ironically the author refers to Lippmann’s classic work showing elitist defenses).[5] However, the data is used both ways—low political talk means nothing because it is not rich enough. On the other hand, it might be important if we look at it in non-survey ways. This paper is naive about much basic social psychology. Of course we need to know more about informal political conversation. Has anyone argued otherwise? Still, without a real model of communication, one is likely to get to that point.

The last three papers all have important insights. Ryfe’s considerations of Carter and Clinton “town meetings” raises the role these play in a cultural image of

how our system “works.” Jones raises an important issue, which could have been helpful to Beasley, by showing that there is a two-way influence from pop culture to political culture. The analysis of two talk shows, *Politically Incorrect* and *This Week with Cokie Roberts and Sam Donaldson*, is important work. It shows, and I must confess a bias here as the target is the eminently ignoble George Will, that the public and alleged elite insiders do not understand the culture in the same way. There is a difference between celebrity (which some politicians acquire under certain conditions) and political operation. Citizens apply different logic to evaluate one, rather than the other. Jones shows this clearly with Clinton’s continued high approval ratings during the Lewinsky scandal, while people such as Roberts, Donaldson, and especially Will simply labeled him as incompetent, immoral, and the end of civilization as we know it. They were wrong because they did not understand that the public sees a separation between the relevant and the sensational. Jones’s paper shows this with fervor. The last paper, by Parry-Giles, is a rehash of the development of “authenticity” by a candidate. The task is to understand how a candidate constructs a “real” image or, maybe better, an image of “reality.” The case study is Hillary Rodham Clinton’s campaign for Senator. While not a new approach, the paper is a good case study.

In sum, this first volume is uneven. If the editor, Rod Hart, is to be believed—and I found no reason to doubt him or his insights—these young scholars have tried some new things. Often, their reach exceeded their grasp. Still, the book has some useful and imaginative new research agendas as promised. It suffers from much of what troubles political communication as a sub-field: there is no real model of what communication is or how it works. As a traditionalist I prefer a work that sets itself against a strong paradigm such as McGuire’s “communication and persuasion matrix” or Roberts’s and Maccoby’s work on mass media effects in the *Handbook of Social Psychology*.^[6]

The second volume of these two conference-centered books begins with a preface by Hart that is a brief and only slightly modified version of that which comes in the first volume. However, this second volume, *Communication in U.S. Elections*, is by far the superior volume. Not only are the papers much more substantive, they also raise the issues of the entire conference more clearly and often with small examples of pilot studies.

Shaw’s first chapter is a very good introduction. It has a decent summary of the history and findings from

voting research, though it omits Miller and Shanks’s important work on generational impacts and is somewhat slight in its treatment of Alvarez’s work.^[6] It contains recent data on the proliferation of media and sources as well as setting out the author’s vision of the new agenda in political communication research.

The next two chapters take a thoughtful look at the role of information in campaigns. Scheufele provides an important look at the role of political discussion in increasing informed voting. While not “a test,” by the author’s admission, it is a provocative illustration. His illustration shows that media, when other variables are controlled, decreases political participation, but inter- and intra-personal communications (the black box) are important. The suggestion of further investigations of the role of political socialization as a basic filter for political communication is very important. Althaus’s chapter is worth the price of the book. Using NES data he shows how the stimulation of fully informed voters changes support for parties, incumbents, and turnout in Congressional elections. His multi-year examinations show the importance of this new path in voting and communication research. The author leaves the reader wanting more, and I suspect he will be forthcoming on this new agenda of research.

Framing comes into the picture in the next few chapters. Shah argues that “ethical framing” is crucial for communication. Using a limited experiment, the author shows the need to research the role of “values” in responses to political communication. Simon adds a brief chapter, with much description but little data, on the value of content analysis via computer that allows spatial representations of framing impacts. The chapter calls for more, but shows innovative thought.

The papers turn back to the issue of information levels with Vavreck’s investigation of the impact of campaigns on lowering voter uncertainty. This paper connects strongly with Althaus’s, though it seems to be unaware of that data. Still, using a very large data set, the research reported shows conclusively that campaigns do affect voter’s certainty and information. One small quibble here: the tables report strong significant levels, but no measures of association. Working backward from the tables it is possible to compute some and they are high—e.g. a lambda (a PRE measure) of +.22—and that strengthens the argument. Indeed, campaign communications do matter and this research calls for a continued examination. Hetherington’s article on trust, cynicism, and policy implications repeats some of his earlier work. How-

ever, he gives a good argument for treating trust as both an outcome and a cause. Parenthetically, some of what he says has changed since the terrorist attack of September 11. While he seems unaware of the cultural components of Americans' lack of trust (e.g. anti-statism, individualism, etc.), he could not have predicted the documented rise in trust in government that has occurred since the September 2001 events or the perceptive summary of trust measures in Moore's 2002 article in *Public Perspective*.^[7] Still, his overview of the issue and the importance of incremental changes in public policy deserve a wide audience.

Larvis's and Valentino's articles both concern the importance of a constructionist view of the media's portrayal of different groups. In the former article it is political parties and in the latter it is racial groupings. Both show that labels are communicated by the media that have important impacts on political communication and decisions. While both articles would benefit from more data, they are good examples of the task of the volume, showing a new and potentially productive research agenda.

The last three articles are all somewhat predictable. Lipinski has a good start at showing the importance of external congressional communications, though more data is needed. Klotz's work on the internet is a good introduction, but needs broader coverage to be anything new. Finally, Richardson's exploration of the relation between political advertisements and popular culture shows, again, the role of "framing," but it seems more an exploratory piece than the promised "new agenda."

In sum, this is a conference-generated volume that does not disappoint. It does lay out some new agenda for research. Hopefully, communication scholars will pay attention to this second volume. It promises some new

paths of research for those who would accept the challenge presented by these young and insightful scholars.

Notes

[1]. Sam Roberts, *The Brother* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[2]. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

[3]. Frank Newport, "Media Portrayals of Violence Seen by Many as Causes of Real-Life Violence," Poll Analysis, *Gallup News Service*, May 10, 1999.

[4]. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Everything You Think You Know About Politics and Why You're Wrong* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[5]. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997; orig. 1922).

[6]. Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996); and R. Michael Alvarez, *Information and Elections* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997).

[7]. David W. Moore, "Just One Question: The Myth and Mythology of Trust in Government," *The Public Perspective* 13 (January/February 2002): pp. 7-11.

[8]. William J. McQuire, "Attitudes and Attitude Change," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, *Special Fields and Applications*, ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, 3rd edition (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 233-346; and Donald F. Roberts and Nathan MacCoby, "Effects of Mass Communication," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, *Special Fields and Applications*, ed. Lindzey and Aronson, pp. 539-658.

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Citation: Brian S. Vargus. Review of Shaw, Daron R., *Communication in U.S. Elections* and Sparrow, Bartholomew H., *Politics, Discourse, and American Society*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

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