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Political communication is concerned with the role of communication within the political process. Consequently the development of new forms of mass media at the turn of the 20th Century foreshadowed significant changes in the study and practice of this phenomenon. This was also the period when there significant growth in adult literacy as well as major expansion of the electoral franchise amongst the most advanced industrial societies. The arrival of (near) universal suffrage alerted political elites to the limitations of their traditional interpersonal forms of address and of the increasing need for them to be able to address a much enlarged, more heterogeneous public. Political communication through different media then became the norm for campaigns that increasing went beyond simply trying to inform or publicise an issue or candidature to seeking to engage and persuade a mass audience.

Pioneering theorists with an interest in political communication, notably Graham Wallas, recognised sometimes emotive imagery would increasingly become prominent in what passed for public debate as competing politicians particularly sought to attract the attention and support of the large numbers of new voters. The resulting forms of address were far removed from the kind of critical rational debate Jurgen Habermas identified as being a central component of a healthy functioning public sphere. The debasement and 're-feudalisation' of the latter took place with the rapid growth of commercially driven forms of communication such as advertising and public relations.

Contemporary public intellectuals active in inter-war politics were among those keen to welcome and explore the potential interplay between mass media and mass democracy. It is then no coincidence that the 1920s saw the publication of important books with major relevance to the development of strategic communication including Charles Higham's on advertising and Walter Lippman's treatise on public opinion which promoted the desirability of elites manufacturing consent. Similar sentiments underpinned Edward Bernays' popularisation of the concept and practice of public relations as a means of influencing mass opinion through the solicitation of favourable coverage from a range of news media outlets with large audiences.

Lippman and his fellow practitioners and theorists of political communication held to patrician notions of essentially benevolent party and media elites managing debate and influencing the popular will. Their complacency was seriously challenged by the destruction of many European democracies during the 1930s. The Nazi takeover, in particular, was conceived of as a response to economic and civil crises but also the result of a concerted campaign that demonstrated the power of mass propaganda. The perceived success of this debauched strategy contributed to a belief in the 'hypodermic needle' model which suggested an influential media co-existed with a largely passive, suggestible audience. The idea of this strong effect was reinforced by other, more discreet and less disturbing incidents such as Orson Welles' notorious 1938 broadcast of War of the Worlds in which he caused panic in the rural Mid-West with his all too vivid radio dramatisation.

The strong effects model encouraged the pioneering work of early political communication scholarship involving Harold Lasswell and his colleagues at the Institute of Propaganda Analysis. Their attempt to develop typologies of the different

kinds of manipulative activity was superseded by Paul Lazarsfeld and others' attempts at researching the relationship between media consumption and voter participation. These and other studies led to the forging of an influential limited effects consensus that argued the primary influence of the media over voters was reinforcement not change.

The inherent difficulties in accounting for the impact or not of different forms of political communication shaped post-war research and led to the flourishing of other debates as to the relationship between politicians, voters and media. Most obviously there were attempts to conceptualise a more sophisticated understanding of how audiences actually read, watched and listened to politics and how they perceived and responded to events and personalities through their exposure to news coverage, campaigns or other messages. Consequently there were moves to identify other less general effects and how different groups of citizens and voters responded to communications and especially those tailored to them by electoral strategists. Some of this work came to the plausible conclusion that those with less formal education, little interest in politics but who were also above average media consumers (especially of television) were more susceptible to being influenced by campaigning.

A discernible trend among researchers towards going beyond the 'voter persuasion paradigm' led to the revisiting of debates begun in earnest by Lippman and others during the inter-war years as to the strategic role and function of political communication in a democracy. Much work was devoted to understanding how media and campaigns attempted to set the agenda or frame issues in a way that was presumed to have an impact on public understanding. Unlike other subjects, these functions were perceived to be important because for many citizens politics was still a remote topic of only periodic interest to them.

Neo-liberalism has had an obvious impact on the public and private sphere if judged by the rise of rapacious consumerism and the significant growth in the size and reach of the marketing industry. Democratic debate has not been immune to these trends and there has been a notable marketisation of political communication apparent in the excessive attention now devoted to electoral advertisers ('image makers'), public relations consultants ('spin doctors') and opinion researchers ('pollsters'). Although each of these actors has long played a role in various campaigns, the growing influence of these 'electoral professionals' towards the end of the 20th Century had a major impact on the organisation of parties, the state and interest groups. It is then no coincidence that the most image aware and marketing conscious creations such as the New Democrats and New Labour were borne of a response to defeats by New Right opponents who pioneered the more integrated use of the communication techniques that they eventually copied. Central to this approach is an excessive focus on a few target voters at the expense of all others which helps resolve the apparent paradox as to why turnouts are falling in spite of the use of the most supposedly professional political communications.

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