

Online Political Communications: A Theoretical Approach

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Over the course of the last few Presidential campaign cycles, the use of the internet has been widely employed as part of each political campaign's communications. The subject of political communications has been examined at great length so far in communications theory, and yet much less is understood on the role of the new medium. Initially heralded as a means to democratize public opinion, the internet has since been portrayed both as a source of misinformation (look no further the emails identifying Barack Obama as a Muslim) and for some an alternative source of obtaining political knowledge than the traditional news media. Indeed as the news media incorporate more citizen journalism and social media into their stories, the source of communication messages is increasingly blurred. It is the interest of this research review to explore how online distribution of political communications serves important agenda-setting and opinion leadership functions, particularly through the role of online news media, as campaigns try to influence public opinion over these new platforms and within the sources that have yet to emerge.

Before studying the spread of political knowledge over the internet, it is important to first understand the theoretical structure behind agenda-setting effects in political communication. Agenda setting describes a process through which those issues which are considered most immediately important in the public to address is created and upheld through a two-step flow of information from the newsmedia and into the public agenda. There exists a strong correlation between the agenda presented through the mass media and the agenda of salient issues in the general public, in that changes in the public policy

agenda as presented in the newsmedia tend to precede changes of individuals' perception of the public agenda (Scheufele).

In some cases one would expect the issues that impact individuals, for example high energy costs, would be part of the public agenda anyway but on a whole the studies around agenda-setting suggests that many issues represent a disproportionate position in the public agenda set in the mass media (McCombs) Agenda-setting starts in the initial step of where public opinion begins, where the mass media introduce an issue (or at least bring attention to it) that is of salience to the public. This salience is transferable as the public agenda changes, in part because agenda-setting theory is based around those considerations made most recent in one's memory. Thusly priming becomes the result of agenda-setting, in which individuals form their perceptions on an issue or candidate based first around the most recent or salient criteria on which to evaluate their voting decisions.

So if in political communications the criteria individuals base their decisions around come from the most recent issues in the media, it should come as little surprise that the news in the mass media figure strongly in their recent memory. But as journalists try to create the news stories they think belong in the public agenda, it is surprising how prominently the incorporating of weblogs, sometimes called blogs, factor into the stories they create. Although many traditional journalists might have reservations about the journalistic integrity of web based citizen journalism exhibited by some bloggers, as journalism teachers try to integrate online innovations in journalism into their curriculum it is becoming

apparent that their students are coming to rely on blogging in their own reporting (Chung). While blogs offer a source on competition to the newsmedia, students of journalism make use of blogs as a means to contextualize, and more importantly to generate stories for their own reports. In their study over 82% of journalists monitor blogs for story ideas and research, and already 63% of professional journalism use these blogs out of habit (Chung). This agenda-setting relationship between blogs and the student journalists who read them creates a future process in which “it is likely that blogs will be discussed in journalism and mass communication programs with increasing direction given to student as how to fully use blogs as a constructive journalistic tool,” (Chung 316) when creating their news agenda.

Perhaps journalists rely on blogs as a source in the agenda-setting process because journalists take their cue from bloggers, some of whom represent policy expertise no longer found in their newsrooms. In Daniel Drezner’s analysis of foreign policy bloggers, he noticed an agenda-setting influence based not only the foreign policy expertise that some elite bloggers can provide, but also as a quick measure of public opinion (though possibly a false sampling) around issues when determining their salience. Foreign policy experts in particular play a greater role in the agenda-setting process through their blogs, as opposed to their limited influence for the public within the academic journaling community; “As Cole made waves within the virtual world, others in the real world began to take notice,” notes Drezner noticed of one expert blogger. This comes to form a symbiotic hierarchy of expertise within the blogging community, where

outside media can more easily look to these elite blogs in reporting on their foreign policy questions. And because these specialized blogs contain the expertise to fact-check the traditional media, it is likely that their readers are more likely to trust these online news sources, especially when a blog comports with their individual political knowledge and ideology.

Although policy bloggers comprise more of a niche audience among online political communications, these experts are able to attract attention and set the public policy agenda by focusing on a particular issue to communicate. Using in-depth interviews and content analysis of successful policy blogs, Laura McKenna was able to study how bloggers use their online platform to influence agenda setting in the public. Although these blogs policy goals do not always result in policy action, they have been successful in generating interest around their issues, positioning themselves as critical and impartial analysts that disseminate information in a similar way traditional media outlets try to do. Noting the limited influence of these experts outside academia, where there peers do not necessarily give them more recognition for their public work, they have been successful in garnering public interest particularly among journalists. And when issues become part of the public agenda, their online platform makes them easily accessible sources that frame these issues for journalists who rely on their available expertise, giving them a sort of prominence around their issues.

A sort of agenda-setting hierarchy from bloggers who bring attention to some issues may be part of their conception, with some of the more successful blogs being established through think-tanks, those most established agenda

building actors, that provide the policy agenda for these blogs. Indeed Matthew Sheffield constructs a model of agenda-setting from blogs sponsored by liberal think-tanks incorporated into the traditional media, albeit through the lens of his own conservative perspective of the news media, similar in comparison to the conservative think-tank messaging structure. For example in his literature review, Sheffield tracks the creation of left-leaning think-tank the Center for American Progress, who created their own blog Think Progress whose stories are often picked up by other independent blogs. This creates a resonant messaging structure, similar in his mind to the perceived majority opinion generated by conservative talk radio programs in the 1980's and 90's, where these issues become incorporated into broadcast news media as an agenda-setting function. "For instance," observes Sheffield, "MSNBC's hard left anchorman Keith Olberman and 'Hardball' host Chris Matthews routinely lift stories from Think Progress (and other liberal blogs) passing them along without informing viewers of their dubious provenance," (Sheffield 4). With the prominent backing of experts in the existing agenda-building infrastructure, these blogs are able to successfully set the agenda in traditional news media eager to incorporate their issues.

But even beyond their influence in the agenda building process within the mass media, bloggers are certainly playing a role in setting the agenda among their audiences who prefer using online news sources. Although there remains some consensus around most of the issues that are considered most important, there remain significant differences in the public agenda among younger people

who are more likely to prefer online news. To be sure, Coleman's study of agenda-setting online found a close correlation between stories online with those reported in newspapers and broadcast news. But as one might expect, younger voters were more likely to use online news sources. And while one of the samples in Coleman's survey mirrored previous studies showing an almost identical correlation between agenda-setting in the news media by those in the older generations studied, this younger group in the study deviated significantly – nearly 20% less – in the issues they listed as most salient to the public agenda. Although the differences in media use did not eliminate the agenda-setting influence among the younger generation, aged 18 to 34, for those who used the internet the most the correlation in agenda-setting was even lower, only 70% as compared to the nearly identical agenda set (ie nearly 100%) by those who relied more on traditional news media.

Going back to the concept of agenda-setting outlined earlier, it is clear that blogs are playing a role in the agenda-building process with journalists in the traditional newsmedia, through which they participate in the agenda-setting process in the public in the media and directly through those who read online news sources like blogs. As both student journalists and younger people turn increasingly to blogs for news information, reliance on these sources for which issues are most salient create different agenda-setting than the mass media alone. Relying on the expertise these blogs can provide on the policy agenda issues, the news media rely increasingly on the experts who might otherwise have participated in the agenda-building process through the same think-tanks,

academia, and policy institutions in previous models of disseminating public policy agenda. But even Scheufele would note in his limited-effects modeling that agenda-setting in the media is not in itself the means through which this political information is incorporated into political knowledge by those who remain engaged with the newsmedia on issues in the public agenda; in the public it is often those who follow the agenda most closely who act as the conduits of these political communications to the interpersonal level of exposure where political opinion forms.

If agenda-setting is only the initial step of introducing the issues which are most salient, it is important to consider the role of interpersonal communications in the dissemination of political communications and the formation of political opinion. As Lipmann once pointed out the information obtained in the media do help form a conception in our minds of the broader world, which sometimes spurs informal conversation that can relay information further than direct exposure to the media itself. Silvo Lenart incorporates this understanding in his theoretical study "Shaping Political Attitudes" which examines the interrelationship between the normative effects of the agenda-setting news media and the interpersonal communications that is sometimes called a two-step flow of information.

While media sources try to act as impartial conduits of information in forming the public agenda, it is up to individuals, and especially opinion leaders, to integrate this knowledge into their everyday conversations, often reflecting their own ideological considerations in their explanations. Sometimes the information spread interpersonally comports with the individual reinforcement of



ideological disposition, but in other cases the media serve a normative function of which subjects are discussed within a social network among individuals. So much of interpersonal communications begin through exposure to the agenda setting media, and when this comports with the political disposition of the individual it is likely to spread interpersonally within their network of friends and family. An important exception in this interaction occurs as information from the agenda-setting media running contrary to their political perceptions often creates a reluctance to spread this information, so the media does not have a direct effects over the information which is relayed interpersonally. But because interpersonal communications make up such a large part of how political knowledge is distributed to the wider public, the media provide the information which influences much of the public agenda that is relayed through interpersonal networks (where most political opinion takes shape).

It is at the this interpersonal level that political communication messages from merely the information transmitted in the agenda-setting media into the political knowledge incorporated that forms individuals' political opinion. In William Eveland's study of political discussion he analyses three different explanations about how interpersonal communications spread political knowledge; exposure, anticipatory elaboration, and discussion-generated elaboration. As explained for Lipmann in media exposure to newsmedia, exposure to information about an issue at the interpersonal level, in which a discussion partner exposes the other to awareness of an issue, is not alone enough to create and spread political knowledge (and often may relay

misinformation about the subject). In contrast are those individuals who devote greater interest to retain information in the newsmedia, using the motivation to have discussions with another party, had greater levels of political knowledge through anticipatory elaboration than through exposure alone. Likewise discussion-generated elaboration helps retain information about an issue at higher levels, in part because this makes both discussion partners to critically reconsider the analysis and relevant details about the issue in communicating about the issue. So those who are motivated to obtain political information through the newsmedia with the intent to incorporate these facts into interpersonal communications, as opinion leaders are considered to do, were able to retain political knowledge and help others obtain this information.

To look at those who act as the conduits of political knowledge at the interpersonal level, it is most critical to examine those who are considered as opinion leaders within their social networks, in part because these persons exhibit the highest interest in obtaining political knowledge in their motivation to incorporate it into conversations. From Lenart and others who have studied opinion leaders, notably Popkin's study of information shortcuts, we know that opinion leaders act in their social networks as a source of generating opinion that other individuals will trust, in part because they are considered more knowledgeable about the subject matter than other members may be. In their study of opinion leaders on specific issues, Nisbet & Kotcher try to generalize some common traits of these conduits of information; through some combination of personality characteristics, degree of knowledge about a particular subject, and

the contacts an individual has, opinion leaders draw attention of others to particular subjects and signal how they should think or act (Nisbet 7). It takes some combination of these characteristics for an individual to emerge as an opinion, as the most popular member in a social circle may not influence how others perceive a political issue, nor an expert in a scientific pursuit be able to sway influence significantly without a central position within their social network.

For political communications campaigns, these opinion leaders can be highly consequential multipliers of campaign messages, even under the limited-effect model Schenk uses in his study “Towards a Theory of Campaigns.” As outlined in Eveland’s study, the additional exposure of information is less important as the evaluation of an issue interpersonally. So opinion leaders are more than a conduit of information within their sphere of influence, but can be measured through their ability to influence those within their network which is tempered by the strength of their personality. Schenk also points out that opinion leaders need to be perceived as competent and communicative in the subject they are considered valued sources of knowledge by their sphere of influence. So using opinion leaders to spur interpersonal communication can be very effective on shaping the political opinions of individuals they come into contact.

But not all interpersonal communication needs to occur absent of the influence of the media (in fact, this may actually be impossible), so even Sosnick makes note in “Applebee’s America” that these same communities are being built online. In addition to transferring existing social groups of contacts onto social networking websites, Sosnick provides practical examples of the channels of

communication being created online, including some from political communications. In his literature review, Sosnick notes that “forty-five percent of internet users—about 60 million Americans—say the internet has played an important or crucial role in helping them deal with at least one major life decision in the last two years,” demonstrating the power of influence inside these online communities.

If one wanted to look more closely within these communities, it is likely you would see some opinion leaders emerge again, although a new study by McLeod & Ho finds that there is a greater expression of opinion from all parties through computer-mediated communication compared to face-to-face. Because of the anonymous nature of online communications, whereas in-person communication often relies on observable social cues, the field for expressing opinions is relatively level particularly in the absence of any clear indications of opposing opinions. Because the perception of the current opinion climate can create some apprehension among individuals to express opinion, interpersonal communications are often tempered by the need to remain congruent in the group and avoid isolation, although it is worth noting that opinion leaders often do not fall into these problems because they understand their subjects enough to exert some confidence in expressing their opinion. So while opinion leaders are willing to express their ideas through interpersonal networks no matter where these form, it is interesting to note the apprehension absolved through the use of computer-mediated conversations, particularly as they apply to opinions forming around political communications.

While this literature review has thus far made note of the agenda-setting and interpersonal/opinion leadership dimensions of political communications online, there exist some models worth noting that are created not by individuals but are generated by political campaigns. A good review of the development of social media websites for use in political campaigns can be found in Kathryn Montgomery's "Generation Digital", which shows the development of social media into campaigns in comparison to previous voter mobilization efforts like the Rock the Vote campaign. While teenagers and other young people have often been excluded in discussion in the political agenda-setting process, they are much more active at communicating interpersonally on the same subjects. So in mobilizing young voters in the 2004 election cycle, groups organized a myriad of micro-targeted websites, each forming a social network that encourage their members to communicate offline using their own ideas while providing some materials to spur the direction they might want to take; call this a remixing of individuals of political communications if you will. This reflects the model of opinion leadership, in that these individuals are given political knowledge they can adapt for use that will explain the ideas best within their own social network.

To better understand how online communications are being incorporated offline interpersonal engagement, Cristian Vaccari used qualitative interview with those who conducted the online campaigns for presidential candidates in the 2004 election cycle. In their interviews it was found that the unidirectional message distribution used in traditional political communications did not integrate well online, so even though a majority of website traffic in these

campaigns was from those interested in learning biographical and policy information about the candidates a growing number are looking to use this information interpersonally. This same information can be used in conversations, primarily with like-minded individuals online, although the campaigns found instrumental effectiveness when they encouraged these communicative adopters by sharing strategy and emphasizing inclusiveness within a campaign.

But organizing individuals to participate in a campaign interpersonally is not as simple as sending out an e-mail from a list of volunteers, or at least Allison Dale's survey of voter mobilizations contact seems to indicate that young voters prefer passive contact, and some individuals were bothered by unsolicited contact. In their post-test survey of individuals they sent a SMS text message to their cellphones reminding them to vote, as much as 23 percent reported being bothered by the contact, although this contradicts survey results that a majority of young people prefer being contacted through passive means – text messages (31%) and e-mail (30%) – rather than active contact such as phone calls that many political campaigns employ in their Get-Out-The-Vote activities. But even passing along the same message through e-mail from personal contacts is not enough, or so Davis suggests that political communications require some degree of personalization for interpersonal use to be more effective online. For example an interest group might suggest for their members to create their own voter guide, reappropriated from the website content within the group, for distribution offline. Another use that might be made is to provide cookie-cutter e-mails and

scripts for individuals to send as letters to the editor (or even to their friends) or to call in to talk shows, serving an agenda-setting influence of sorts.

Going back to the concept of opinion leadership that channels the agenda-setting process, it is clear from Nisbet & Scheufele's study of online citizenship that the incorporation of political information into knowledge takes place when individuals use them in conversations with others. These individuals exhibited great political knowledge than those who were less likely to talk about politics, reflecting the theories of anticipatory elaboration, and were successful incorporating this news information online as well as offline. So although the internet provides increased access to civics information, and it is still like that individuals still use the same self-selection process of information that affirms our preexisting ideology, these opinion leaders can actually use the internet to further their expertise and spread information more widely within their social networks that others may never have been exposed to at all.

And so considering this incorporation of information not being relayed in the agenda-setting process from traditional media sources, it is easy to see how blogs have emerged as such an influential interpersonal source of political communication. In a survey of people who write and/or read blogs, the Social Media and Democracy Research Group found that this public audience was hostile towards the mainstream media and relied on blogs that share their political orientation, which was instrumental in encouraging participation. While there are any number of reasons why people read blogs, its employment led to higher levels of consuming news information and of political knowledge –

successfully mixing media sources with offline communication as suggested in Nisbet's online civics study. And if this group is already alienated from traditional agenda-setting media sources, it is possible that this study explains how those otherwise disinclined to obtain political knowledge in the first place come to be encouraged enough to carry this knowledge into their conversations offline.

In considering this literature review of online political communications and the theories that apply, it is clear that a theme is emerging to include existing roles of agenda-setting and the influence of opinion leaders in the online distribution of political knowledge, particularly as embodied by blogs. Bloggers are becoming both part of the agenda-setting media and filling an agenda-setting role occupied by opinion leaders even before there was an internet. It is surprising that the literature provided does not make the connection between the agenda-setting function and the interpersonal level many are approaching these blogs, which because of their informal and opinion-infused analysis share many traits with the communication offered from opinion leaders.

Blogs are an informal platform for individuals to express their political expertise, which is communicated as a subjective experience between the blogger and their individual readers, much as opinion leaders act as interpersonal conduits of news information. Because this platform allows for feedback through the use of comments and sometimes exists within a community of bloggers, there is a fundamental interactivity with the use of blogs that more closely resembles the interpersonal communication. And like the opinion leaders who are relied on to provide political knowledge infused their own opinions



across their social networks, bloggers who demonstrate a working knowledge of the issues and leverage their expertise become the same trusted sources of information that their readers (many of whom are blogging themselves) mirroring opinion leaders offline. To be sure, not all bloggers are opinion leaders and not opinion leaders are bloggers, but those who share these common traits with opinion leaders are clearly carrying out the same communicative role through a different medium.

It is surprising to these same blogs playing a greater participatory role in the agenda-setting process, particularly if they are achieving parity with journalists in the newsmedia. As journalists incorporate more blogs into the construction of their news stories, it is possible that difference between the public agenda of those individuals who prefer online news sources might more closely mirror those who rely on more traditional newsmedia., This would represent not the shift of online agenda Coleman notes the shift in the news agenda that is being set through online sources of news. And as policy experts participate in the agenda-building process, with institutional resources of think-tanks to back them, it is likely that agenda-setting may circumvent newsmedia all together in favor of online news sources such as elite bloggers whose audience rely primarily on them.

The mechanisms by which blogs generate and facilitate the spread of information in political knowledge is well documented in this body of research; anticipatory attention is paid by both bloggers and their readers who intend to use them, especially as the online communication mobilizes a wider set of issues

in the public agenda. Because opinion leaders are still the group most likely to read or to write their own blogs, given that they consume much more specialized information at much greater depth, the internet has become the ultimate resource for them to attain new information easily and spread political knowledge of their own. This discussion based motivation extends from those bloggers who read the news in order to create blog entries that infuse their opinion-infused interpretation of events and onto those who read blogs in order to pick out subjects they would like introduce in their own interpersonal conversation. Blogs will also incorporate the discussion-based elaboration model to generate a deeper understanding of the subject, primarily as blogs use comments but also as blogs serve the same fact-checking function between other blogs much as Drezner noted blogs sometimes interact with the media. This motivation of discussion-generated blogging both spreads political communications and deepens their knowledge to form opinions.

This same breadth of information, combined with the greater willingness to express opinions within a computer-mediated discussion environment (McLeod), has mobilized those who would otherwise be reluctant to introduce new subjects into the public agenda online. As the public uses the internet to seek and connect with other like-minded individuals, it is increasingly likely that those ideas which were previously considered marginal can use these blogs (and other online communications tools) to spread their opinions in a supportive community of thought. If one wanted to introduce an item into the public agenda, specifically those issues that would ordinarily fall into a spiral of salience model creating

reticence in expressing this idea, it is possible for the internet to introduce these ideas to a wider public. Perhaps the best example of this possibility comes from the campaign of Representative Ron Paul for the Republican party's presidential candidacy, which used the internet to great effect at finding like-minded Libertarians who otherwise felt marginalized by the political paradigms in the US. This campaign in particular should be researched carefully in the time to come, as it relied primarily on their online communications to identify and mobilize voters who would have been otherwise disenfranchised in the political policy agenda.

In addition to using blogs and e-mail, the Ron Paul campaign made great use of social bookmarking websites to promote campaign messages and creating support within social networking websites, which appear to mirror some other channels opinion leaders are using to influence others. This shows that changing technology creates new means for political communications to spread using many of the same mechanisms, if only a campaign takes the time to create and facilitate the appropriation of their messages for use on the interpersonal level. Indeed if letters to the editor once served an agenda-setting influence within the newsrooms of newspapers, perhaps the cookie-cutter emails Vaccari identifies serve their own interpersonal influence on newsmedia as they try to reflect what they perceive as public opinion before setting the agenda; we know so much is true for the student journalists who check blogs first as their gauge on the wider public much like an individual might rely on an opinion leader to explain what to think within their social circle. So if campaigns make it easy to

adapt campaign messages and encourage individuals to share these political communications with friends, the interpersonal mechanism may be more influential than the top-down message dissemination paradigm used before.

From a review of the literature available it is clear that online distribution of political communications serves both important agenda-setting and opinion leadership functions, particularly epitomized through the role of blogging. As more individuals continue to rely on the internet as their primary source of news, shifts in the agenda set begin to show up, so it is increasingly important for a political campaign to connect with where this audience reads and surfs. Because of the open nature of the internet, and because individuals are self-selecting of which sources they obtain their political knowledge from (or not seeking news sources at all), it is more important than ever to create communications that can be incorporated interpersonally – online or offline. Opinion leaders will still serve as the key arbiters of political information with their social network, but since they are simply using blogs, communication campaigns will need to make their messages accessible through as many mediums – including SMS and mobile-accessible websites – that emerge in this interconnected world. Not only will the successful use of online communications by Barack Obama's campaign need to be studied for some time to come, but as technology evolves new campaigns need to experiment with new communications tools. They will be able to employ new technology with confidence if they the agenda-setting and opinion leadership mechanisms found online, incorporating the same theories into these new platforms for political communications.

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