Wait, Haven't We Been Here Before? A Method for Using History to Help Political Communication Scholarship

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In many ways, the pace of political communication change is moving at breakneck speed. Between social media platforms, data analytics, algorithms, bots, deep fakes, disinformation campaigns, and countless other recent additions to our lexicon, it feels like so much continues to change in a short period of time. Chronicling and testing the effects of these technological changes is important. However, using historically rooted approaches to political communication and the process of political communication innovation would offer greater context to the analysis of political communication today, and would show that everything is not changing as quickly or constantly as many might otherwise assume.

This essay presents a call for more historical approaches to political communication and, in particular, how American Political Development (APD) and Diffusion of Innovations literature offer valuable tools for political communication scholars toward this end. I will explain how each of these approaches helped me build and test a model of political communication change and innovation over time, called the political communication cycle (PCC), and detail how increased use of APD and Diffusion of Innovations approaches offer three clear benefits to political communication scholars.

Why We Need More Historical Approaches in the Study of Political Communication

I argue in my book, *The Only Constant is Change* (2018), that political communication change occurs as a result of the combination of technological, political, and behavioral forces that help to shape if, when, and how political communication innovations occur, and the pace at which others choose whether or not to adopt these innovations (Epstein, 2018). A good deal of political communication scholarship tends to focus primarily or exclusively on the first important force, the role of technology and technological change. This is understandable as these changes are interesting, important, and worthy of examination. However, a broader historical perspective can help bring the political and behavioral forces into focus, which shows that there is actually much more stability across time than we might otherwise expect.[1]

Throughout political history, political actors and organizations have always communicated in order to try to disseminate information, gain or maintain supporters, influence the public agenda, raise resources, and mobilize political action. In other words, political communication *goals* have remained remarkably stable over time, while the communication *activities* used to achieve these goals have changed substantially (Epstein, 2018, pp. 6–7). This constancy of

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political communication goals, and the stability that it suggests only becomes visible once political communication is analyzed through a historical lens.

Political communication, by its very nature, is interdisciplinary. While clearly directed at politics, political processes, effects on democracy and comparative approaches around the globe, the subdiscipline also is also inherently linked to mass communication, media studies, journalism, psychology, sociology, political science, and computer science, among others. However, relatively speaking there is a scarcity of historically rooted analyses of political communication. One study by Stanyer and Mihelj (2016) analyzed every article published in three leading communication journals, including this one, over a 15-year period from 2000 to 2014 and found that only 151 articles, representing approximately 1% of the total number of articles published, explored political communication change over time in any way (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016). Those scholars working in political communication or information, technology, and politics are already working in interdisciplinary spaces. But there is a great opportunity to expand how we analyze, test, and explain political communication practices, especially over time.

There are many valuable methods scholars can take to incorporate temporality and history into their scholarship, including using historical case studies, comparative approaches across history or place, and exploring trends and changes across time. Some great recent examples of this type of political communication scholarship include Jordan Taylor's examination of the asymmetrical "information politics" received in the United States and Canada during the French Revolution near the end of the nineteenth Century (Taylor, 2019), and Heidi Tworek's historical analysis of how Germany conducted information warfare and sought to control global communication through two world wars (Tworek, 2019a), and how to apply the lessons from this effort toward countering digital disinformation campaigns today (Tworek, 2019b). Other important recent examples include Elizabeth Cohen's innovative analysis of the politics of time itself when it comes to justice and policymaking (Cohen, 2018), and policy applications like Chloe Thurston's powerful book uncovering decades of U.S. government policies shaping unequal home-ownership opportunities (Thurston, 2018), and Richard Rothstein's highly praised book on the legal history shaping the resulting racial segregation (Rothstein, 2017). Above all else using history to explore political communication helps provides context and a greater ability to understand why things matter and what to pay attention to.

David Karpf recently offered a similar call for more temporally grounded political communication research, specifically exploring political communication during the widely changing internet era. Karpf outlined three broad approaches which can be used (Karpf, 2019b). The most common has been using a linear approach which chronicles changes in strategies and technological sophistication as time moves forward. Examples of this approach include the wonderful books by Kreiss (2012, 2016) and Stromer-Galley (2019) that detailed changes in U.S. Presidential Campaign communication over a number of electoral cycles (Kreiss, 2012, 2016; Stromer-Galley, 2019). Next was a rhythmic approach, guided by the ever-changing media cycle. This approach grows from the powerful insights that Andrew Chadwick presents in the *Hybrid Media System* (2017) and his "Political Information Cycle," and other studies which have explored the changing pace of new coverage of events in the digital era (Chadwick, 2011, 2017; Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009; Yates, Joselow, & Goharian, 2016). Finally, Karpf points to the cyclical approach developed in my book, which aims to incorporate

both the development over time and the repeating process of change in order to find trends and patterns used to contextualize change and compare political communication innovation at different points in history.

These three approaches are mutually beneficial and can work together to create robust historically grounded scholarship. The linear approach can provide the most granular detail of political communication change. The rhythmic approach is needed to connect political communication to the very human processes of creating, disseminating, and consuming political news. And the cyclical approach, the main approach I describe in the remainder of this article can help create context and a method to connect all of these dots and means to make sense of what is most important across time and place.

Useful and Underutilized Tools: American Political Development and Diffusion of Innovations

Though there is a relatively limited body of historical scholarship on political communication, researchers looking to move in this direction can still work from the useful mooring of past literature. In fact, there are two bodies of literature that offer particularly useful language and theoretical approaches that can benefit historically minded scholars of political communication, namely American Political Development (APD) and Diffusion of Innovations.

APD is an approach to studying American politics from a historical perspective that seeks to identify and account for patterns of change and equilibrium in American political institutions, norms, ideas, and political behavior. The focus is on the causes, nature, and consequences of key transformative periods (Kersh, 2005a, 2005b). As a subdiscipline, APD emerged in the 1980s and quickly grew to relative prominence among political scientists who focus on traditional institutions, governance, or policymaking. The flagship APD journal, *Studies in American Political Development*, was created in 1986, and the Politics and History section of the American Political Science Association, was founded three years later.[2] It has remained a vibrant subdiscipline within political science including the launch of the blog "A House Divided" in 2018 which brings together political science scholars "to use the toolkits of American Political Development, American Political Thought, historical institutionalism, and political and intellectual history to shine a light on our current politics."

It is notable that none of the contributors to "A House Divided" have listed political communication as an area of focus, nor do any of the topics covered so far include media, journalism, or political communication.[3] I do not mention this as a critique, but rather as an illustration that APD continues to be used primarily to explore American institutions. However, it is essential to state that there is no reason that this approach must be restricted to institutional subjects nor solely American ones. In fact, there are several reasons why APD is particularly well suited for the exploration of political communication across time, regardless of whether that political communication takes place in the United States of America or not. First, journalism and various forms of media, both traditional and contemporary, are institutions themselves and can be examined in much the same way as the presidency or the courts. Additionally, the APD framework provides a useful approach to the analysis of the impact of changing information and communication technologies (ICTs) on political activity because it does not presume the traditional

periodization of American history favored by historians (Kersh, 2005b). This allows for a broader and often richer approach to historical changes across the political landscape. It maintains the centrality of politics in the exploration of a topic over time, which can be helpful for political communication scholars that have understandably focused heavily on the technological changes that are impacting journalism, politics, and political behavior.

The most comprehensive analysis of APD as an approach was developed by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek in *The Search for American Political Development* (2004).[4] One central tenant of APD scholarship is the identification of recurring patterns or historical breakpoints in time. These patterns help delineate political orders, which Orren and Skowronek define as a constellation of practices, ideas, and institutions that hangs together over time, a bundle of patterns exhibiting coherence and predictability even as other aspects of politics undergo change (Orren & Skowronek, 2004, pp. 9–16). The complexity of a multi-institutional political system with several overlapping orders causing tension leads to what Orren and Skowronek call "intercurrence."

According to Orren and Skowronek all political change, including transitions between political orders, proceeds on a site, a prior political ground of practices, rules, leaders, and ideas, which provide boundaries and impediments to political development (Orren & Skowronek, 2004, pp. 20–26). This is closely aligned to the related concepts of path dependence and increasing returns.[5] Path dependence suggests that change occurs over time largely through incremental adjustments guided by the series of changes that have taken place stretching back through time. Path dependence in turn generates increasing returns: the further along a particular historically evolved path, the more costly it would be to start over. Increasing returns is a concept particularly well suited to the analysis of ICT development as the creation of ICTs has moved society in one direction as communication has become faster, cheaper, and more convenient over time.[6]

Diffusion of Innovations literature provides the vocabulary and theory that can be helpful to bridge the gap between APD and other historical scholarship, and research on information and communication technologies (ICT) development and its impact on political communication over time. As a field of study, Diffusion of Innovations emerged following the publication of a pioneering study on the diffusion of hybrid corn adoption by farmers Iowa farmers by Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross in 1943.[7] Everett Rogers, an influential communication scholar and sociologist compiled, organized, and clarified the diverse and interdisciplinary world of diffusion research in his book *Diffusion of Innovations* (Rogers, 2003).

Decades of Diffusion of Innovations research provide valuable vocabulary that can help to contextualize the important work being done on political communication and modern technological innovations, by linking them to the broader behavioral and political processes. For instance, Clayton Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma*, distinguishes between two very different types of innovations, *sustaining* innovations, the relatively small, incremental shifts that dominant players masterfully adopt in order to maintain power, and *disruptive* innovations that incumbents usually do not react to until relatively late in the adoption process (Christensen, 2000). While Christensen analyzed innovations in the business world, it does not take much imagination to recognize examples of these types of innovations, and the resulting path dependence, affecting political communication and digital politics. Rogers himself defines *diffusion* as the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of

a social system, centralizing the social nature of diffusion (Rogers, 2003, pp. 5, 12). Just like politics and political communication more broadly, the diffusion of innovations takes place through a sequence of choices about if, when, and how to adopt innovations. Those who measure diffusion over time have used systems like the *S-Curve* to compare diffusion patterns and measure stages in the diffusion process (Epstein, 2018, pp. 49–71; Ryan & Gross, 1943).

The APD and Diffusion of Innovations approaches were central to my process of evaluating the dynamic forces involved in political communication change and identifying a regular and repeating pattern that occurs over time, called the political communication cycle (PCC). The PCC starts with a lasting period of general stability regarding the sources, messages, and audiences of political communication called a political communication order (PCO), which applies the APD term "order" toward political behavior in a new way. Disruptions in PCOs, then, occur through a multistage process. First, a new ICT is developed and becomes widely accepted. As access to this medium grows, political actors are motivated to start to experiment with the use of the new technology in political communication activities. Once some political actors successfully tap the new communication technology to achieve their longstanding communication goals, others often follow their lead. But this copying is not automatic. Instead, the diffusion of successful political communication innovations requires the effective use of a political communication innovation by one political actor that appears to be easily transferable to the goals of another, and reasonable to try based on the costs, and technological expertise requirements. Under these circumstances, diffusion of certain practices will spread, and eventually new norms are created, bringing with them increased stabilization of political communication changes and the formation of a new PCO.

Three Benefits of Taking a Historical Approach to Political Communication Research

There are three clear benefits for scholars who apply APD and Diffusion of Innovations approaches to political communication research. First, it can help identify repeated patterns in political communication across time. This offers a more systematic approach used to compare changes throughout history, because different stages of a cyclical, or evolutionary process are easier to compare than a continuous line of historical change. This offers one advantage over a linear historical approach by providing tools to compare and evaluate political communication choices, actions, and innovations at similar points in a repeating cycle. This comparative tool can also extend to different regions or nations globally. The process of political communication change moves at a different pace in the U.S., South Korea, and Tanzania, but a similar cyclical process can be applied to all of these places. Second, this approach helps scholars and readers to understand where we are currently in the evolving trendline of political communication change. Finally, the APD approach can help us build and use stable models, like the political communication cycle, upon which ongoing political communication and information technology and politics (ITP) research can be rooted in a variety of analyses. This serves the dual role of providing historical context for modern research so that scholars can better connect the dots between important ongoing research, and also testing and refining the historically minded

models and theories as they are applied to new subjects, places, events, and historical periods.

Conclusion

Political communication change moves forward through the turning of technological, political, institutional, and behavioral gears. As ongoing research incorporates more historical approaches, including American Political Development (APD) and Diffusion of Innovations literature, they will have a better ability to maintain a focus on all of these important forces and will be able to contextualize important moments, innovations, and events. Political communication appears to change constantly and quickly and scholarship in this interdisciplinary subdiscipline can feel like it is chasing a target moving at the speed of technology. However, if scholars adopt more historically rooted approaches, and journals and public facing platforms publish this work, they will redirect attention toward the political, behavioral, and institutional processes central to political communication goals, strategies, and actions. This will help provide necessary context, highlight meaningful events and transitions, and show us that everything is not always new, and the cycles of history can help us see more clearly where we are, and where we might be headed.

Notes

1. For a great example of see (Karpf, 2019a).
2. Other related journals have developed since the introduction of *Studies in American Political Development*, including *the Journal of Policy History* (founded in 1989) and *Review of History and Political Science* (founded in 2013).
3. A House Divided includes dozens of articles, from 13 regular contributors spanning a list of 24 different topics as of Dec. 2019. ("A House Divided," 2018).
4. For the most complete overview of the methods, rationale, and implementation of American Political Development see (Orren & Skowronek, 2004); for additional noteworthy examples of APD analysis of changes in American political institutions, norms, ideas, and political behavior see (Nardulli, 1992, 1995; Skocpol, 2003; Skowronek, 1997; Tulis, 1987).
5. Both path dependence and increasing returns have grown mainly within the field of economics, yet have regularly been applied to political growth and development. For a clear articulation of these terms within a political context see (Pierson, 2000).
6. For further explanation of the usefulness of applying increasing returns to the development of technologies see chapter two in (Arthur, 1994).
7. For more information on this interesting study and the impact that it had on the future of diffusion research and the development of the S-curve model, describing adoption patterns see (Epstein, 2018, pp. 49–71; Ryan & Gross, 1943).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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