



Digital Social Sport Political Communication in China: A New Perspective of Theory, Issues and Paradigm

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Abstract. In the digital age, political communication and sports communication complement each other. The rapid pace of technological innovation and information dissemination has been consistently reshaping the political process, making it crucial to comprehend political phenomena. This paper aims to revise the theory of political communication in the digital society and explore the new subjects that have emerged in political communication and political science research in this era. The analysis is based on a review of over 2000 cutting-edge research papers published in leading international journals from 2012 to 2021, employing bibliometric methods. From this analysis, six key topics and research methods have been identified, including "information cocoon room-based public opinion polarization" and "cross-platform political information flow with multiple agents". The study reveals a paradigm shift in research on political communication in the digital age, moving from vertical to horizontal political communication, from media effects to information communication effects, and from national to global interaction. The research is also transitioning from a multidisciplinary approach to a post-scientific approach.

Keywords: political communication, computational politics, theoretical framework, cutting-edge issues, paradigm shift.

1 Introduction

Since the 20th century, the continuous innovation of communication technology has been driving sport, political and social changes. The evolution of media and political landscape has been intertwined. In the early 20th century, the emergence of mass media coupled with two world wars linked communication technology inseparably with political reality from the very beginning. Early political communication research revolved around how newspapers, radio, and television mobilized war participation, shaped public opinion, and influenced voting, laying the foundation for the important role of public opinion, propaganda, and media effects in political science and communication studies. In the latter half of the 20th century, the development of television media paralleled the

rise and fall of the Cold War. On one end of the confrontation, media became the vanguard in shaping and disintegrating ideologies; while on the other end, the combination of television media and democratic elections heralded the arrival of the "media politics" era. A series of media "strong effect" theories and critical theories, such as agenda setting, priming effects, spiral of silence, and framing effects, emerged one after another, outlining how mass media powerfully shaped public opinion. By the end of the 20th century, Herbert Marshall McLuhan's prediction of the "global village" during the Cold War became a reality, and the rise of the internet and the rapid progress of globalization brought about unprecedented economic, personnel, trade, and information integration. However, the abundance of information heralded the return of the "limited effect" era of media, giving rise to theories such as information cocoons and filter bubbles. In the 21st century, the resonance between information technology and political and social changes once again manifested, and the multiple echo chambers constructed by social networks and algorithms led people to live in complex and parallel information spaces. False information could be replicated and disseminated on a large scale across platforms and regions, and the "post-truth politics" re-enacted the "pseudo-environment" under McLuhan's pen. Populism, nationalism, and political polarization surged globally, and the great power game surged. The overlapping of new and old political communication phenomena, the profound intertwining of information public opinion and geopolitics, have placed the international situation in a state of rapid and unpredictable change, pushing human society towards another historical turning point. The media and information dissemination mechanisms are a key theoretical perspective for understanding the changes in political development. For example, the "technological determinism" represented by McLuhan believes that each iteration of communication technology fundamentally propels the evolution of the societal knowledge landscape, and the renewal of the knowledge system nurtures social changes, thereby influencing the political landscape. From another perspective, each technological innovation directly changes the way in which various subjects interact in political life, thereby redefining political propaganda, public opinion shaping, elections, and decision-making processes. Whether communication technology directly or indirectly drives political changes, the profound interdependent relationship between communication and politics requires a re-understanding of new political phenomena from the theoretical perspective of media and information dissemination. In the digital age, how various subjects participate in politics through digital technology and how political information flows in complex communication networks have become indispensable keys to understanding contemporary political phenomena. The digital age's numerous new phenomena and the methodological leap driven by big data require political communication research to update its theoretical framework and focus on entirely new scenarios, topics, and methods.

2 Research Questions and Research Methods

Specifically, how does the digital society reconstruct the theoretical landscape of political communication? What new issues does it bring to the research of political communication and even political science? What new research areas does the methodological innovation represented by experimental and computational political science bring, signifying what kind of shift in research paradigm? This article starts from the perspective of the co-construction and changes of communication and politics, sorting out the theoretical framework innovation of political communication research in the digital age. To explore the innovation of research topics brought about by changes in theoretical frameworks, this article analyzes over two thousand political communication research papers published in top international journals from 2012 to 2021 using bibliometric methods, summarizing the frontier topics, keywords, and methods of political communication research. The study found that political communication research in the digital age is undergoing a fourfold shift in research paradigms.

3 Literature Review

In 1995, Nicholas Negroponte, the director of the MIT Media Lab, first pointed out the advent of the digital age in his book *Being Digital*[1]. "Digitization" transforms the basic form of the object from atoms to bits, and its attributes of high-speed transmission, large capacity, shareability, replicability, editability, and fusion fundamentally change the nature of information dissemination[2]. Compared to mass media, digital media have stronger interactivity and participation, and their content can be filtered and calculated according to personalized needs. As the communication field shifts from newspapers, radio, and television to the internet and social media, there has been a fundamental shift in the process of political communication[3]. According to the definition of political communication by Pippa Norris, a comparative political scientist at Harvard University, political communication is the interactive process of information transmission between politicians, news media, and the public[4]. She believes that this process includes both the top-down transmission of information from the government and politicians to the public, as well as the horizontal communication among political actors, and the public expressing their views to the government from the bottom up. Political communication is the diffusion, acceptance, identity, and internalization of political information in the political community,"including the flow of political information within and between political communities[5]. The application of new communication technologies implies changes in communication subjects, communication fields, and communication methods, which in turn trigger the reconstruction of the theoretical framework system in this field[6]. Before the advent of the internet, traditional news media served as intermediaries in the communication between the government and the public, and the theoretical construction of political communication revolved around the interaction among the three parties[7]. Specifically, political parties, governments, and politicians used the media to serve specific political goals such as elections, mobilization, decision-making, and education, while also being supervised and held accountable

by the media[8]. Of course, different countries have different media systems: for example, in one-party states, the media reflects the will of the ruling party and the state, while in pluralistic political entities, the media may reflect the ideologies of different parties[9]. In the dimension of interaction between the media and the public, traditional news media influence the public's political attitudes through agenda setting, framing effects, priming effects, second-level dissemination, propaganda, and persuasion[10]; the public processes media information to form their own mental pictures[11]. In the dimension of government-public communication, the government achieves governance goals through propaganda, mobilization, consultation, and other means, responding to public demands and gaining support[12]; and the public reflects public opinion through voting, elections, social movements, and petitions[13]. The information technology revolution has given rise to a pluralistic and interactive political communication system among the government, the public, news media, and social media. This has changed the power relations among the subjects, with a dual effect of empowering and deconstructing each subject[14]. Various subjects of political participation can bypass the role of the media as gatekeepers and communicate directly through social media[15]. For example, the information published by politicians through personal social media accounts often creates a stronger sense of immediacy and presence, which greatly influences domestic and international public opinion[16]. On the one hand, this means that political parties and governments can more agilely achieve goals such as propaganda, mobilization, and image building; on the other hand, it has also promoted the rise of pluralistic discourse narratives, fake news, computational propaganda, and populism[17]. With the help of the internet and social media, society can share information, collaborate, organize, and mobilize across platforms and regions more quickly, and can communicate demands to political parties and politicians more efficiently, form public opinion pressures, and hold them accountable[18]. However, the increasing volume of information has also led to pervasive information overload. As social networks and platform algorithms become deeply embedded in the information people encounter, individual information environments continue to differentiate, making it more difficult to reach social consensus. In short, the political communication system in the digital age is a highly interactive and agile information system, often triggering widespread effects from small changes[19]. The democratization of communication channels not only changes the power structure of political life but also implies the reconstruction of the theoretical framework of political communication[20]. In summary, the theoretical construction of political communication in the digital age must incorporate the interactive relationship between the internet, social media, and traditional political participation subjects[21]. Take the agenda setting theory as an example. Traditionally, the news media plays an important role in prioritizing public issues, influencing the public's perception of reality. However, in the digital age, social media may amplify or challenge the media agenda. Specifically, traditional news media and politicians participate in agenda setting in the social media field by opening accounts and creating topics on social media[22]; social media then influences media agendas by conveying social demands in reverse. Media convergence helps to form a matrix effect of propaganda, but the coexistence of institutionalized and non-institutionalized communication may mean a competitive agenda orientation. The agendas of political parties and politicians are

often filtered by opinion leaders of the network, filter bubbles, social networks, and platform algorithms. Due to the high-frequency and interactive agenda setting by various information subjects for highly differentiated audience groups, the "mental pictures" of the public also vary, making public opinion more diverse, even torn and polarized[23].

4 New Perspective of Theory

The adjustment of theoretical framework often signifies the advancement of research topics. Therefore, this section utilizes bibliometric methods to further explore the forefront of political communication research in the digital age. The scope of literature analysis encompasses research papers published in international authoritative comprehensive journals, political science journals, communication journals, and special journals of political communication from 2012 to 2021. We gathered the titles, abstracts, and keywords of all original research papers through the citation index database (Google Scholar) and obtained a total of 2300 papers. These were then analyzed using the bibliometric software CiteSpace. The high-frequency keywords of these papers encompass various aspects such as news, spread, behavior, network, model, epidemic, public opinion, information, impact, and many more. In conclusion, the rapid expansion of political communication research in international authoritative journals underscores the emergence of this field as a new driving force for knowledge breakthroughs in disciplines like politics, communication, information science, and computer science. Political communication is evolving into a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and flourishing research field, with interdisciplinary integration gaining momentum. However, the perspectives of different disciplines are somewhat divergent. Comprehensive journals typically employ computer algorithms to model and calculate the laws and effects of information dissemination. Political science journals focus more on the role of media in political phenomena and processes such as party mobilization, elections, and political polarization. The Journal of Communication examines the impact of different media forms on public opinion and political participation from a media perspective.

5 New Perspectives on Issues

Based on the aforementioned bibliometric analysis, the following will further explore the cutting-edge literature, summarize the frontier issues and methods of political communication research in the digital age, and focus on delineating the impact of information technology. It is imperative to note that these issues are interconnected and often closely related both in theory and reality. The following topics not only extend classic subjects such as media effect, public opinion, propaganda, and persuasion in the realm of digital media, but also result from the interplay between technological innovation and changes in political patterns. The proliferation of fake news facilitated by social robots entails a significant challenge in the digital age. Prior to the emergence of the Internet and social media, the spread of rumors was not uncommon. However, in the digital age, there is a new phenomenon of false confidence in facts, leading to "post-

truth politics," where political entities manipulate public opinion and control it using big data and algorithms. False information distorts public perception of factual public affairs, impacts the dissemination of scientific knowledge, disrupts the formation of collective rationality, and presents a new challenge to electoral democracy. The phenomenon of false information flooding and its impact on geopolitics in the digital age stems from the convergence of global political ideologies and the information environment. Globalization over the past three decades has exacerbated economic and social disparities, resulting in the global rise of nativism, nationalism, and populism. False information aligns with the public's discontent with reality, and politicians and the media propagate it through online platforms, making it more readily accepted than in the pre-digital era. Furthermore, social robots significantly amplify the spread of false information. Research indicates that during the Brexit referendum in the UK, approximately one-third of the total social media information was generated by social media accounts affiliated with the Brexit group. In the 2016 US presidential election, Trump's social robot network was four times larger than Hillary's. Social robots have fabricated a false consensus and reshaped public opinion patterns.

Presently, research on false information predominantly focuses on its identification, dissemination, influence, the psychology of belief in falsehoods, and corrective measures. This research has garnered interdisciplinary academic attention, integrating methodologies such as formal modeling, computer simulation, big data analysis, and experimental approaches. For instance, experimental research by Adam J. Berinsky suggests that rumors possess inherent stickiness, and refuting them can strengthen people's memory of the rumors, thereby amplifying their diffusion. Computational analysis by Soroush Vosoughi and his colleagues revealed that rumors tend to spread more rapidly and extensively than the truth, primarily due to their novelty and elicitation of stronger emotional reactions.

Another area of focus is the utilization of algorithms and social media for promotion and mobilization. The advent of social robots in the realm of public opinion and political propaganda has given rise to computational propaganda. Numerous recent studies have delved into how political parties and figures leverage algorithms and social robots to artificially intervene and influence online public opinion. Additionally, digital technology has opened new avenues for propaganda and mobilization, leading to investigations into how political entities utilize social media, fan mobilization, and headline parties for these purposes. The research in this domain encompasses traditional qualitative methods alongside experimental and big data approaches.

These scholarly endeavors shed light on the complex interplay between technology, information dissemination, and political influence in the digital age.

The transmission and diffusion of political information across various platforms among multiple communication entities represents a significant frontier in political communication research in the digital era. Key subjects of study in this area include individuals, organizations, network information platforms, and government behavior. For instance, research has shown that personal selection, social networks, and algorithms constitute a "triple filtering" of information, influencing the information encountered by individuals. Additionally, the behavior of social media users, as well as the

impact of government and platforms on information flow, have been subjects of scholarly inquiry. Studies have delved into factors such as content screening mechanisms on internet platforms and the diffusion mechanisms of hate speech across platforms.

6 Conclusion

The political and social changes driven by media transformation have given political communication a constantly new thematic scene. In the digital age, politics and communication are more inseparable, not only reproducing classic topics such as public opinion and propaganda in new media environments, but also giving rise to a new set of challenging issues such as platform governance and polarization of public opinion. The profound interplay between digital technology and political reality requires the advancement of paradigms, theories, and methods in political communication research. Due to the diversity of information dissemination entities and the acceleration of information transmission rates, political communication is expanding to political communication, with the importance of issues such as political participation based on social media interaction and cross-platform information flow becoming evident. In the context of great power competition, the perspective of political communication research will expand from the internal affairs of nation-states to the global arena, with the flow and effects of political information between states becoming a key issue. Polarization, fake news, and other phenomena have become threats to democratic elections, while new communication technologies can provide internal and external impetus for China's rise. In general, political communication research in recent years has shown an increasingly strong trend of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, becoming a vibrant and evolving multidisciplinary field. Among them, the innovation of research methods such as experimental and computational political science has provided important methodological tools for penetrating the "black box" of information dissemination mechanisms and public opinion. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, "If we fail the test of the internet, we fail the test of long-term governance," and "creating a favorable public opinion environment is a major issue in governing the country and ensuring national security." The new phenomena and new issues of the digital age require researchers to insightfully understand cutting-edge issues from a historical perspective, construct general theories using scientific methods, tell the Chinese story from a comparative perspective, push classics to the forefront with multidisciplinary thinking, and promote national decision-making and image-building practices through scientific research, in order to build a new era of political communication research based on China and oriented towards the world.

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