Political Communication: Perspectives on the Future of the Field

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Election campaigns in recent years have revealed how political communication is rapidly changing due to the emergence of new forms of media. Recent political elections in 2010 have shown the power of the media as well as how it is transforming. Traditional sources of media such as newspapers, television, and radio are slowly being overlapped by new media, such as the internet and social networking. Online media empowers users by allowing for more choice and selection of contents. South Korea, as one of the most wired countries in the world, is an interesting case in terms of the influence of new media and its impact on politics. While the media is transforming, the way in which politics is presented is also changing. We are seeing now the emergence of branding in politics as demonstrated by former-British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the way he presented his image in British politics.

To understand more about political communication and its future, the EAI invited Holli A. Semetko, Emory University, to discuss more about the field and its new trends. How has political communication changed over time? What impact do new forms of media have on elections and voter turnout? And what kind of media contents will we see in the future? These were some of the questions addressed during the Smart Talk. The following is a summary of the presentation and the subsequent discussion.

Presentation

History of election and media

The mass media has largely dominated political campaigning as a source of information during election time. In general, the mass media, which includes television and radio, are the only sources for the public to obtain information about elections and the policies of candidates. In the 21st century, it is still the case that for most countries the majority of the public still rely on traditional sources of information, such as newspapers. However, among some countries that are leading in internet-based technology, the trend is to move away from the traditional mass media. This is particularly prevalent among the younger generation in these countries, who are internet-savvy users.

When understanding traditional sources of media, there are two important concepts for political communication: agenda setting and framing. These two concepts in this field are associated with the question on what are the possible effects of the news media on the public and their relationship with politics. Studies have shown how these two concepts are indicative of the influential power that the media holds.

Agenda setting is to the effect where certain issues dealt with as important matters in the media subsequently become crucial issues among the public too. Studies have shown that people will aggregate and start to think about

certain issues that the media provides them through watching, reading, and hearing sources of information. There is though criticism focused on the fact that agenda setting makes it difficult for media contents to retain objectivity. It is easy for some media contents selected through agenda setting to reflect the preferences and policies of powerful parties and interest groups.

Framing evolved out of agenda setting. This process leads people to think about issues and agendas in a certain way. In other words, framing has a particular direction to lead people's way of thinking. When the public is influenced by framing effects, they will have certain opinions on what the media has presented.

Media in elections and politics

Considering the influence and power the media has, there is a strong view that the media needs to be impartial and balanced in the way that it delivers political issues and parties' policies when they organize and present their coverage during elections. On the other hand, balanced news coverage usually results in diminished reporting. That is impartiality and balanced reporting does not make for pulsating news coverage.

Elections represent the high point of political communication in democracies. During this time, the main evening TV news often has the widest reach. Their reach with voters who are undecided or potential vote switchers is of particular interest for political actors. The importance of traditional media is further emphasized by two aspects: visibility and tone.

Visibility is about the number of times political actors such as candidates, parties, and party spokespersons are seen in the news. Tone indicates how the political actors are evaluated in the news, either positive or negative. Topics or themes in the media become very important for political actors in terms of visibility and tone during the election period. Political actors will always aim for high visibility with very positive tone. Generally though, it is predicted that the path of the media's contents usually moves to high visibility with a negative tone and then down to low visibility with a negative tone. In such cases, political campaigns will try always to shift media coverage to low visibility with a positive tone, and finally up to high visibility with positive tone. Assessing the visibility and tone in the media can be a way to identify the range and quality of information that citizens have access to during the election time.

The Future of Political Communication

With this overview of the how the traditional media operates and its impact on its audience, the direction in which political communication is heading can be considered. New trends and diverse actors are proving to be a major influence in this field and changing the way of political discourse. This change will be a shift away from unilateral communication to a communication based on a consumer paradigm. There will be three ways in which these changes will take place.

Firstly, there is the current decline of the mass media, particularly the weakening of newspapers which have been struggling in recent years. In response, different types and range of media will appear determined by the needs of the consumer. Such a consumer-based media will be at the mercy of developments in technology such as the internet and social networking. Already, this technological consumer-based media is replacing the traditional advertising-driven model.

Secondly, political marketing is expected to be more widespread through the use of branding. Among the population we are also seeing increased political participation in the choices made by consumers. For example, fair trade is an area where consumers are making political decisions related to food products such as coffee, banana, and chocolate. From this we can expect there will be political marketing within all common fields moving away from the traditional sphere of political dialogue.

Lastly and a related point, there will be increased focus on the new concepts of public relations and branding by targeting a variety of new actors. Conceptions used in traditional media resources, agenda-setting and framing will soon be replaced with political public relations and political branding in the future.

Discussion

The Challenges of Online Political Communication

The discussion addressed some of the issues raised in the presentation related to the emergence of new forms of media for political communication. In particular, the impact of the internet is having a major effect in South Korea. However, this also presents a number of difficult issues in terms of creating divisions within society.

The discussants all agreed that the development of technology, especially the internet will be the new form for accessing information. Yet despite this new development and trend, one discussant pointed out that around 60% of the population in South Korea who use the internet as a source of information are mainly of the younger generation. As such, the older generation is still dependent on the tra-

ditional sources of information.

Holli Semetko believed that with its universal internet access, South Korea was setting the trend in online sources of information. This will see South Korea establish itself setting as an example for other established democracies like Germany. The concern though remains on the generational divide in South Korea. However, while the generational divide in Korea can be found in other parts of the world, a bigger problem for some countries is with the digital divide between those who have access and those who do not. Semetko also pointed out that while the younger generation, mainly students, uses the internet for sources of information; they often read the online contents of the traditional media outlets, such as newspapers. Online videos contents, like YouTube, are also showing a similar phenomenon in that most of the videos are uploaded by TV stations.

The discussants explained how this trend differs in Korea where the younger generation actually uses the internet because of a distrust of traditional media sources, particularly the daily newspapers. This though presents another problem in that online sources not related to the traditional media are not always reliable. With the distrust of the traditional media, many young Koreans are more likely to rely on internet-based speculative opinion and views that has not been fact-checked.

Semetko agreed that the level of the public's trust in all sectors such as the government, military, and social institutions are diminishing. Studies in the past have looked at whether the media is responsible for this decline in trust, but most of the data shows a mixed picture. In fact one of the main challenges is that trust levels are improving in some areas, but declining in other parts. It will be critical to maintain the right balance of trust among the

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public toward the main institutions in order for the mass media to operate effectively.

Social Networking and Elections

The impact of social networking is a topic of much interest for political communication, specifically how it influences elections. With the rise in usage and application of Facebook and Twitter during political campaigns, social networking is an important trend, but the effects are still not that well understood.

One discussant mentioned about the Korean case of the 2010 local election which showed a greater participation by the younger generation in voting than in previous elections. This could be a crucial turning point in understanding the great impact of new media like the internet over traditional media during elections.

Semetko mentioned that President Obama is also using social networking to motivate people to participate in elections. However, there is a body of opinion that casts doubt on the impact of using these kinds of new media outlets during elections. Still, using new technology seems to have some effect on mobilizing people to participate in elections, but its effect is mainly targeted on a certain group or specific region rather than on the whole population.

Differences between Established and New Democracies

The discussion has looked at how some issues in political communication differ between established and new democracies. Traditional views have been that established democracies have less vote switching and longer traditions of political association, whereas emerging democracies are the opposite with a tendency to switch parties and a changing number of political parties. One discussant wanted to know the extent to which these views still apply today in the context of new technology and changing forms of media.

Semetko felt that the gap between established and new democracies is closing, that they are becoming closer in terms of political characteristics. The presidential election of 2008 in the United States shows the degree to which vote switching has become more prevalent and the voters are less partisan, something that has usually been associated with new democracies. This trend of vote switching can generally be attributed to the emergence of technology and the way in which sources of information are changing. At the same time, we are seeing more partisanship on the left and right in the United States, resulting in a disappearing center. What this is indicative of is that people are becoming more engaged in politics. Much of this is indicative of how the role of political communication has the propensity to move political opinion.∎

——— Holli A. Semetko is a Professor of Political Science at Emory University

Discussants

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