Out of Sight, Out of Mind?
Qualitative Methods in Political Communication Research

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Communication scholarship is known for its diverse methodological and paradigmatic approaches. Yet the field of *political* communication has a long-standing tradition of prioritizing quantitative, (post-)positivist scholarship. This shapes how scholars produce, structure, and value knowledge. In a landmark special section of the *International Journal of Communication*, Karpf et al. (2015) argued that this consensus marginalizes qualitative, interpretive political communication research, which significantly limits the field's explanatory power and narrows our understanding of unfolding phenomena and reforming concepts (Graber, 2006). In the eight years since Karpf et al. made these assertions, political communication has undergone rapid change, as a series of crises – including a global pandemic – destabilized the public sphere on an international scale. Nevertheless, we argue that the field's tendency to marginalize qualitative research has persisted and shifted. When it comes to qualitative methods, "new diversity in polcomm" remains sorely lacking.

The purpose of this piece is to provoke disciplinary introspection by reigniting a longstanding debate in a new light. What is the place of qualitative methods and interpretive approaches in political communication scholarship today? We enter this debate as early-career scholars invested in building methodological and epistemological flexibility into the fabric of political communication's future. Our intent is not to discredit quantitative methods or downplay the value of existing qualitative contributions to political communication. Instead, our analysis focuses on recent trends in qualitative research and the vital contributions it offers in today's tumultuous political landscape. While our discussion centers on digital media, with a particular emphasis on social media, our observations can also be applied to other political communication contexts. Ultimately, we contend that increasing qualitative literacy and support for qualitative methods stands to benefit the field as a whole.

An Update to the State of Qualitative PolComm Research

In their 2015 piece, Karpf and colleagues conducted a simple review to examine the prevalence of qualitative scholarship in the field's flagship journal, *Political Communication.* The review revealed that only 43 out of 258 (16.7%) articles published between 2003 and 2015 were qualitative, with only 21 articles (8.1% of the total) based on "primary data produced through qualitative fieldwork" (p. 1891). Following their example, we briefly reviewed the issues of *Political Communication* that have appeared since. Using the approach adopted by Karpf et al., we considered articles to be "qualitative" when they were primarily based on "interpretative, historical, critical, and rhetorical analyses as well as those premised on fieldwork (defined expansively as interviews or observation)" (p. 1891).

In 2015, Karpf and colleagues called for a "new era of qualitative research" in political communication (p. 1890). Yet we find that *fewer* qualitative studies have, in fact, been published in *Political Communication* in the years since. Our results show that of 258 empirical papers published in *Political Communication* between 2015 and 2023, only 18 (7.0%) articles included qualitative methods. Of these, 8 (3.1%) were mixed-methods studies using qualitative and quantitative methods together, while 10 (3.9%) were purely qualitative. Surely, *Political Communication* is only one journal, and peer-reviewed publication is only one metric through which academic research is valued. However, this journal represents the cutting-edge of current scholarship and is a top-cited publication in the communication discipline. This is not to say that qualitative methods have not gained traction or recognition in recent years, which have seen many examples of rich and impactful interview-based, and ethnographic, and qualitative content analytic political communication scholarship (e.g., Kreiss et al., 2018; Toff & Nielsen, 2018; Van Duyn, 2021).

So why has qualitative research remained rare in *Political Communication*? The most obvious answer to this question is that qualitative research has been fragmented across politically-oriented journals, like the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, and other subject area publications, like *New Media & Society*. This analysis presents a juncture to consider what makes a welcoming journal for qualitative and interpretive scholarship as well as how the lack of a central hub for qualitative political communication research might undercut its contributions and limit the field as a whole. However, beyond journal selection, we argue that the "marginalization" of qualitative methods in political communication scholarship has also *shifted* in recent years due to changing methodological practices and the emergence of new communication technologies that shape political phenomena.

Shifting "Marginalization" of Qualitative Methods in PolComm

Political communication has its origins in behaviorist currents from fields like social psychology, political science, and mass communication research (Ryfe, 2001 in Karpf et al., 2015, p. 1891). This has led political communication scholars to emphasize individual attitudes and opinions, elections, and formal political processes, focusing on measuring "effects" and "influence." After the decades-long dominance of experimental and survey methods premised on instrumental rationality (Barnhurst, 2011)—the political communication field has recently welcomed the "computational turn." Though seldom spelled out, the heightened attention to computational methods is underpinned with an ideology of big data, which assumes that

expansive datasets and computer-assisted analysis offer superior intelligence and erudition (Mills, 2018).

Undoubtedly, big data offers important insights into communication phenomena, but more data does not necessarily tell the richer stories of political culture. For example, many forms of political (dis)engagement do not necessarily produce trace data suited for computational analysis. Strong reliance on trace data is likely to overlook subtle meaning-making practices, such as social media "lurking" that do not readily translate into quantifiable behaviors. Moreover, computational approaches depend heavily on the content that platforms and users make publicly available. However, as social media gradually move toward limited, closed networks and small group communication on messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram or ephemeral platforms like Snapchat and BeReal (e.g., Bogost, 2022), accessing and contextualizing these sorts of networks requires skills and sensitivities predicated on relationship building, not just relationship analyzing. Computational and qualitative methods are well-positioned to work in tandem through mixed methods approaches that integrate big data with in-depth analysis (e.g., Bail, 2021; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), but formal attention to their synergies remains limited.

Qualitative Contributions: Capturing Depth and Complexity

Qualitative and interpretive research is essential to the continued scholarly project of political communication, both as a standalone approach and in combination with a diverse array of other methods. Qualitative interview research and participant observation prioritizes "thick" accounts of people's experiences and sensemaking related to political communication. Similarly, qualitative textual analysis allows researchers to capture discursive constructions of meaning and the narratives we live and research by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1983). Thus, these methods are instrumental for theory development and revision through (a) in-depth inquiry, (b) research built on trust and collaboration with participants, and (c) robustness to change.

Qualitative methods forge "deep stories" that can support nuanced theory development and complement insights from quantitative and computational research. These findings can sometimes seem contrary to prevailing ideals and normative understandings of politics. For example, recent interview studies on the complexities of news avoidance extend existing theorizing to offer alternate explanations of behaviors as rooted in individuals' emotional experiences of civic life (Toff & Nielsen, 2022). Qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography place the everyday behaviors and observations of research participants at the center of inquiry.

Qualitative methods also offer rich data gathered through sustained contact and relationship-building with participants instead of companies or platforms. Building and maintaining these relationships requires close attention to ethical issues such as researcher-participant power relations and confidentiality. In platform configurations—such as messenger apps—that position individuals as major data sources and gatekeepers (Rossini, 2023), a growing focus on participatory research methods further suggests the potential of meaningfully involving citizens in the research process from its inception. Approaches that meet citizens within their accounts, experiences, and curiosities of politics can spur reflection on accepted knowledge

and forge alternate research pathways—in contrast to research dependent on companies' or platforms' changing APIs and policies.

In research on media technologies and political phenomena, the impact of societal change is a constant force. Technologies and platforms that were once popular will eventually become obsolete, while political events become part of cultural memory. Longstanding communication practices outlast technologies or events, but understanding how they evolve requires theoretical maintenance. To build and refine theories that can stand the test of time, in-depth inquiry and the prioritization of diverse experiences are invaluable. Qualitative research is fundamental to building a field that remains robust to social, technological, and political change as it happens.

Conclusions

Ultimately, we call for a more epistemologically flexible and open approach to political communication research. Highlighting the criticality of qualitative and interpretive research in today's media landscape, and building upon Karpf et al.'s (2015) evaluation of the underappreciated role of qualitative research in the field, we recommend two essential steps for supporting and strengthening qualitative research in political communication.

Increasing Qualitative Literacy in the PolComm Field

Achieving visibility and strengthening the position of qualitative social science in political communication requires increasing qualitative literacy among quantitative scholars (Small & Calarco, 2022)—the lack of which is particularly cumbersome in the process of academic peer-review. It is essential to note that the goal is not to directly increase *the amount* of interpretive research. Instead, we argue for increasing the number of people who comprehend the basic tenets of interpretive approaches, departing from the notion that solely quantitative research is "evidence-based" (Goyanes, 2020).

Qualitative and interpretive approaches are not subject to the same standards of statistical generalizability that quantitative methods utilize. Instead, they involve key considerations of depth and transparency that enable equally rigorous research from an alternate point of view. Despite operating within different standards of "reliability" and "validity", these methods still offer unique contributions that can and should be mobilized in intersubjective conversation with quantitative methodologies. Nevertheless, it is not only qualitative scholars who need to learn to speak the language of quantitative social science (as commonly advised in graduate courses and expected by quantitatively trained journal reviewers), but also vice versa. Given the complex nature of contemporary political communication, the field needs methodological polyglots more than ever.

Strengthening the Position of Qualitative PolComm Scholarship

Forces that propel the future of political communication scholarship, such as special issue calls, course syllabi, and academic job advertisements, have given special attention to quantitative methods and, most recently, data science as highly valued skills in research on political topics. In this context, reasserting and strengthening qualitative and interpretive positions requires greater support for developing qualitative foundations. Realistically, this can be achieved by gradually building footholds for an emerging generation of qualitative political communication

scholars on a global scale. These footholds can be allocated through temporal resources, such as devoting attention to methodological pluralism in graduate coursework; financial resources, such as grant-funding and job opportunities; and knowledge resources, such as conference panels and special issues.

Finally, we must maintain a continued and lively debate on quality standards, innovation, and open science practices in qualitative research, which are currently largely set by quantitative scholars (e.g., data accessibility for survey research is not comparable to publishing interview transcripts or field notes). In the future, journals and gatekeepers in the field need to be flexible to qualitative standards of transparency (e.g., discussing positionality) and engagement of qualitative scholars in these matters is pertinent.

All of this requires more network and capacity building among qualitative and mixed-methods scholars at different career stages. Collectively achieving these goals will enable us to better mobilize *all* of the research methods at our disposal, further bolstering the potential of political communication research in tumultuous political times.

Acknowledgements

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