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“New” Methods, “New” Challenges

Danielle K. Brown, Michigan State University

Kathleen Searles, Louisiana State University

The current state of politics and communication is one of precarity. The causes, effects, and objects we study have profound implications for our world, which puts the subfield in a unique position to exert influence not just on scholarship, but on public discourse. To rise to this occasion, we’re called to continue addressing the most critical problems in our society, while also prioritizing and engaging in the difficult internal work of ensuring our subfield is representative and inclusive.

Most agree that increased inclusivity is normatively vital to the institution, and efforts to act on this conclusion are evident. For example, the flagship journal *Political Communication* formed an ad hoc committee to identify strategies to increase the geographic, topical, and demographic diversity of published work (Lawrence 2022). However, what is often lost in these conversations is how important such efforts are for the robustness of our inquiry. By changing processes that affect how and what is published, researchers can disrupt routine approaches to studying political communication. Doing so will aid in the recruitment of new subfield members, and ultimately, new perspectives, different experiences, expertise, and methods will advance the subfield.

And yet, to meet this challenge in a way that is generative rather than extractive, *there must first be an acknowledgment that the very idea of positioning methodological shifts as “new” is problematic*. It illustrates how the White gaze attributes value to the work of scholars of color once they share membership in the subfield – erasing a history of methodological contributions in other subject areas while also claiming those authors as their own. Thus, even as the subfield seeks to expand its parameters and build inclusivity, it may be inadvertently acting as Columbus, “discovering” terrain already covered by scholars who have been kept in the margins.

Where has political communication failed in the past? Much misinformation research misses out on a long tradition of studying the effects of non-credible claims in Black communities (Gamble 1997; Vercellotti and Brewer 2006); scholars paint a portraiture of Black people as victims of the digital divide rather than early adopters in the proliferation of information communication technology (Everett 2009); research focuses on echo chambers to the detriment

of understanding how marginal publics create spaces for Black activists (Squires 2002; Jackson et al. 2020); and public opinion measures and methods that fail to validly capture the ideology and attitudes of Black Americans call into question our most stalwart theories (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Harris-Lacewell 2023; Jefferson 2023).

Canons of research have provided evidence of the authoritarian nature of the racialized hierarchies that govern countries like the United States, and their conclusions call into question the legitimacy of systems that undergird democracy (Mills 2017). From the documentation of rampant and persistent state violence and the reification of racist tropes through political rhetoric and media content (Brown 2021; Dixon 2019; Richardson 2020), there is significant distance between how democracy is conceptualized and the reality of living in one for many people (Francis 2022). Yet, many political communications researchers were caught off guard by events that suggest a democracy in decline, such as the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. State Capitol, despite ample evidence (with some exceptions such as Mourão 2019, Van Duyn 2021). The fight to defend democracy was suddenly urgent for many scholars; such a groundswell of urgency was largely absent when countries like Thailand watched their democracy crumble after a successful coup d'etat in 2014, or after repeated extrajudicial killings of Black people in the U.S. Many in the field persist with this blind spot to the peril of the discipline (Gaither and Sims 2022; Kreiss and McGregor 2023).

Beyond these gaps, the methodological tools used to conduct this research can also create “new” challenges. Accounting for groups that have been underrepresented in political communication research means rethinking standard approaches to methods and research design (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Harries 2022). Our survey instruments have been attuned to address White people’s problems and perceptions. For example, common survey measures like political ideology do not adequately address the politics of Black people (Jefferson 2023). The foundations for such consideration can be found as early the beginning of the 20th century, when W. E. B. DuBois (Dubois 1904) offered scholars a framework for understanding the psychological and sociological dualities Black people experience and use to navigate racialized oppression and marginalization.

Methods of research distribution also create “new” challenges. Public-facing work can put scholars in vulnerable positions online, where abuse and harassment are used to intimidate, with very real offline consequences. The experience of abusive comments was familiar to many faculty of color long before digital and social media. They have long dealt with racist, gendered, and xenophobic comments on course evaluations (Heffernan 2023) and from their peers (Generett and Jefferies 2003). Institutional support systems for scholars who face such occupational intimidation are far from uniform.

For this official reboot of the *Political Communication Report* to focus on new methodological diversity is an opportunity to first, as a subfield, reflect on the system that has permitted primarily White scholars to ignore research by scholars at the margins, primarily scholars of color and those from countries beyond the US and Europe, for far too long (Freelon et al. 2023). This acknowledgment points to some practical strategies for ensuring our subfield’s important efforts to diversify the voices of political communication are not contributing to harm.

Strategies for a More Inclusive Approach to Political Communication

First, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone has equal access to safety. U.S. institutions of higher education have a long history of using and abusing Black people, and today they persist as sites of discrimination (Wilder 2013; Dancy et al. 2018). Moreover, the experience of racism affects mental health, with a range of consequences from depression to anxiety (Umberson 2017; Williams 2018). Considering the cost of racial stressors in the context of academic publishing, the pressures to publish or perish may be more easily mitigated by scholars who do not already endure these mental health taxes, perpetuating existing inequities in the field (Buggs et al. 2020).

Similarly, some topics and methods bring scholars in direct contact with oppressive and harmful systems which can significantly affect their well-being (Milner 2007). For example, conducting research on racism while also embedded in the same oppressive systems is likely to be disproportionately taxing for scholars who are also negatively affected by those systems. At the same time, researchers who hold identities that have been marginalized in societies are often penalized for conducting “me-search” or research conducted on communities in which the researcher shares an identity (Harris 2021). White scholars who boast conclusions about predominantly White samples are rarely concerned about or threatened by the same critique. Simply acknowledging these inequalities is not enough, and leads us to a more tangible call to action, and our first proposed strategy for a more inclusive subfield:

Use Political Communication Section monies to establish a fund that supports legal fees/mental health costs of scholars who experience harm as a result of their work.

This suggestion ties into another inequality that makes inclusivity a more difficult task for political communication, and that is the pressing problem of online occupational intimidation, where scholars may face online abuse and harassment meant to silence or stall their work (Parker 2015). Importantly, the threats that a BIPOC woman faces when enduring an online campaign of abuse are categorically different – more gendered and violent (Posetti and Shabbir 2022) – than a White woman. If that same woman faces scrutiny from the media or public officials for her work, she is also less likely to be protected by her institution (Crenshaw 1995; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2008; Bailey and Trudy 2018; Robertson 2021). Considering the push for political communication scholars to do more public-facing work (Nielsen 2018) – which will require personal and professional tradeoffs for many scholars – the subfield should consider the unequal distribution of these online harms. This leads us to our second proposed strategy ([which we’ve made a similar argument for in a journalistic context in Brown and Searles 2022](#)):

Support your colleagues targeted by online occupational intimidation and push for institutions to produce relevant policies and resources.

Additionally, when we expand whom and what is considered to be an object of political communication research, we are not doing so from a neutral position. Researchers can learn from critical cultural and qualitative work (Karpf et al. 2015; Mokhtar 2017), where conversations of safety and access are more common (e.g., Mun 1998; Roguski and Tauri 2013; Letherby 2020). The field of political communication is dominated by a quantitative approach to inquiry, as well as the United States case (Boulianne 2019). The result is that many members of the subfield have not been compelled to consider the role of their own identity (Hooker

2017; Richards 2020). Such lack of reflection means that our scholarship often defaults to the experiences of White people, and although such positionality requires value-laden assumptions, it is upheld through a process of elevating objectivity and empirical rigor (Harris 2021). The role of positionality is critical to qualitative research, a method that demands self-reflexivity (Milner 2007; Nencel 2014). To engage in self-reflexivity requires qualitative researchers to position themselves to the topic, the participants, and the design, as well as their perceived position by others (Holmes 2020). Researchers can look to this tradition of self-reflexivity to increase attunement more broadly, would benefit the field more broadly by encouraging researchers to consider the ways they benefit from existing systems of oppression (e.g., Irwin 2006; Reynolds 2016; Harries 2022). Critical quantitative work offers us another path forward in this regard (e.g., Brown and Mourao 2022; Freelon et al. 2018; Freelon et al. 2023; Holt and Sweitzer 2020; Stamps 2020). Such consideration is necessary for all political communication if we are to sustain our efforts toward a more inclusive subfield (Buggs et al. 2019; Wilson and Hendrix 2022). This brings us to our third proposed strategy:

Read, cite, collaborate, advocate, and recommend researchers that have been traditionally marginalized by the subfield.

Simply, we are advocating for meaningful allyship, or as Clark (Clark 2019) defines it: “the process of affirming and taking informed action on behalf of the subjugated group.” Otherwise, bringing in new voices will only satisfy our own narrow interests in performing diversity, equity, inclusion, and access, rather than actually creating a more inclusive subfield (Wright 2002; Wilson and Hendrix 2022; Gaither and Sims 2022). To this end, ask questions: Is it really a gap in the literature, or is it a blind spot in your perception? Did you theorize a new concept or just find a new word for an existing concept? Are you colonizing an area of research that has been stewarded by scholars in adjacent subfields, or working from different methodological orientations? Have you considered collaborating with scholars who might be disproportionately and negatively affected by oppression? By challenging our own deficit perspectives, we can better understand how our subfield’s norms perpetuate inequality (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Richards 2020). This strategy is seemingly simple, but without purposeful action to this effect, we are putting our efforts into “discovering” methods and topics that have long been flourishing in other subfields; efforts that could be better assigned to lifting scholars that have been doing this work.

Conclusion

To celebrate the methodological diversity that has resulted from inclusion efforts, the subfield must acknowledge its ethical responsibility to fully include those that were previously ignored, discounted, or disallowed from membership, many of whom did the work that makes the discipline’s forward progress possible.

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Danielle K. Brown

1855 Urban and Community Journalism Associate Professor
School of Journalism
Michigan State University

Kathleen Searles

Sheldon Beychok Distinguished Associate Professor
Political Science, Manship School of Mass Communication
Louisiana State University