THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION

AND INFORMATION ABOUT PUBLIC AFFAIRS

A proposed topic
for the Conference on Issue Voting,
Cognitive Processes and Rational Choice

Peter Clarke
Professor and Chairman, Department of Journalism;
and Mass Communication Research Program

University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

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Introduction.

This memorandum argues for an expanded study in pre-election surveys of relationships between communication about, and knowing about political affairs. This relationship should be detailed in ways that recognize the environment of media and their content and relevant aspects of citizens' behavior.

Data about this relationship should expand theories of political behavior and communication—and help inform journalists so that they may conduct public communication in more rational and effective ways.

The need for data about communication and knowing.

Since 1952 the Michigan election surveys have accumulated a wealth of important findings about citizens' voting choices. The changing dynamics of different presidential and off-year elections have been examined. Secondary analysis has dissected the structure of political ideologies and the correlates of political system trust, among many other topics.

Comparatively few findings have been generated about the acquisition and development of political information. Studies have been absorbed with explaining attitude formation and candidate choice, rather than with the informational maps that may shape evaluation and preference.

The scholarly preoccupations evident in the surveys are understandable and have been vastly productive. But they have limited the applicability of data to the improvement of journalism about political campaigns. To be sure, the content of journalistic election coverage has profited from a richer understanding of vote decision. But practitioners of journalism have not seen their activities illuminated often in survey findings.

The most recent studies, starting with 1974, have begun to correct for this ommission. More detailed measures of communication variables have been included. This welcome development deserves expansion.

Practitioners in the mass media will see even greater value in the surveys if questionnaires and study designs attend more fully to the goals of journalism. Ideally news professionals seek to create an informed public.

It may seem odd—or even presumptuous—to intrude the interests of an outside group into scholarly affairs like election surveys. Two reasons prompt me to speak for these outsiders.

Long and continuing discussions with journalists and with scholarly colleagues convince me that both groups share an interest in "cognitive structures" as criterion variables. And second, there is urgent need for improved journalistic performance; improvement must rely, I am persuaded, on an empirically based understanding of the media's educational role.

If the national surveys are instrumental toward advancing this understanding, researchers who take part can gain a new form of satisfaction from contributing to the public good.

Measuring political information.

The study of what people know about politics requires more sophisticated concepts than heretofore measured in most sample surveys. The typical analysis (see attached paper, "Newspapers, Television and Political Reasoning") examines the gross distribution of awareness about candidates or public issues.

A more differentiated view should be sought, one that is not cramped into a mold limited by campaign ingredients. At least three foci should be considered:

How people cognize institutions in the political system and the most fundamental procedures by which these parts operate.

How people cognize political actors, including candidates, and relationships of similarity or distance among them.

How people cognize political problems, order them according to importance, and associate them with political actors and parts of the political system.

The Conference on Issue Voting, Cognitive Processes and Rational Choice will want to explore theoretical models that capture the relational properties of cognitive maps, as well as their components. And discussions should address the trade-offs in measurement strategy. Fixed-response scales enable elegant statistical treatment—and crush respondents into the observer's conceptual scheme. Open-end and ideographic approaches wreak less damage in measurement reactivity. But they produce coding headaches and yield data susceptible to relatively simple analytic techniques.

I hope that as these arguments are waged, the voice of the journalist might be heard. How surveys define the dimensions of information will control whether or not results will relate easily to the work of professional news people.

An example from our research may help illustrate. We have been interested in the way communication processes link differently to what people know about local, compared to national political issues.[1] We used an ideographic approach in one study of 400 adults in Toledo, Ohio.

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[1] Philip Palmgreen and Peter Clarke, "Media Agenda Setting for Local and National Issues," Communication Research (in press); Philip Palmgreen, Mass Communication and Political Knowledge: The Effects of Political Level and Mass Media Coverage on Political Learning (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1975); Peter Clarke and Philip Palmgreen, "Media Use, Political Knowledge and Participation in Public Affairs," paper presented at the International Sociological Association, August 1974.

Half the people were asked to nominate an important public issue facing the national government; the rest were asked to specify a local issue.

With both groups our measure of information followed conceptual dimensions we hoped would offer journalistic rewards as well as theoretical insights. We distinguished between three types of cognitions about problems and asked separate, open-end questions eliciting information about each.

Respondents were asked for _salience information._ Questions inquired whether the nominated problem affected the person or his family's property, their health or how they spent their free time.

Questions also sought _actor information._ Were there any individuals or groups—inside or outside government—thought to be at work or fighting over how the problem should be solved?

Finally, the interviews elicited _proposal information._ Did the respondent know of any ideas that had been put forward for dealing with the problem?

Saliences, actors and proposals represent different targets for journalistic energy. And we find that the cognitions are structured interestingly in the public mind. There is a rather strong Guttman pattern (R=.87 by Edwards' criterion) suggesting a sequence by which information about public issues may be acquired.

Aside from persons with no information at all, the least informed possess only salience information. They see personal impacts, but nothing more. Persons a little better informed combine salience with proposal information. They've become aware of how the problem might be solved.

Only the informational elite know about political actors, inside or outside government, who are working on the problem. One supposes that this informational elite is best equipped to petition their government.

We speculate that perception of an issue's personal impact (on property, health or spare time) constitutes a pre-condition to acquiring information about the machinery of public policy (actors and their ideas) that might resolve the problem.

Here lies a problem for journalistic performance. The habits of news coverage are not atuned to reporting about issue salience. For example, we have content analyzed press accounts of issues like air pollution to find only scattered references to the effects pollutants have on house and auto paint, yard shrubbery and the public's health. Our survey results confirm the suspicion that journalistic inattention to issue salience blocks the spread of public understanding about political actors and policy alternatives. Correlations are higher between use of news media and possessing actor and proposal information, than between media use and salience information.

Other findings from this research could be cited. But my purpose here is not to urge these dimensions of information for adoption by the national surveys. Instead I hope to illustrate a point of view about how criterion variables might be defined. The Conference will surely seek theoretical coherence and analytic flexibility. Surveys should also be invested with the capacity to discover how cognitive structures arise. Familiar distinctions between candidate characteristics and issues, while fascinating to the academic community, may bear little resemblence to the way politics is conveyed in media.

Communication structures are likely to be repeated in cognitive structures, and will suggest criteria by which vote decisions are reached.

Measuring communication and its effects.

As the attached report and other recent research make clear, news media exert visible and important effects on public understanding of campaigns and politics. But tracing these effects requires forms of measurement more sophisticated than conventionally presented in survey research designs.

Interviews should be used to capture peoples' reconstruction of the messages about politics to which they have been exposed. Message discrimination behavior can be segmented according to aspects that are appropriate to the study of cognitive structure and vote decision.

The simple measurement of time people spend with different media will not suffice.

Contextual data should be assembled about features of the media environment in which people are imbedded. These features include media competition (see attached paper), audience reach and number and kind of outlets.

Content analysis must be used to account for the focus that media coverage takes and for structural contingencies in the content of messages about campaigns, political contenders and issues.

We can attain understanding of communication effects on information levels through research that embraces: a) the institutions through which information is transmitted; b) the shape in which information is presented; and c) the ways in which information gains attention. Of course, collection of both respondent data and "objective" data about communication multiplies

research costs. The Conference will want to work toward identifying the critical features of institutions and content that might constrain or facilitate the distribution of information.

Redesigned surveys will also want to account for the different character as well as magnitude of media effects across sub-groups in the population. This obvious principle is illustrated by an analysis drawn from the 1974 Michigan data. Interviews conducted in states having Senate races can be used to trace different patterns of information holding among newspaper readers.

The analysis focuses on two kinds of information holding about the Senate contest; they are statistically independent. People were asked to explain why they wanted to vote for or against the party contenders; responses conveyed impressions of the candidates. People were also presented with a list of political issues (inflation, race relations, etc.) and asked to indicate any that were emphasized in the campaign; responses can be summed to produce an issue awareness score.

People who follow public affairs and the campaign in newspapers possess greater amounts of both kinds of information--candidate attributes and issue awareness. This should not surprise us. It is less obvious that newspaper reading might yield different patterns of information, holding constant the level of interest in politics each person brings to reading.

Consider the newspaper users in Table 1, separated according to their interest in following public affairs.

TABLE 1

Information Holding about the Senate Campaign, by
Interest in Public Affairs: Newspaper Users Only

	Interest in Public Affairs		
Pattern of Information holding:	high	medium	low
Low information levels	9%	20%	40%
Mainly candidate atributes	36	24	15
Mainly issue awareness	14	19	33
Both cand. attrib. & issue awareness	41	39	12
	100%	100%	100%

Among persons highly interested in politics, we observe a tendency for
candidate attributes to be recalled with greater frequency than issues
(36 per cent, compared to 14 per cent). The reverse holds among persons
least interested in political activities (15 per cent, compared to 33 per
cent).

This bit of data is not conclusive, and other variables need to be
controlled. But it would appear the motivation to attend to politics
helps shape the character as well as volume of information one retains from
newspaper accounts.

This may be explained by the predictability with which campaign issues
become apparent, year after year—contrasted against the relative change
and uncertainly created by emerging political figures. Highly motivated
persons may be quick to learn about the changing parade of politicians,
while the disinterested newspaper users either learn little, or are only
able to repeat the familiar litany of public questions dominating almost
any race for federal office.

The data in Table 1 suffer from limitations that should be reduced in future surveys. Information holding has not been measured through a coordinated set of items that lend themselves easily to detection of error variance. The analysis does not account for the content of newspaper coverage. Nor have we distinguished between early campaign and late campaign in the different opportunities that surely exist for communication and learning.

But the most important limitation stems from how variables have been defined. It is not clear why the measurement of cognitive structure should be confined to candidates or should rest on the emphasis accorded to a predetermined list of issues.

Conclusion.

Both academic and non-academic communities will welcome the range of imagination that the Board of Overseers can bring to design of future election studies. The Board's task is most challenging, considering the intense competition that is bound to arise over questionnaire space, sample frames, and the advisability of data-gathering supplements to the surveys.