

Political Culture and Political Communication

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Political culture consists of widely shared, fundamental beliefs that have political consequences. Political culture shapes how individuals and the society act and react politically. It determines the types of governmental institutions, how much authority is vested in the government, who is given authority and power in the society and government, who is allowed to participate in decision-making, and various other elements which relate to the interactions of the people with their leaders. (See Lane, 1992, p. 364-365).

The beliefs come first. In the United States, these would include democracy, populism, freedom (from and to), rule of law, limited government, equality of opportunity (but not of outcome or condition), competitive individualism, the free market, and private property. These beliefs are widely shared and transmitted from generation to generation.

The political culture approach argues "that 1) people's responses to their situations are shaped by subjective orientations, which vary cross-culturally and within subcultures; and 2) these variations in subjective orientations reflect differences in one's socialization experience, with early learning conditioning later learning, making the former more difficult to undo. Consequently, actions cannot be interpreted as simply the result of external situations: enduring differences in cultural learning also play an essential part in shaping what people think and do" (Inglehart, 1990, P. 19).

A political culture is not necessarily state or even society-wide: different groups within a country may and often do have their own particular political cultures. Nor do all the members of a group invariably hold the elements of their political culture with the same intensity: U.S. elites are usually more attracted to freedom than equality, while the mass may opt for the opposite; college professors are inclined to respond to freedom more than democracy, their students often take the reverse position.

Some of the elements of a political culture may conflict, even be contradictory. Freedom can be incompatible with equality, democracy with limited government, and populism with private property. In the United States, the urge to intervene abroad conflicts with the impulse to isolationism.

Ideas Have Consequences

The ideas that go to make up political culture are not innocuous, they have political consequences. The history of the people of many states can be viewed as a still ongoing struggle to achieve the political culture idea of democracy. In the U.S. this has entailed the enfranchisement of women and African Americans. Legally

enforced racial segregation in the American South was attacked and ultimately nullified for clearly violating the widely accepted idea of legal equality.

Political culture sets the framework, the intellectual environment, within which government and politics take place. From political cultural beliefs one can, in Wildavsky's phrase, derive "miles of preferences" (Wildavsky, 1987, p. 8).

The connection is made to the words, behavior and actions of public officials, both elected and appointed, those seeking political office, leaders of political parties and interest groups, and others trying to influence public affairs and policies, in three general ways. First, political culture constrains their actions: even if inclined otherwise, they usually refrain from taking positions or from implementing policies that blatantly violate the elements of the political culture.

Second, it provides them with opportunities to propose and advance policies, to take action. Thus U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson invoked equality in successfully promoting passage of civil rights legislation during his presidency.

Third and relatedly, they can use some element of the political culture in trying to justify their proposals and actions as President Bill Clinton has done in his efforts to rescind the ban against homosexuals joining the U.S. military.

Complicating the situation is the fact that the component terms of a political culture, words such as democracy, equality, and freedom, are often malleable if not unconscionably vague. Moreover, the consequences of actions taken in their name are often uncertain-cause and effect are unclear. Which means the words can and often are used to justify quite different policies on the same subject: both supporters and opponents of American military involvement in Vietnam justified their positions in political cultural terms.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Culture is learned. It varies from one society or group in society to another. The actual and potential role of the media in shaping a political culture is thus self-evident. The media transmit political culture from one generation to another. They diffuse values, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts, through society in ways that cause some of them to be "widely shared". Indeed, in Communications and Political Development, Lucian Pye has claimed that the "flow of communications determines the direction and the pace of dynamic social development". It is therefore possible "to analyze all social processes in terms of the structure, content, and flow of communications" (1963, p. 4). Mass communication provides the possibility of a quick diffusion of new ideas into a society and hence the possibility of more rapid

changes in political cultures. These are important concepts as the scope of global communications rapidly increases and the barriers to the flow of media around the world fall. In sum, the media are sometimes able to create, reinforce, and change political cultures, often with concomitant effects on the behavior of rulers and publics.

Targets of Influence

Rulers, public officials, leaders of organizations, and their advisors have always been aware of the importance of the media in advocating and advancing their views, and attacking the arguments and positions of their antagonists. They have three fundamental targets.

Actual and potential supporters are the most immediate. Control by leaders of an organ of communication is often essential to build and sustain a political group or movement. As Lenin wrote at the turn of the century about the Bolshevik movement in What Is To Be Done? "there is no other way of training strong political organizations except through the medium of an All Russian newspaper" (1969, p. 157).

Second, the people of a nation or society are inevitably and invariably targets of influence, usually by their own rulers. Indeed, governmental control of the main media of communications, as in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, has been a perennial feature of totalitarian states. Propaganda is pervasive and continual, usually directed at promoting the elements of the political culture of the rulers' ideology.

Third, influence attempts are also directed abroad at the governments and people of other states. One need only turn on a short wave radio to encounter the myriad government funded broadcasts of numerous states presenting their points of view. The major world powers established formal organizations (as with the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Marti for the United States), to disseminate their views abroad and to try to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of hostile or unfriendly governments.

Relatedly, influence is sought within foreign countries. This may be accomplished clandestinely, as the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency did by subsidizing some anti-Communist publications published outside the U.S., and the Soviet Union did by subsidizing foreign Communist parties, including the one in the U.S.

Other foreign governments have been known to hire American public relations firms to improve their reputation and promote their policies within the U.S. The most blatant and successful contemporary example was perpetrated by the government of

Kuwait which employed the Washington, D.C. based Hill and Knowlton before and during the Gulf War between the U.S. led coalition forces and Iraq (Manheim, forthcoming).

A recent innovation is for leaders and their representatives to gain access to and express their viewpoints publicly on the airwaves in other countries, particularly on U.S. television.

Governments are most active in the influence business, usually directing their efforts at all three targets simultaneously. But they are not alone. Antagonists may be at work. Thus "terrorist" organizations also try to influence all three targets: their members and actual and potential supporters, people within the states in which they operate, and opinion abroad (Paletz and Schmid, 1992).

MEDIA CONTENT

We have been discussing deliberate efforts, mainly by governments, to use the media to influence the views and concomitantly the political cultures of people at home and abroad. But in many states, governments often do not control, let alone own, the media. In societies where most of the media are privately owned and relatively free media content is primarily determined by profit seeking (or at least survival) and other motives.

In most states, therefore, media content appears in four basic forms: entertainment (the bulk of movies, much of television, music, etc.), advertising, pseudo-news, and news.

News is obviously political. We would argue however, that, no matter how oblique and indirectly, the other three forms all contain political content and purvey some basic values. They thus have the potential to influence political culture -but not necessarily in ways public officials would prefer. Indeed, the less apparent the political material, the more potent it may be. The movie JFK probably influenced more views about the assassination of that president than the Warren Commission Report, innumerable books, and thirty years of newspaper stories.

Television, situation comedies, soap operas, TV dramas, and sports likewise all more or less contain political meaning. They are not just entertainment. For example, sports as shown on American television "emphasize competition, individualism, and success" (Paletz and Entman, 198 1, p. 173), thus reinforcing the political culture's competitive individualism ethos.

The effects can be more complicated. Some feminists in the U.S. deplore the

showing on television of re-runs of a 1950's comedy series entitled "I Love Lucy" depicting the misadventures of a rather scatter-brained women. But some feminists in India welcome the show on television in their country for its depiction of a free and relatively independent individual compared to the lot of the typical Indian woman.

Advertising too can be politically culturally potent, promoting not just products but such values as individualism, consumerism, sexism (the use of the female body to try to make certain products desirable), and tolerance (by showing members of different ethnic groups working and playing together).

Much of what appears in the media falls somewhere between entertainment and news. We call it pseudo-news. It too is rife with elements of political culture. Newspapers -the Herald-Sun of Durham, North Carolina is typical- try to attract, retain, and regale readers with sections on money and finance, science, health and medicine, automobiles, and real estate; personal advice, medical, and humor columns (the three are often interchangeable); and such other staples as stock market data, comics, reviews (of movies and restaurants), and obituaries (a potent source of cultural and personal values).

NEWS

Government and politics, the actions and activities of leading public officials and other authority holders, and elections are all news. Disasters wreaked by nature and humans are news, as are wars, revolutions and coups, conflicts and controversies, outrages, and scandals.

News is timely, something that just happened, such as an assassination attempt on a prime minister; or is just exposed -a politician's suddenly revealed extra-marital affair even if it happened years ago. Timeliness also means that new information or at least details are usually necessary for a story to stay in the news. Stories with a powerful emotional impact are an exception, they remain newsworthy until resolved. The most famous and extreme example was the American embassy hostages in Iran: the story was kept in the news until their fate was resolved.

Proximity also matters. Nearby events are generally more newsworthy than similar ones far away. A local murder is given more prominence than many deaths in a distant country.

Obtaining News

Also important are the processes by which news is obtained, for journalists are

employed by organizations (newspapers, television stations, magazines, etc.). In gathering news they follow work routines and observe the norms and conventions of their profession.

Sometimes journalists develop news. The most time consuming and expensive form is investigative reporting which entails in depth probing into a subject.

More often than developing the news, reporters actively gather it. They are on the scene of an event.

Usually, though, reporters' stories are based on second-hand accounts, what people tell them happened; or third-hand retelling, what people tell them others told them happened.

The news media rely on the wire services for much their international and national news stories; the newspapers use their own reporters primarily to cover their localities. Wire service stories tend to provide the basic "facts" (who, when, where, and what) and not to tackle the more complex subjects of why and with what effects.

News gathering can be difficult, if not impossible. Events occur in far-off places. Governments, intent on preventing the release of bad news, refuse entry to foreign journalists, prevent them from reporting if they get in, and censor their dispatches when written. Some of the worst horrors of the late twentieth century were barely reported at the time, for example the slaughter in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge. Even the supposedly most open of governments have been known to deny reporters access to some of its undertakings as the U.S. did when it invaded Grenada; or to restrict access and censor coverage as with the Gulf War.

News gathering is facilitated by predictable and recurring events such as elections, trials, legislative activities, court decisions, and by events such as speeches and press conferences that are scheduled in advance.

Much news comes from regular, usually governmental channels. One important reason is that journalists' news gathering time and tools are limited: they cannot compel people to talk to them, or reveal useful information even if they do talk. So reporters often depend on others such as legislative committees, government departments and commissions and regulatory agencies which conduct investigations, hold hearings, and issue reports. Increasingly, the press also draws on the more or less reliable work of academic researchers by summarizing soon to be or just published research (prestigious medical journals are particularly favored) on health, psychological (personal relations), social, and media subjects.

Beats

Beats facilitate and routinize news gathering. Reporters on beats are responsible for covering particular institutions, usually governmental, and their occupants.

Each of these institutions has its complement of press secretaries, spokespersons, and information offices designed to deal with the press as effectively as possible in the interests of the organization and its leaders. They try to control and shape the information flow, structure the news, and coordinate responses.

Public officials' effectiveness in managing (manipulating) the news certainly differs. A study K. Kendall Guthrie and I did showed that coverage of President Ronald Reagan was surprisingly varied by focus and favorability: television news turned out to be significantly more favorable than the New York Times (Paletz and Guthrie, 1987).

Sources

In gathering news and working their beats, reporters necessarily interact with and often rely extensively on sources who provide them with information. Whether they do so eagerly, willingly, reluctantly, or under extreme duress depends on their motivation. These motives can include some combination of self-promotion, undermining a rival, the desire to advance or obstruct a particular policy or course of action, and to ingratiate themselves with the journalist. Information may be provided openly and unrestrictedly or anonymously subject to various conditions. Howsoever and by whomever provided, information is the vital currency of news. Thus the reporter-source relationship is often symbiotic: they need each other.

"News" Received

Much news is brought to journalists' attention. For there are a lot of people desirous of appearing in and on the news, having their views and perspectives transmitted by the media. So, often abetted by public relations assistants, press agents, personal representatives, and other hirelings, they try to bring their current and future activities to the news media's attention through press releases, press conferences, and so on, sometimes devising what they hope is newsworthy behavior to encourage attention. At the same time, they strive to conceal their unattractive behavior from the sometimes prying press. Indeed, some public figures are in such demand that they can virtually dictate the circumstances and conditions of their interaction with the news media.

Objectivity and Frames

Many western journalists are guided by the canons of their profession. They strive for accuracy, objectivity and impartiality, to keep their personal opinions out of their stories, to avoid bias. The exceptions are feature and interpretive stories which allow greater subjectivity.

Facilitating this objective, much reporting is descriptive, based on objective reality, oriented around questions of what, who, where, when and, if possible, the problematic "why". Death is death, people who are killed usually become corpses. Reporters will try to get the facts right even though, for one reason or another, essential information may be unavailable or incorrect: day, location, number who died, circumstances, and causes.

None of this means, however, that reporters exclude perspectives and values from their stories. Consider the deaths story: the deaths will be treated differently and given more or less prominence in the U.S. press depending on whether they are of U.S. or Iraqi soldiers killed in the Gulf war.

The point is that reporters often precede news gathering with some idea of the way the story will turn out and how to organize and structure, in a word, how to frame it. They may even begin with the frame and collect material to fit it.

Framing is crucial; for news stories tend to frame events in particular ways, to bring a perspective to bear, to emphasize some aspects at the expense of others. It is difficult to identify social actors and name in action without also nominating an attitude toward them. This is inherent in the very process of selecting, editing, organizing, and presenting stories. In other words, to edit is to interpret, to speak and write is to define, to communicate is to structure reality.

Consider a television news story on massage parlors in which the theme was illicit behavior: sexual exchanges, drug use, organized crime, and venereal disease. Masseuses were interviewed to obtain answers to these questions and the film was edited to focus on these concerns. But the massage parlor story could have been discussed from such other perspectives as good health, sexual satisfaction, onerous governmental regulations, free enterprise, and career opportunities (Paletz and Entman, 22).

Journalist tend to depend on each other for ideas, a reliance increased by the way they cover stories in groups or packs. They consequently tend to work with a relatively small repertoire of frames. For many years, international news was fitted

-sometimes shoe-horned- into a US v. USSR cold war frame, or its variant of capitalism v (and superior to) communism. Frames recurring in the western press about government and politics are bureaucratic incompetence, inefficiency and waste, power-hungry politicians motivated mainly by vote-seeking, politicians' strategy and tactics, especially in campaigns, elections as horse races, legislative stalemate and corruption, and conflict within and between the branches of government.

At the same time, public officials, candidates, and others involved in government and politics are providing journalists with more self-serving (although not necessarily inaccurate) story frames: bureaucratic competence, politicians motivated by the public interest, legislative achievements, and co-operation between the branches of government in the public interest.

Which of these frames predominate in the media can have significant effects on the content and viability of the political culture involved.

The Cable News Network

The Cable News Network (CNN) will sometimes go live to breaking events. Such broadcasts, which are sometimes live or, more often, on a just received tape, are often transmitted directly and instantaneously. This eliminates much of the processing of material by reporters in the field and editors at CNN. The benefits speed, immediacy and vividness. The problem is that the footage is often raw: it has not been structured and organized, given coherence and meaning by journalists at CNN. The network is thus vulnerable to the charge of being a conduit for those whose activities it transmits in this way.

CNN also airs stories provided by various national broadcasts organizations from around the world. These stories reflect the suppliers' views, that of their governments in state controlled systems, thus providing a diversity of perspectives otherwise virtually unseen on U.S. television and absent from the press.

Cases

As we have chronicled, media content is a complex combination of the influence efforts of rulers and leaders, the profit based activities of corporations, and the news gathering and reporting behavior of journalists.

We are witnessing, moreover, the spread of global, especially western controlled, media around the world. The major news wire services (AP, Reuters,

Agence France Press, and UPI) are western owned, as are the suppliers of television news visuals (World Wide Television News and Visnews). The Cable News Network (CNN) also broadcasts worldwide, choosing the stories it deems newsworthy for its U.S. and then international audience. Similarly, western entertainment, in the forms of movies, music, and television programs, is pervasive around the world. Consequently, many different cultures are being exposed to the same presentation form and content of news and entertainment programs. That so many different people encounter a perspective from a particular culture may well shape their political cultures, homogenizing them.

We therefore consider next three cases of the possible effects of political communication content on political cultures. Following that, we will conclude with some speculative scenarios.

Empathy

Modernization theory emphasizes the centrality of the media in the transition from traditional to modern societies. In The Passing of Traditional Society (1958), Daniel Lerner argued that the key to this transition is the development of "empathy" towards other people and cultures. It is only when individuals in the society began to open themselves up to the experiences of others outside of their own culture that they begin the transformation to modern society. The media aid the development of empathy in individuals by providing experiences of other cultures beyond what is available through personal communication.

This occurs not only through news but also entertainment such as motion pictures and music. These sources of information provide glimpses of other "ways of life" beyond the immediate experience of people who have not seen life beyond their local community. In addition, Lerner believes that the mass media drive the overall process of modernization by helping bring societies back together into a nation following the collapse of traditional societies formed around villages. In this way the entrance of mass media completely changes the political culture of these societies.

Dependency

Lerner's optimistic and positive analysis was superseded by the dependency approach. This contends that the media in developing countries encourage western values which allow the industrialized developed countries to dominate not only economically but socially. The political cultures are being transformed in these countries so that the people will be open to exploitation. The dependency school defines development as sovereignty and independence from the West and suggest

that information should be seen as a social good rather than as a commodity. The media are given responsibility to shape the political culture in a way which supports independence and nationhood. The New World Information Order was formed from the New World Economic Order in UNESCO in order to encourage alternative news sources for developing countries so that they would not have to rely on the West's traditional sources.

The NWIO demonstrates the types of actions taken in response to the fear that since media can shape the cultures of nations, those who control the media can control the culture.

A Critique

This argument suffers, however, from serious problems of methodology, lack of research on content, questionable assumptions about causality, and tendentious assertions in place of empirical evidence. To begin with, there has been little research to establish the actual content, the similarities and differences, of the political cultures of developing countries and the sub-sections and groups within these countries. In addition, there have not been enough systematic and detailed studies of the actual content of news and entertainment purveyed by western sources. Quite likely, the messages of this content are less homogeneous, more contradictory and conflictual, than is claimed. It is invalid to assume, moreover, that the third world media serve as simple conduits for the western material. In this respect, in research underway, Danielle Vinson and I are showing that even though the western wire services and sources dominated reporting of the shooting down by USSR of a Korean airliner, coverage varied widely in the world's newspapers. They often included or omitted facts according to their political and ideological perspective. Thus the "fact" that many people had died in the shootdown was mentioned frequently in U.S. newspapers but only rarely in the Soviet Union's Pravda and Cuba's Granma.

And even if a monolithic western perspective dominates a state's media content, that doesn't mean the people of that country will accept it wholeheartedly and change their political culture and actions accordingly. How else to explain the thirst for American culture in many countries that coexists with a rampant hostility to the American government and its international actions.

Indeed, René-Jean Ravault has provocatively argued that the receivers "can use information provided by the 'cultural dominator' to their own advantage... to make decisions and elaborate military, diplomatic, political, and economic strategies totally unintended by the sender and sometimes quite detrimental to the 'dominating sender'" (1987, p. 247).

Iran

Iran is a case in point. The Shah deliberately attempted to change his country's political culture through the importation of western media content accompanied by a (limited) number of western political ideas. This failed to penetrate the mass of the society and was violently rejected, along with the Shah. The main reason was that it inspired a resurgent Shi'ite Islamic movement which relied on indigenous information system of "person-to-person, group-to-group, traditional, religious, pedagogical, and ideological or political communication modes" (Ravault, 257-258), consisting primarily of pronouncements by clerics transmitted orally and by tape-recorders.

Failure

The failure to change political cultures can be seen in Eastern and Central Europe. Despite decades of autocratic rule including domination and close scrutiny of most in-country mass media, once the governments which ruled with coercion were destroyed, artificially countrived countries could not hold together. There has been a return (reversion) to nationalism, ethnicity, and even neo-tribalism. Segments of the population have demanded their own governments apart from the ones that had been in force for decades. In the former Soviet Union, societies fought for their independence from the country which had enveloped them for years.

These examples indicate the limitations of social engineering via the media to eliminate old political cultures and create new ones. A crucial factor, however, is that media content in those countries did not go unchallenged. For many years the West provided not only news but entertainment to people behind the iron Curtain. It was not only that the West wanted to present an alternative to the state-run news, but also to inject Western Political cultural values into these countries. The rulers of those states were thus unable totally to control the contents of mass media to create their preferred political culture.

SPECULATIONS

We conclude by speculating about some possibly important connections between political culture and political communications.

Nationhood

To establish a national political culture, develop feelings of nationhood, localities have to be exposed to news concerning other parts of the presumed nation. When an attempt is being made to bring together a disparate group of peoples as a nation, there must be some method of spreading the idea that everyone is a member of this new entity. People who have not been exposed to the message that they belong together will not have this feeling. In traditional societies, personal communication in villages often produces the only sense of belonging. The mass media might (be used to) change this by emphasizing news which involves a national perspective and producing entertainment which develops some idea of a national character.

The development of the feeling of nationhood is a problem in nations such as Somalia which is split by rival factions who command higher authority than any national leaders. It is hoped that Somalia will be able to have a stable central government once outside forces are withdrawn. However, there appears to be a lack of nationhood feeling among many Somalians. Until a distinct Somalian political culture is established, a stable government is unlikely.

Another example is South Africa where a variety of political cultures exist. As plans are being made for elections which may be open to everyone there is a question of what the political culture of South Africa will be like under the new system. Has the government through the media been able to develop a South African political culture which overrides other cultural affinities?

Lines of Communication

The political culture's view of participation can have a significant effect on the amount of input allowed into the government and thus the system's perceived legitimacy. Political communication serves to connect different sections of the country and the leaders with the public. This can facilitate a sense of participation in the workings of the government. Although political cultures differ in the amount of communication which is granted by the leaders and expected by the people, an irreducible minimum of communication is probably necessary for the masses to feel that they are in some way influencing the country's policies and that their leaders are legitimate. The mass media are usually a main provider of this line of communication.

Many of the new governments in Eastern and Central Europe have taken office at a time when their political cultures are ill-defined and uncertain. As these countries change their governments people need to feel that they have an adequate level of access to their leaders and a voice in the direction of their changing governments. The political cultures that the former autocratic governments attempted

to form did not provide much communication and did not raise the expectations of the people to have much input into government. The new media can, have a significant impact on expectations and hence the legitimacy of the new governments (see Paletz, Jakubowicz, and Novosel, forthcoming).

The media's role in forming a line of communication between leaders and the people of a country can be seen in the recent presidential election in the US. The political culture may have been changed when new lines of communication were opened by presidential candidates in media outlets which had previously not been utilized for political communication. Entertainment programs were used to a large degree by the three major candidates to make their pleas to the people for support in the election. The political culture in the US until this past election did not provide such an opportunity to the people. This change occurred not through an evolution of media, but through the candidates' novel and successful attempts to reach more voters.

New Roles

Political cultures sometimes need to change to accommodate and facilitate modernization or upheavals in the political system. Political communication may be able to modify, even alter the political culture and in the process prepare the people of changing societies for new responsibilities and roles.

Many people in Central and Eastern Europe experienced an overload of information when they were presented with new freedoms and constraints following the revolutions. The old social structures were changed and many were completely removed leaving some individuals with a difficult time coping with the new realities. The mass media could perhaps expose people to new ideas and ways of life which they have no other way of contacting. In this way, the media might be able to shape preferences without individuals always having to incur all the difficult new political and economic experiences. If the media could shape the attitudes towards capitalism or make the people better able to cope with the new system they might possibly influence the way that changes occur.

Role of the Nation

Political cultures influence foreign policies (Ebel, Taras, and Cochrane, 1992). Political communication influences what the foreign policy role of the nation is and what it should be, and thus shapes the attitudes of the nation towards the outside world. The countries of the former Soviet bloc have to define their role in the world after having been informed through the state-run media for so many years. The

political culture's perspective on the country's place in the world can have a significant impact on how foreign policy is executed. For example, the former Soviet republics have to decide if it is in their interests to give up their nuclear weapons. That decision may depend in part on how the role of the country in world affairs is defined by the political culture and transmitted by the media.

CONCLUSION

As the world continues to change both politically and technologically there are new arenas and opportunities for the complex inter-relationships and interactions of political cultures and political communication to take place. Research opportunities abound. The battles over control of mass media in Central and Eastern Europe attest to the struggle to influence this formidable ally. In their turmoil, these countries can offer illuminating case studies of the media's effects on political culture.

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