No one cares what we know: three responses to the irrelevance of political communication research

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Abstract: Public discussions around the role of different forms of political communication in influencing various political outcomes in for example the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and UK EU Referendum suggest that political communications research is largely marginal to these public discussions. We might think we have epistemic authority over our object of analysis, but no one cares what we know. The result is that substantially important public (and policy) discussions of issues at the core of our field are dumber than they could have been, in part due to our absence, an absence that is in turn in part due to the ways in which we as a field do our work. In this essay, I identify some of the external and internal factors that help account for this and suggest that we as a community debate whether we want to do something about our irrelevance and the internal norms and institutions that contribute to it. I offer three possible responses, labelled academic purism, scholarly conservatism, and intellectual pragmatism, and different styles of engagement, and ask whether we should aim to be a more active part of the "rough process" of public discussion, or simply leave it to others and accept that no one cares what we know.

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Recent years have seen intense public discussions of political communication, but political communication research as a field has been largely marginal to these discussions. The purpose of this essay is to outline a diagnosis of some external and internal factors that help account for this and suggest that we as a community debate whether we want to do something about our irrelevance and the internal norms and institutions that contribute to it.

I would offer as a starting point that the discussions around political events in 2016 and 2017 in the US and the UK offer critical cases for understanding the position of political communication research in such public discussions and that these critical cases suggest we are largely irrelevant. We might like to think we like other scientific fields have "epistemic authority" (Gieryn 1999), the legitimate and recognized right to define, describe, and explain specific aspects of reality. But no one cares what we know. Donald Trump's election victory, the Brexit referendum result, Theresa May losing her majority in the 2017 General Election—all these surprising political outcomes have been attributed to various forms of political communication. Some see them as the result of supposedly rampant fake news on social media, or perhaps sophisticated microtargeting of persuadable voters, Russian propaganda, or maybe the campaign performance of candidates like Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn. And these events play out against the backdrop of (1) a crisis of confidence between much of the population and many public institutions including elected officials and news media in many countries and (2) a global structural transformation towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment.

As a field, we have reams of research that could speak directly to these issues. And yet intellectual input into public discussions has largely come from hybrid institutions bridging the academic-professional divide like the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard, Data & Society in New York, the First Draft coalition, or the Oxford Internet Institute; from individual academics coming out of other fields like economics, law, or political science; and

from various public intellectuals and think tanks. If there is something akin to that marketplace of ideas that John Stuart Mill described as a "rough process of struggle," our object of analysis has been at the center lately, but political communication research has been at the margins. The consequences are clear. Us not engaging does not stop others from doing so. A demand in the marketplace of ideas will always find a supply, whether we take part or not. The result is that substantially important public (and policy) discussions of issues at the core of our field are dumber than they could have been, in part due to our absence, an absence that is in turn in part due to the ways in which we as a field do our work.

Our own research gives us an understanding of some of the external factors that help explain why we are largely irrelevant. Engagement can take many forms—with ordinary people, with media, with elites. In each case, we face external barriers. Most people are "cognitive misers" who primarily care about things aligned with their sense of self, their everyday life, or that directly impacts their core ideals and interests (Delli Carpini 2004). For all its considerable qualities, our field is thus a hard sell to most of the public. In terms of media interest, we know that news is driven by forms of co-production where journalists and sources negotiate newsworthiness (Cook 1998). Here too we remain marginal. Political communication researchers are many things, but "primary definers" we are not. In terms of engagement with the various elite stakeholder communities who dominate these debates, many other knowledge producers compete for access and attention (Campbell and Pedersen 2014). Judging by who are involved in the various commissions, non-profits, and reports responding to recent political events, the others have won that competition, just as they are the ones quoted by journalists and the ones with a high public profile offline and online.

But there are also internal factors that contribute to our irrelevance, internal factors we might try to address if we wish to overcome it. They are rooted in some of the informal norms and formal reward systems of our field. Both informally and formally, we privilege a

certain way of producing peer-reviewed work for a narrow academic audience to a degree that risks relegating everything else—interdisciplinary collaboration, teaching, service, let alone various forms of public engagement—to the margins. Despite some variation from country to country and university to university, at a field-level we both we recognize (informal norms) and reward (formal institutions) primarily peer-reviewed publications produced for a field-internal academic audience. Not all of these institutions are under our control. But some are. When is the last time political communication as a field gave an award for public engagement or effective science communication? (The way the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's gives the Dorothy Bowles Award for public service and the American Political Science Association the Hubert H. Humphrey Award.)

Let me underline that I strongly believe that peer-reviewed publications are an indispensable core of what we do. The combination open-ended empirical inquiry, the sharing and accumulation of insights across a community, and the evolution and enforcement of shared standards that enable scientific knowledge production requires something like the imperfect institution of peer review (Ziman 2000). Engagement is not a substitute for these core aspects of scientific work, but engagement can enhance it and supplement it. It is precisely because I believe that we as scientists can produce distinct, valuable, and reliable knowledge that I am concerned with our relative irrelevance to public debates to which I believe we have much to contribute. And the kinds of engagement that interest me are about bringing relevant and robust knowledge to the (always rambunctious, sometimes rambling) conversations that societies have about themselves, not about sounding off one's personal opinions or chasing media attention for media attention's sake. We see such engagement in scholars talking with citizens and groups in their local communities, with journalists either as

sources or increasingly as contributors on sites like the *Washington Post*'s "Monkey Cage" blog, and with elites in formal organizations in politics and the media.

The question is thus not whether or not political communication is a scientific field—it is and should be. The question is what kind of scientific field it should be, how it should be it, and what our relations should be with others. We have the extraordinary privilege of thinking for a living. The question then is how we do it, whom we do it with, and whom we do it for.

How do we do it now? I would suggest the dominant way in which we as a field enact our norms and inhabit our institutions approximates what some sociologists of science (e.g. Gibbons et al 1994) see as an older paradigm of scientific work, often called "Mode 1", driven by academically-exclusive, investigator-initiated, and discipline-based forms of knowledge production that tend to privilege ever more precise answers to inherited questions. This stands in contrast to what has been called "Mode 2", the kinds of context-driven, problem-focused, and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production that are central to some of the most successful fields in science today, like computer science, engineering, and medicine, fields that tend to encourage engagement with an evolving set of both inside and outside partners and focus on contemporary issues. This, of course, is also the mode of work practiced by earlier pioneers in political communication research, like Paul Lazarsfeld (Karpf et al. 2015).

The two modes have many overlaps, some common virtues, and additional different advantages and disadvantages. Both can produce brilliant work, both can produce crap. They are not in direct opposition, not a binary choice. Both are committed to peer-review and to scientific norms of open-ended inquiry, sharing and accumulation of insights, and shared standards. But the way they go about it differ, in part due to their audience orientation. Mode 1 is inwards-looking. This, I would suggest, is the case for most political communication

research. We write for one another. (Even if book sales and article downloads demonstrate we don't necessarily read one another.) Mode 2, in contrast, is oriented towards engaging with a wide range of different and often external audiences. As the former President of the European Research Council Helga Nowotny has argued, at its best, this mode of academic work combines the reliability that is the hallmark of all science with "social robustness" to produce "robust knowledge" that is relevant to and accepted by actors in the context of its application (Nowotny 2003, p. 151).

The difference between Mode 1 and Mode 2 is not about individual dispositions, about what you or I do and want. The difference is about what a community of inquiry recognizes and rewards, and how it in response to these informally and formally institutionalized incentives as a consequence tend to spend available time and resources. In Mode 1, public engagement is at best a hobby. In Mode 2, engagement with multiple communities is part of the formulation of questions, sometimes part of the research process itself, and always part of the communication of research findings.

These different orientations not only change what people do, but also what it means. If the outside world seems to care more about Mode 2 research, perhaps this is in part because Mode 2 research seems to care more about the outside world? Let's say for the sake of argument it takes three months of full-time work to produce a good peer-reviewed journal article. How often do we spent even ten percent of that trying to communicate the findings? If your answer is "I don't have time," it is worth asking what institutions shaped that answer and whether they are conducive for what we want to be as a field.

So what do we do next? I don't have an answer but I hope we can discuss what we, as a community of inquiry, want to be in the future, what we want to recognize and reward each other for doing. Consider three possible responses—

First, redoubling efforts to move away from our roots in Mode 2 towards the kinds of Mode 1 work that dominated some sciences for much of the second half of the twentieth century and try to produce ever-more precise, reliable scientific knowledge drawing our problems from our own previous work (or positioning new approaches relative to existing paradigms). Perhaps if our work was even better theoretically, methodologically, and empirically by our own internal standards, the outside world would also find it more relevant? This could be seen as a form of academic purism.

Second, reproducing the status quo. Political communication research has always involved a mix of Mode 1 and Mode 2 work, and after all many members of our community, from early career researchers like Shannon McGregor, to mid-career ones like Talia Stroud, to senior figures like Kathleen Hall Jamieson, are clearly and effectively engaging with public issues in addition to producing peer-reviewed work. We may be seen as irrelevant by much of the outside world and other academic fields often ignore our work, but the students still come flocking and we produce interesting research, so perhaps things are just fine as they are, enabled by the limitless complexity of inherited institutions. If so maybe the downsides (foreseen or unforeseen) of any attempt at reform would outweigh the possible benefits? This is a form of Burkean scholarly conservatism.

Third, some form of reform that would remain committed to peer-review as an institution and to the scientific norms of open-ended inquiry, sharing and accumulation of insights, and shared standards, but that would follow growing fields like computer science, engineering and medicine in embracing Mode 2 forms of context-driven, problem-focused, and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production and consciously seek to informally and formally institutionalize forms of recognition and rewards that incentivize engagement. Perhaps we could make ourselves more relevant if we focused less on ourselves and more on

others? This could be seen as a kind of intellectual pragmatism, a commitment to scientific work that addresses the big issues of our day and engages with others in doing so.

None of these responses would directly address the external factors contributing to our irrelevance. People are busy, we have limited leverage with journalists, and many other compete for elites' attention. But they would represent different ways of responding to the internal norms and institutions that encourage us to be marginal. Purism may see irrelevance as an acceptable price for internal excellence. Conservatism would like us to be more relevant but may not want to change anything to become so. Pragmatism would suggest we could produce more robust and relevant research if we recognized and rewarded engagement with a wider variety of outside audiences and stakeholders. (This would then ask new, tough, question of "engagement with whom", "to what end", and "around what issues"—I would briefly suggest at least four different ideal typical styles of engagement can be identified along the axis of partisan/impartial stances and inside/outside strategies as in Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1 – styles of engagement

"Professorial prophets" *Partisan stance/outside strategy*	"Organic intellectuals" *Partisan stance/inside strategy*
"Public intellectuals" *Impartial stance/outside strategy*	"Engaged Experts" *Impartial stance/inside strategy*

The debate over the proper public role of social science is a recurring one that is renewed every generation or so in every discipline and every field. We may all agree with Robert Merton's (1973) observation that the goal of science is "the extension of certified knowledge" on the basis of organized skepticism. But not all scientific knowledge is recognized by others as such (granted epistemic authority). And we don't all agree on what

kinds of knowledge we want to extent, and who we want to extent it to. We will never settle these issues once and for all, but recent reminders of our irrelevance provides an occasion to discuss what we as a field would like to be, what we would need to do to become that, and what informal and formal institutions might enable that. As our generation confronts these recurring questions, a key issue for me is whether we should aim to be a more active part of the "rough process" of public discussion, or simply leave it to others and accept that no one cares what we know.

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