



Steven Chaffee and the Future of Political Communication Research

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This article discusses four basic characteristics of Steven Chaffee's research: going beyond the "common research wisdom," careful explication of concepts, avoiding unsubstantiated charges against the media, and investigation of the social aspects of communication. The evolution of political socialization research is used as an example of how these characteristics have strengthened Chaffee's contribution to that area and to the larger field of political communication. It is argued that the future of this field would benefit from emulation of these characteristics. Continuing problems of political communication research are noted, and various emerging problems are discussed.

Keywords civic socialization, community contexts, concept explication, family communication patterns, Internet uses, interpersonal communication, media use, political socialization, social capital, social structural influences

I will discuss four basic characteristics that epitomize the four decades of Steven Chaffee's research: going beyond and sometimes rejecting the "common wisdom" of research fads, insisting that concepts should be carefully explicated, avoiding heaping blame on the media without providing evidence, and taking seriously the social aspects of communication. Research guided by these characteristics has contributed very much to the rapid development of the political communication field and, I believe, the future of this field would benefit greatly if scholars would emulate them.

Four Enduring Characteristics of Chaffee's Research

Going Beyond the Common Wisdom

The first of Chaffee's qualities is his willingness to think beyond the popular concepts and "hot topics" of the day. The "political" in political communication was only an adjective when Chaffee began his career in the 1960s; in fact, one could argue that political communication became a field only with the publication of Steve's edited volume with that title (Chaffee, 1975). From the start, Chaffee was able to see the problems and limitations of the two dominant research paradigms of the 1950s and early

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1960s: the limited effects “reinforcement” model derived from the Columbia voting studies and propagated by Klapper (1960) and the attitude change consistency/dissonance theory models of persuasion. For example, Chaffee focused his research on knowledge and other cognitive effects as more direct and likely outcomes of exposure to news media than the possibility of conversion of attitudes and behavioral change that dominated the concerns of the Columbia researchers (Chaffee, 1977–1978).

Careful Concept Explication

The second quality, like the first, can be traced to Chaffee’s work at Stanford with Richard Carter. This is the idea that we should develop clear definitions of concepts that must be linked to appropriate operational indicators (Chaffee, 1991). Chaffee noted that the concept “reinforcement” used by the Columbia scholars to summarize the dominant media effect in campaigns referred to, conceptually, the *strengthening* of previous opinions. Operationally, however, the concept included anyone who *failed to be converted* from his or her earlier vote choice (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985).

Chaffee also drilled into his students the idea that careful explication of the concept of “media use” is crucial. Rather than focus on use or *time spent* with the medium, the key was frequency of *exposure* to various types of *content* within a medium. Later, he showed that it was necessary to include also the level of *attention* to the medium, particularly for television, where the audience is likely to divide attention with other activities (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). More sensitive media use measures make possible the identification of more subtle political effects. While attentive news watching may convey knowledge, entertainment viewing may have generally negative effects. Viewing of specific genres within entertainment content may have different patterns of political effects. Situation comedy viewing is clearly related to low participation (Shah, 1998; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2000) and to discouraging viewers’ frames that lead to support for welfare programs (Sotirovic, 2000); watching adventure drama shows tends to have opposite effects.

Avoiding Flogging the Media

Chaffee’s work has shown little taste for simplistic single-cause theories rooted in the common, pious Calvinist/vulgar Marxist blaming of journalists or media for all of the world’s informational ills. His research has instead struck a balance of criticism among news sources, journalists, and audiences and allocated responsibility to each by suggesting better ways for information exchange. He has shown, for example, that television news does inform attentive members of the audience (Chaffee & Franks, 1996), but has also suggested ways news content might be made more engaging and useful for all users.

Analyzing the Social Aspects of Political Communication

Finally, Chaffee has served the field well by promoting the idea that communication is a fundamentally social activity with social consequences. This seemingly mundane observation has important implications for research. Early on, Chaffee saw in the Columbia research an artificial pitting of media and interpersonal influence that he later called a “synthetic competition,” and he called attention to various ways in which the two might converge or be complementary (Chaffee, 1972, 1982; Chaffee & Mutz, 1988). In his

early work (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973), he found that social influences (e.g., expecting future discussion with others) were more important than individual variables (e.g., candidate knowledge) in predicting information seeking in an election campaign. The importance of social units and the conjoint effects of mass media use and interpersonal communication are particularly evident in Chaffee's research on coorientation (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973) and family communication in the political socialization process (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1973; Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1970).

Socialization Functions of Political Communication

Predicting the future of research in political communication is a daunting task. It is difficult enough to understand where we have come from and where we are now. There is, however, reason to believe some progress has been made. The subfield of *political socialization* is a case in point.

The Traditional Model

The late 1950s and 1960s was a "golden age" for political socialization research during which a flood of research was generated. We should note, however, the close fit between the prevalent definition of socialization and the political stability of the period: "the process by which persons learn *to adopt the norms, values, attitudes and behaviors accepted and practiced by the ongoing system*" (Sigel, 1965, p. 1 [italics added]). This definition implied a single set of facts and attitudes that were necessary to maintain a unified political system. The agencies of socialization acted sequentially: First the parents, then schools, and later the news media would transmit to children and adolescents what "mature citizens" already knew and practiced.

Media influences were left relatively unexplored, and inadequate media measures were the rule when media use was examined. Interpersonal communication of political information from parent to child was tacitly assumed to be natural and unidirectional. Thus, communication generally was seen as an unproblematic *non*-variable in the transmission process.

Challenging the Traditional Model

It was against this background of a static, top-down, communication-light model that Steve Chaffee and I, along with our students, began work in 1965 on the role of media and family communication in the adolescent socialization process. We found that good citizen parents did not necessarily produce politically aware children. At least as important was the *pattern* of communication between parents and children, the *socio*- and *concept* dimensions whose influence on media use and citizenship has stood the test of time and cross-national replication. What was proposed was the idea that social settings in which control was relaxed and exposure to heterogeneous ideas was encouraged make thoughtful participation more likely. The idea suggested that this might apply to settings beyond the family and that children raised in such pluralistic families might look for peer groups of heterogeneous composition with similar communication characteristics in later life. Unfortunately, many researchers were less interested in the idea and more interested in acquiring the set of family communication pattern items they could "plug into" their research.

Nevertheless, Chaffee and his students kept family communication and media

socialization research alive and available for application to contemporary political communication problems (Chaffee, Jackson-Beeck, Durall, & Wilson, 1977; Chaffee et al., 1995; Chaffee & Tims, 1982; Chaffee & Yang, 1990). He added to the political socialization model the idea of child-to-parent reciprocal influence (Chaffee et al., 1995) and, more recently, a reformulation of Piaget's concept of "disequilibrium" (Chaffee, Saphir, & McDevitt, 2000).

Chaffee's socialization research has survived four decades, while the transmission model has not. The chaotic events of the Vietnam period of the late 1960s and early 1970s further undermined this static model of socialization to a unified society. The result was the virtual disappearance of political socialization as a research topic for more than 20 years.

New Models

The good news is that, after its long absence, political socialization has been reborn with a slightly different name and a very different model (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998; McLeod, 2000). One major reason for this rebirth is the growing concern about reported declines in indicators of the "health" of civil society. This is seen in stagnant levels of knowledge despite rising levels of education (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and in declining participation in many, if not most, forms of civic participation (Putnam, 1995, 2000). It is also evident in the decline in daily newspaper readership, a major source of information about politics. The importance of reopening socialization issues was underscored by evidence from cohort analyses that declines in social capital (Putnam & Yonish, 1997) and in newspaper reading rates (Peiser, 2000) are concentrated in the most recent cohort of young adults.

The renaissance in political socialization research does not represent merely pouring old wine in new bottles. The new socialization models are distinctively different in numerous ways. The stability biases of the earlier research have given way to greater recognition of diversity and conflict. Democracies and communities are portrayed not as unified wholes but as arenas where many forces and interest groups are contending. Earlier criteria of "successful" socialization—affiliation with a political party and trust in government—seem more problematic today.

New Criteria. Reflecting a changing political system, new criteria have been advanced. Volunteering for community activities among adolescents, for example, is at record high levels while more traditional indicators of political socialization are falling. Such activities as volunteering may provide experiences and skills that make later adult participation more likely.

The early focus on political outcomes rather conceptually distant from communication has given way to a greater concern with deliberative processes. Thoughtful information processing, listening to diverse points of view, taking turns in discussion, and working out compromises are seen as no less vital to democracy than are efficacious attitudes and voting.

Adding incentives to this "second look" at socialization is research showing that the earlier conclusions about the inefficacy of school experiences may have been hasty. Reanalysis of earlier data with a more extensive set of items has found civics courses did indeed enhance political knowledge, particularly classes that involved expressive activities rather than rote learning (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Beyond the classroom, school and peer effects are being examined along with extracurricular programs often involving

media that may encourage youth to think, communicate, form networks, and act in ways contributing to civil society.

The new criteria are reflected in the name change, from *political socialization* to *civic socialization*. The change is more than cosmetic. It reflects a broadening of focus of participation beyond voting and partisan politics to a wide range of behaviors, including working on civic projects, attending local forums, and using new media for civic purposes. The new model includes as *civic engagement* a set of socialization criteria memberships in clubs and churches that are thought to generate skills and motivation to participate in civic life but which are not political in the usual sense. This broadened definition raises some problems, however: How do we keep national issues and partisan politics in the mix? What are the boundaries of "civic participation," and what does it *not* include? We need Steve Chaffee to do some concept explanation on this problem.

Community Focus. In keeping with this civic emphasis, the *community* has become a prominent arena for political communication research. The idea conveyed by the concept *social capital* is that it has both a micro-individual level and a macro-community level component. Civic participation is a function of both individuals' characteristics and community resources, network connections, and norms as contextual influences.

The interpersonal networks that connect individuals with community resources are the objects of much contemporary research, starting with the work of Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987). The varying macro contexts of communities and neighborhoods in shaping individual civic behavior are of potentially great influence. The problem is that the large NES and GSS national data sets so commonly used by researchers do not have enough cases in the various metropolitan areas to permit assessment of community contextual effects. In lieu of such large data sets, comparative community studies are an important alternative.

Developmental Theory. Interest in civic socialization also has been stimulated by new approaches in developmental theory that emphasize changes across the life span and the influences of sociopolitical and economic conditions. Moral development, conceived of as personal commitment to actions benefiting others and the common good, is seen as a fundamental aspect of development through adolescence and into early adulthood. *Youth* now includes early adulthood, ages 18 to the late 20s, which have always had the lowest adult levels of news use, knowledge, and participation. Again, there are difficulties in using the NES and GSS national samples to intensively study young adults. A sample of 1,200, for example, would generate a young adult subsample of 200.

Finally, the subfield has benefited from foundation funding of research evaluating various intervention programs attempting to stimulate youth citizenship. Most of these programs involve using media in various ways to develop motivation and skills that are useful for citizenship. Many have found positive effects, at least during the course of the intervention. Steve Chaffee has been active in this area, organizing evaluation of a *Kids Voting* program that revealed the benefits of strategies that combine the influence of schools, families, and media (McDevitt & Chaffee, 1998, 2000; McLeod, Eveland, & Horowitz, 1998).

Mediated and interpersonal communication processes have been brought from the periphery to the center of the new approaches to civic socialization research. Media content and social networks matter for political learning, but so do the motives and strategies that youth have for using information. Civic socialization is a very promising direction for future research in political communication.

The Future of Political Communication Research

Recurrent Problems

Political communication research can be characterized as a growth area by whatever set of indicators we might choose. As evidence of the closer correspondence between the constituent terms “political” and “communication,” we can point to the founding of this journal in 1993 as a joint venture of the political communication divisions of the American Political Science Association and the International Communication Association. But a less optimistic note can be added. Certain long-standing problems remain. Most fundamental is the fact that politics and active civic participation are not central to most people most of the time. They act mainly when the opportunity arises, not from a concerted or sustained interest in politics. Although central to us as scholars, we are studying what is primarily a marginal activity. This is more clearly the case when we focus on young people. The implications for research are that the influences on informational media use and civic participation may be primarily nonpolitical orientations and behaviors.

Measurement Problems. Second, there is a continuing tension between developing sensitive communication concepts and finding measures of them in available national data sets. Chaffee has reminded us over the years that time spent with a medium will not adequately represent media use, but uncritical use of such crude measures is still common. Further, beyond adding frequency and attention to specific content measures, it appears that how reflectively people process the informational content is equally important (Kosicki & McLeod, 1990). Political communication researchers may have to forgo the convenience of large national data sets and generate their own data sets with more sensitive media measures.

Despite Steve Chaffee’s wise counsel and positive influence on his many students, lack of appropriate concept explication remains a deterrent to progress in political communication research. After a half-century, the concept “reinforcement” is still used very loosely. Any evidence for selectivity in media is credited as a reinforcement effect. Published research reveals large discrepancies between conceptual and operational definitions: for example, *cognitive complexity* as measured by number of words used by the subject and *principled reasoning* as measured by cross-issue consistency—an operational definition previously used as an indicator of “ideology” (Converse, 1964)—rather than measured more directly from open-ended respondent protocols (McLeod, Sotirovic, Voakes, Guo, & Huang, 1998).

What Constitutes a Media Effect? Another continuing problem is lack of agreement as to what constitutes a media effect in nonexperimental research. The disagreement appears to be as much about inferences as about evidence. We can discern scholars at two extremes in their levels of caution about inferences (McLeod & Reeves, 1980). *Type I worriers* are loathe to conclude that media have *any* effects; they insist on stringent alpha levels using a host of control variables including political interest. They imply that the possibility of reverse causation prevents saying anything about effects, and, when all else fails, they allude to findings accounting for *only* 3% of the variance. *Type II worriers*, anxious to assert strong effects, use a flexible alpha level with a single control or none. They ignore alternative explanations and allude to findings explaining *as much as* 3% of the variance.

Research Fads. Now that the political communication field has become respectable and popular, it seems increasingly to follow the fads and fashions of research at the expense of taking risks in new areas. I point out here that Chaffee was never trendy, but many of us are. Are there not limits to how far we can bend agenda setting? Do we really need another example of the third-person effect? Can we not operate at a slightly more abstract level and examine the origins of the numerous misperceptions of human behavior and public opinion?

Emerging Problems

The Internet. The most obvious new problem is how to apply the rise of the Internet to research on political communication. The Internet has the potential for being quite different from traditional media and requires a different approach to research. Yet, there are many signs that contemporary Internet research is likely to repeat many of the same mistakes of research conducted during the early days of television. Research that looks at use versus non-use or number of hours spent on-line is not apt to produce much of value. On the other hand, what the Internet is being used for appears to be of great importance (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Uses for information, for games, and for chat rooms appear to have quite different antecedents and effects on civic participation.

It is clear that the “digital divide” is a real problem. Disparities in “use” may in time be reduced for class and race as they have been for gender. Greater difficulty may be encountered in efforts to equalize the “effect” of various Internet uses across different groups. The likelihood of nonuniversal effects of Internet use may be seen in various age groups. The 18–27-year-olds not only have the highest mean levels of most types of Internet use, but it appears they also have by far the strongest effects of such use (regression coefficients) (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2000). Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether these Internet findings are merely age effects or are also cohort effects. The positive influences of informational uses of the Internet, if found to be a cohort effect, may partly offset the cohort declines in newspaper reading and participation that are ominous signs for democracy.

Antecedents of Informational Uses. Another problem affecting the future of the field is how to develop more adequate models of political communication that more clearly specify the cognitive and motivational antecedents of informational uses of media and the processes directing their effects. It is likely that factors other than social status produce differential effects. These moderator variables interacting with media use are less apt to be narrowly political. The person’s world view and values, thought to be learned relatively early in the life cycle, are likely to influence the use and effects of media (McLeod, Sotirovic, & Holbert, 1998; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996).

Mediating Processes. The intra- and interpersonal processes mediating between media exposure and democratic participation require closer research attention (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994). Interpersonal discussion of issues, reflective processing of news (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2000), as well as integrative and causal complexity in how people understand political issues (McLeod et al., 2000; Sotirovic, 2000) all appear to affect policy preferences and participation. These may be even more important than is factual knowledge, which we need to reconsider as the primary basis of citizen participation.

Coming Full Circle?

The shift to a community focus brings with it the problem of how to conceptualize and analyze structural and contextual effects. These include concepts appropriate to community, neighborhood, school, and social network. This may seem like a full-circle turn back to the Columbia studies in Erie County and Elmira. Not so; those early studies paid little attention to the structure and contexts within the communities and to variations in patterns and connections of social networks.

There is a long standing research tradition in mass communication that links local media to social control at the community level (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1973). More recently, local media have been connected to strong community ties and well developed social networks. These forms of community integration and local media use each independently bolster civic knowledge and participation (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; McLeod et al., 1996). All of these findings show marked effects based on the perceptions and reports of individuals. Community-level effects have not been thoroughly studied. Contextual effects require evidence showing that characteristics of the social unit account for variance after all individual-level effects have been removed. Recent analyses of a very large commercial data set used community context measures aggregated across respondents within the 100+ largest standard metropolitan areas. Results indicated that community context (average levels of trust, community ties, etc.) contributed significant increments to three dimensions of individuals' social capital (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2000). Future research focusing on smaller contextual units such as the neighborhood (e.g., zip code) may produce even stronger results.

The "social" that Chaffee brought into the political communication field was largely micro-social, but his ideas may be extended to larger social units. Conceptualizing and measuring the more macro-social influences of community, neighborhood, and networks is a logical next step. The future of political communication depends on taking such bold steps.

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