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A Framework for Critical-Empiricist Research in Political Communication

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Abstract

Empirical research on political communication can play an important role in informing debates about the democratic value of various political communication processes. However, the degree to which political communication researchers can live up to this task depends on how systematically they relate their empirical investigations to concerns formulated in normative conceptions of democracy. In this paper, I present a framework for the empirical normative analysis of political communication. Based on the two core research procedures of *normative assessment* and *empirical validation*, it provides a model of the relations between normative and empirical research and a template for the empirical study of normatively relevant aspects of political communication. The paper systematizes the relations between normative theory and empirical reality, and discusses the two core procedures for empirical researchers to productively bridge the two. The framework is supposed to foster systematic exchanges between empirical studies of political communication and normative democratic theory and clarify the contribution of empirical studies to democratic theory, practice, and reform. It also implicates additional justification for greater use of controlled experimental research and cross-context comparative studies.

A Framework for Critical-Empiricist Research in Political Communication

Empirical research on political communication can play an important role in informing debates about the democratic value of political communication processes, including phenomena as varied as the framing of news stories, the ways in which citizens talk about politics with one another, or how they select and process political information from various media channels. However, the degree to which political communication researchers can live up to this task depends on how systematically they relate their empirical investigations to concerns formulated in normative conceptions of democracy. Often, such evaluative observations are tenuous and take the form of offhand assertions rather than explications various normative claims that could be made about the empirical finding in question (Althaus, 2012). A framework guiding the empirical normative analysis of political communication is needed to allow systematic exchanges between empirical studies of political communication and normative democratic theory to transpire and to clarify the contribution of empirical studies to democratic theory (e.g., Passavant, 2015), practice (e.g., Donsbach & Brade, 2011), and reform (e.g., Blumler & Coleman, 2015).

Political communication researchers have had great problems handling the complex and often intricate relations between the normative and empirical study of political communication. Yet, as the *Werturteilsstreit* and *Positivismusstreit* debates have shown, assuming counterfactually the normative innocence of empirical work in a positivist framework provides no viable refuge as this strategy comes at the cost of an unclear relation between empirical facts and normative ideas about political communication.

This paper proposes a novel, critical-empiricist framework for the systematic study of the normative aspects of political communication. The framework provides a model of the relations

between normative and empirical research and a template for the empirical study of normatively relevant aspects of political communication. This template allows empirical researchers to devise investigations and interpret their results more systematically and explicitly with an eye towards the normative implications of their findings. It thus helps researchers in recasting political communication research as empirical democracy research and making it more relevant to practical discourses on democratic reform.

In what follows I provide an overview of the main components of an empiricist framework for critical normative analysis, introducing a distinction between the two basic normatively relevant tasks of empirical researchers: those of *normative assessment* (of facts found in empirical research) and *empirical validation* (of assumptions found in normative theory). From this discussion follows an argument for the systematic consultation of normative democratic theory in empirical social research, including communication research, and a need for a more realistic view of “realism” as a normative position. In conclusion, I pull together these ideas to form an empiricist framework for normative analysis in political communication.

Components of Empiricist Normative Analysis

As a first step toward formulating the main components in a normative analysis of political communication it is helpful to analytically distinguish the three general types of world references that can be made in the process of research. When trying to understand the world, scholars may, first, refer to *the world as it is* (i.e., the actual world). This, naturally, is the domain of empiricist inquiry, which may take the form of both empirical description and explanation, through building empirical theory and conducting empirical observations in research studies. Understanding the world as it is and has historically materialized is also the traditional objective of (neo-)positivist approaches to social inquiry. Indeed positivist claims about the proper forms

of conducting research may generally be cast as claims to restricting social inquiry to the understanding of the world as it is.

Another approach of social inquiry is to make references to *the world as it should be* (i.e., the ideal world). This approach has historically been the domain of normative inquiry, particularly in the form of constructing normative theories about how social life should be organized so as to maximize the realization of some value or set of values held to be indispensable to the achievement of the right (“ideal”) form of society, including the organization of the political. Political philosophers have traditionally been preoccupied with the development of well-justified conceptions of the world as it should be, most notably normative democratic theorists and critical theorists more generally.

The relation between the world as it is and the world as it should be is complex and full of tension, and so is the relation between classical empirical inquiry and classical critical (or normative) inquiry. Indeed, the relation between these two types of world references and ancillary modes of inquiry has been the subject of academic disputes and controversy for a long time.¹ After all, how could one come to a convincing notion of how the social world should be organized if there was no understanding of what it actually looked like? And, reversely, how could you ever come to a non-arbitrary decision about which aspects to study of the world as it is, if there was not some underlying normative notion of a hierarchy regarding the relevance and importance of social phenomena that could potentially be studied? The relation between (empirical) political science and (normative) political philosophy continues to be discussed unabatedly (e.g., Habermas, 2005; Leca, 2010; Sayer, 2011; Swift & White, 2008; Thompson, 2008). However, consistent frameworks guiding a systematic connection of empirical and

normative inquiry are lacking, in political communication as much as in other domains of social inquiry.

Here, I shall argue that this connection may benefit from including a third type of world reference in the discussion and consideration of relations between the empirical and normative components of individual research efforts. Social inquiry may not only refer to the world as it is and should be, but also to *the world as it can be* (i.e., the possible world(s)). The world as it can be is not a notion often discussed or reflected in empirical research aiming to develop normative purchase. Yet it is a crucial component of empirical social reality and, I argue, also a crucial link between the empirical and normative worlds if social inquiry is to be neither “only” empirical, nor “only” critical, but critical-empiricist inquiry. Past normative discussions among empirically oriented researchers in political communication have lacked in establishing this link and, as a consequence, have gravitated towards an ill-conceived “realist” view of normative demands towards political communication and been less instructive for the development of normative theory based in rigorous empirical research.

Figure 1 presents this *triangle of critical-empiricist research*. Fully developed empiricist normative analysis, I argue, can be thought of as establishing links between all three components in the manner described in Figure 1. Ideally, exchanges between normative theory (the ideal world) and inquiry into empirical reality (comprising the actual and possible worlds) take the form of a cycle that runs from insight into the world as it is to insights into the world as it can be, and from there to the world as it should be.

We may start by recognizing that the actual world, as materialized at present and if taken at face value, generally is an insufficient source of information about the ideal world we should aspire to according to normative theory. The social and political conditions we find to be in place

at a specific point in time and space do not lend themselves very well for use as normative standards. After all, it is the point of normative social thinking to open up visions of social organization that are not yet realized and push against the “normative force of the factual” (Habermas, 1996, p. 2). Yet, it is clear, as mentioned above, that no normative theory can make a persuasive validity claim if it is not also in step with the empirical reality it refers to. The solution of this conundrum is to take a detour through linking empirical insight into the world as it is into the world as it can be.

Figure 1: The triangle of critical-empiricist research

What could this link look like? I suggest that empirical inquiry can inform our understanding of the worlds that are possible primarily by producing valid observations of empirical exemplars that realize some value(s) stipulated in normative theory to a particular degree. For example, if we look empirically at normatively demanding forms of citizen deliberation in a specific setting, we may learn something about the feasibility of achieving

certain forms of beneficial political communication in similar settings or in general. Indeed, much research on citizen deliberation has produced empirical evidence of settings in which normatively demanding forms of citizen communication could be realized (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Knobloch & Gastil, 2015; on the larger point, see also Gastil, 2014). In terms of our research practices, it is important to note that the exemplar approach implies a greater focus on highly controlled, “counterfactual” experimental research as a way to maximizing insight gained through empirical research into the empirical possibilities of political communication (and other social phenomena).

Next to producing instructive exemplars, empirical study of the world as it is may inform our understanding of the world as it can be through the identification of empirical optimums. This is related to producing empirical exemplars but places the focus of inquiry on comparisons of a broad range of observed empirical cases with an eye towards identifying “best performers” with regard to the realization of social values and approximation of ideal states as stipulated in a particular normative theory. The goal here is to learn about the degree to which a given value is actually empirical realizable, and under which conditions. For example, Wessler & Rinke (2014) looked at a broad sample of television newscasts produced in three widely differing formally democratic contexts (Germany, Russia, and the U.S.) to find out about the degree to which a set of deliberative values could be realized in empirical practice, and which social conditions (media regulation, political system, journalism culture, etc.) would produce this empirical optimum. Of course, we can never know if we have identified an *absolute* empirical optimum, but this realization just points us, once more, to the generally inconclusive nature of the empirical research process. With respect to the research practice, the empirical optimums approach implies a greater focus on observational comparative research that crosses widely varying social

contexts, focusing – though not exclusively – on most similar systems designs (e.g., Anckar, 2008).

Once empirical study of the actual world has informed our understanding of what the possible world of our phenomenon of interest can look like empirically, be it campaign communications, citizen deliberation, or news framing, we have put ourselves in a position from which we may use empirical insight to inform normative conceptions of an ideal world without compromising normative theory's commitment to providing normative standards and ideals that point beyond the empirical status quo. In fact, the link between the possible worlds explored by empirical research and the ideal world of normative theory charts a path between the debilitating normative force of the factual and merely utopian thinking (Galston, 2010), a path that may lead to the discovery of what Erik Olin Wright (2013) calls “real utopias,” the development of normative theory that is neither emptied of aspirational ideals, nor ignorant of empirical reality (for a similar point, see Bohman, 2009). [This is a process I discuss below as *empirical validation*.]

The final link in the cycle constituting the triangle of critical-empiricist research runs from the references to an ideal world found in normative theory to the world as it is. This link expresses two major roles normative theory may play in critical-empiricist research. First, in the early stages of the empirical research process, normative theory can inform the choice of research questions and designs by indicating the normative relevance of phenomena that could potentially be studied (see O'Flynn, 2010). In that way, normative theory, with its focus on justified ideals, can help allocate resources for empirical research efficiently and in a way that ultimately serves to increase its public value. It may raise the social relevance of empirical research.

Second, in the later stages of the empirical research process, normative theory can help in judging the normative significance of the research outcomes, from one or multiple normative perspectives (Althaus, 2012; Rinke & Wessler, 2013). By providing well-developed and justified criteria for the evaluation of empirical findings, normative theory of the world as it should be allows for a more grounded identification and criticism of social problems. Consequently, the findings of empirical researchers may gain leverage in exerting pressure toward reform of social conditions found to be lacking. Here as well, normative, ideal theory may raise the social relevance and public value of empirical research.

Now that we have explicated the links forming the triangle of critical-empiricist research, the question, of course, becomes: How can they be enacted in practice? I propose two basic tasks of empirical researchers that are essential to the critical-empiricist research enterprise: those of *normative assessment* (of facts found in empirical research) and *empirical validation* (of assumptions found in normative theory). If put into practice together, the procedures to fulfill these tasks help in establishing the two-way exchange between normative theory and empirical reality discussed above.

Normative Assessment

Normative assessment is a research procedure that aims to identify value judgments that could be made about an empirical finding and the standards underlying them (Althaus, 2012). It clarifies the relevance of empirical results from the perspective of one or several democratic theories. The procedure thus clearly maps onto the link between the ideal worlds of normative theory and the actual world studied in empirical research. Specifically, it helps researchers fulfill the task of giving their empirical findings normative meaning. It strengthens the critical-

empiricist ideal of realizing a posteriori normativity of empirical research, or, in other words, *normativity by implication* as opposed to a priori normativity or *normativity by assumption*.

Althaus (2012) distinguishes four levels of normative assessment, based on the level of clarity and rigor in pointing out the normative relevance of empirical findings. While normative assessment on the first three levels involves assessments from the perspective of only one criterion value, fourth-level normative assessment provides judgments about multiple criterion values as applied by one or multiple normative theories to the evaluation of an empirical phenomenon (Althaus, 2012, pp. 102–104; Rinke, Wessler, Löb, & Weinmann, 2013, p. 479). Researchers intending to conduct a normative assessment of their findings should first decide about the level of their assessment and the normative theory or theories drawn on as sources of criterion values. They may then follow a two-step procedure: They should start with a *conceptual normative assessment* of the empirical phenomenon in question, in which the researcher examines the concept of the phenomenon for its logical implications with respect to the criterion values. This is followed by an empirical normative assessment, in which the researcher examines the empirical relations of the phenomenon with other normatively relevant phenomena (Rinke et al., 2013, p. 479). This latter step may involve the familiar formulation of hypotheses based on empirical theory.

Normative assessment was only recently proposed as a distinct research procedure, but has already been applied in domains of political communication as diverse as political satire (Holbert, 2013), citizen discussion online (Freelon, 2015), and election campaign news (Rinke et al., 2013) demonstrating its applicability and relevance to research questions central to political communication. Ultimately, normative assessment instills greater normative consciousness in empirical research. If normative assessment is treated as a standard operating procedure in

empirical research, this should lead to more awareness of the normative value of “what is” and, by implication, greater knowledge of “what can be”. It therefore is an integral part in an empiricist framework for normative analysis.

Empirical Validation

Empirical validation is a research procedure to validate empirical claims which – often implicitly – are a part of normative theory. Although not yet introduced as a formal part of the empirical research process, it has been discussed under different names for some time, especially in the context of research on deliberative democracy (e.g., Bevir & Ansari, 2012; Neblo, 2005; Ryfe, 2005) but also beyond (e.g., Schramme, 2008). Empirical validation means to improve normative theory by subjecting its empirical assumptions to rigorous testing in empirical study. In other words, it aims to provide a systematic grounding for normative theory, preventing it from drifting into utopian never-never land.

The procedure thus maps onto the link between the actual and possible worlds of empirical reality and the ideal worlds of normative theory. Specifically, its aim is to translate the normative theory in question into operational terms and standards for empirical research. Testing the empirical claims of normative theories in ways that speak to them helps them realize their potential theoretically or empirically (Mutz, 2008, p. 523).

For empirical validation to succeed, it is important that broad and systematic investigation of claims in different contexts and careful interpretation of results be undertaken. Only then is empirical validation able to evade premature pessimism and the introduction of a conservative bias towards “what is” into normative theory. Such a bias would deprive empirical validation of its critical-transformative potential. It is equally important for researchers looking to engage in empirical validation to acknowledge that normative theory may be valuable and

relevant by formulating *regulative ideas* (i.e., ideas that cannot be realized but are supposed to motivate empirical approximations). In this case, it is only possible to investigate and empirically validate empirical claims about these approximations, but not the regulative idea itself.

Empirical validation as well – although not presented yet as a distinct part of the research process – has been applied by empirical researchers in political communication, for example to normative expectations about the willingness of ordinary citizens to participate in participatory democratic procedures (e.g., Neblo, Esterling, Kennedy, Lazer, & Sokhey, 2010; see also Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2003), their evaluations of such procedures (Morrell, 1999), and their ability to accept fully equal citizenship of all members in the political community (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2004).

Ultimately, empirical validation makes normative theory more realistic, but not in the sense of letting established practices put excessive limitations on the appropriate normative principles for regulating them (Erman & Möller, 2015). Instead, researchers should take as their starting point a normative theory, parse it for empirical assumptions, and then develop research designs to test them so as to contribute to incremental improvements of the normative formation. In other words, empirical validation can contribute a “benign realism” to normative thinking.

Conclusion: Critical Empiricism as Framework for Political Communication Research

In this paper, I have tried to pull together several discussions about and approaches to an empirically oriented normative analysis in political communication (and beyond) that previously were scattered across the literature. I argued that the framework for empiricist critical analysis presented here will promote greater systematic exchanges between the empirical and normative

study of political communication. It should also clarify the contribution of empirical political communication studies to democratic theory, practice, and reform.

I have discussed normative assessment and empirical validation as the two complementary building blocks constituting the framework represented in Figure 1. It is important to remember that normative assessment is a supporting, if not necessary, factor in making scholarship work to realize the relations constituting the triangle – it is the core practice of political communication research understood as critical empirical democracy research. However, it is also important to understand normative assessment as an invitation to investigate the “ideal worlds” indicated by *multiple* normative theories.

More important yet, normative assessment as a procedure gains import when it can draw on normative theories that previously have stood the test of empirical validation of their “ideal worlds” (Mutz, 2008). Validation strengthens assessment, and with it the critical potential of empirical communication research on the whole. Specifically, empirical validation and normative assessment, I hope to have shown, are indispensable for the ability of empirical social researchers to productively engage in empirical criticism.

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Notes

¹ The *Werturteilsstreit* (in early 20th century) and *Positivismusstreit* (in mid-20th century) debates in German sociology were early instances of the controversy surrounding the relation between the real and ideal social world.