

Political Communication Study: A Review

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Abstract

Political communication is one of the most fundamental and crucial concepts in politics and communication studies. This article systematically reviews existing relevant literature to the definition of political communication and theoretical and empirical study of political communication. It hopes to provide some guidance for this field, with the aim of promoting the development of political communication study. This study finds that digital technology is quietly and powerfully shaping a new political communication landscape and the political communication study is showing an increasingly strong trend of interdisciplinary intersection and integration, with computational and experimental social science methods continuing to empower and become new research directions.

Keywords: political communication, theoretical study, empirical study, review

1. Introduction

The term “political communication” is normally a core concept in politics and communication studies. It is a complex and multifaceted field that encompasses the study of how information, ideas, and viewpoints are disseminated in the political domain. It involves analyzing various forms of communication, including public speaking, political advertising, social media, and so on. The study of political communication is crucial for understanding how political actors and institutions interact with the public, shape public opinion, and influence political outcomes. This field is becoming increasingly important in the digital age, as the rise of new media technology has changed the way political information is produced, transmitted, and received. One viewpoint of political communication is that it plays a central role in shaping public opinion and influencing political behavior. Scholars believe that the media and political elites have the right to set agendas, construct political issues, and shape public perception. This viewpoint emphasizes the role of communication in shaping the political landscape and driving political outcomes. Another perspective of political communication focuses on the role of citizens as active participants in the communication process. It emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals interpret and respond to political information, recognizing that citizens are not passive recipients of information, but actively participate in political communication in a way influenced by their own beliefs, values, and experiences. In addition, studies on political communication also include analysis of political rhetoric and language. Researchers in this field have studied how political actors use language to persuade, mobilize, and connect with the public, for analyzing the use of persuasive techniques, emotional appeals, and framing strategies in political speeches, debates, advertisements, and so on. Political communication study has also delved into the impact of new media technology on the political domain. Especially the rise of social media has changed the way political information is disseminated and consumed.

In short, the study of political communication is of important which covers a wide range of perspectives and themes. By studying the roles of media, citizens, language and new media technologies, it can help to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between communication and politics. With the continuous evolution of the political landscape, study on political communication remains crucial in addressing the challenges and opportunities brought by the constantly changing media environment. Based on the above context, under the guidance of literature research methodology, this study systematically sorts out the relevant literature of political communication and then points out the research gap of the existing studies as well as the possible future study.

2. Definition and Connotation of Political Communication

As early as 1922, Western communication scholar Walter Lippmann realized that politicians could use the media to construct, create, and guide public opinion. At that time, Western politicians were shuttling between politics and the media, using their power or financial resources to control media coverage. Is this good or bad for democratic politics? Under such doubts, more and more scholars have realized the need to study the relationship between politics and media. Among them, Brain Mcnair realized that media coverage is influenced by both internal and external factors: the former includes biases against news by journalists, interference from media conglomerates, and so on; the latter refers to various activities of political communication (Mcnaire, 2003). And “political communication” has also become a new term that has attracted widespread attention in Western society.

The category of “political communication” itself contains dual disciplinary elements, namely politics and communication studies, and these two important elements each have very different disciplinary definitions. Is political communication defined from the perspective of politics? Or should we define political communication from the perspective of communication studies? From the current situation, it seems that there is a constant struggle and each is fighting on their own. The broad nature of “politics” and “communication” itself makes it difficult to define the term “political communication”. In view of it, scholars rarely provide a clear definition of “political communication”. At present, there are two trends on its definition: politics-centred and communication studies-centred ones.

The definitions of “political communication” based on politics are mainly represented by the following ones. In the 1960s, the publication of a number of political communication monographs such as Deutsch’s *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (1963) marked the beginning of the construction of the discipline system of Western political communication. Fagen (1966) believed that “political communication” refers to any communication behavior within the political system and between the political system and its environment. Thus, he suggests studying the economic and social determinants of communication networks (organizations, groups, mass media, special channels, etc.) and communication forms. Zhu (1983) proposed that ideal political communication is a consensus of political symbols. The definition proposed by Denton and Woodward (1990) involves public discussion and evaluation of public resources, government authority, and government decision-making behavior. Nimmo and Sanders (1994) pointed out that political communication is an intermediary or channel among politicians, government organizations, and citizens. Li (2005) believed that political communication is the process of transmitting and processing political information caused by the structure and function of the political system.

This type of definition often categorizes political communication activities as a type of political activity, and applies relevant theories of politics to analyze political activities, which is obviously not comprehensive enough. Therefore, the definitions based on communication studies could well make up for this deficiency. Almond and Coleman (1960) believed that political communication is a systemic function that can change political culture and structure. Mcnair (2003) summarized political communication activities into three aspects: firstly, various communication activities carried out by party members and political activists to achieve specific goals; secondly, all non-partisan individuals engage in communication activities targeting those with political affiliations; thirdly, a collection of news reports, current affairs commentaries, or other forms of political discussions on the political actions of politicians, party members, and non-party members. Thus, Mcnair proposed that political communication refers to purposeful communication about politics. That is to say, in fact, Mcnair regards political communication as the essential integration of politics and communication in human society, based on the same human political life as society. Lang and Hou (2004) proposed that political communication is the process in which the government and other political participants widely, rapidly, and continuously transmit political information to the target audience through various channels and symbols, thereby influencing their political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Ju (2007) proposed that political communication is the behavior and process of certain political communication subjects (people, politicians, governments, or government organizations) using meaningful symbols to transmit, receive, and feedback political information between mass media and the objects of political communication.

We can see that whether from the perspective of politics or communication studies, the academic community has defined the essential elements of “political communication” from their respective disciplinary perspectives. However, these definitions precisely lack effective integration between politics and communication studies. Strömbäck (2022) thought that the strength of political communication research lies in its interdisciplinarity, drawing from but also bridging the gaps between different disciplines, where political science and media and communication science arguably are the two most important ones. From this perspective, it is imperative that political communication scholars strive to incorporate relevant theories regardless of disciplinary origin. In this regard, it is also important that political communication scholars, even with backgrounds in different disciplines, work together to find ways of comprehensively defining this term. For this, Jing and Shi (2009) proposed that the definition of “political communication” should first break through the limitations of thinking only from the “disciplinary barriers” of politics or communication studies, and

break through the thinking logic of only focusing on the independent and complete “relationship” between “politics” and “communication”. From this perspective, they believe that “political communication” refers to the process of political information diffusion and acceptance within a specific political community. In this seemingly simple regulation, “political information” means the essential factor deconstructed from “politics”, which means that this information can only be “political”; “spread and acceptance” means the essential elements deconstructed from “dissemination”, that is to say, political information is in a state of “spread and acceptance”, and the two merge to form a new category of “political communication”.

Based on the above definitions, this study proposes that political communication is the process of reaching consensus between different political entities through the back-and-forth flow of political information through certain communication channels. The elements of political communication include communication media, political subjects, political information, and feedback information.

3. The Research Methods of Political Communication

Political communication has attracted much attention from the academic community, with different scholars providing comprehensive and in-depth explorations from multiple disciplines and perspectives. For the importance of it, Deutsch (1963: 81) regarded political communication as the “nerve of government”, Almond (1960) regarded it as the “blood of government”, and Lippmann (1997) believed that the most significant revolution of our time is not an economic or political revolution, but an artistic revolution that “creates consent” among the ruled. The current studies on political communication mainly involve three perspectives: communication studies, systems theory, and politics. This study no longer distinguishes between these research perspectives, but rather provides a systematic review of the overall content of political communication with focusing more on communication studies and politics, aiming to provide some guidance for future study on this field.

The phenomenon of political communication and its studies are not unique to modern times, but the discipline of political communication emerged in the United States in the 1950s. Up to 1960s, with the efforts of scholars such as Deutsch, Pai and Fagen, a basic framework for political communication study was developed. Xie (2006) believed that political communication in the West can be divided into two categories: one, represented by Deutsch, regards political communication as a complete political process, or observes the political process through political communication; another regards political communication as the process of information transmission through mass media, which is the main way and channel of political communication. Under these two perspectives, current studies on political communication mainly includes the following four methods.

(1) Investigation and research

The emergence of political communication in the Western academic community is attributed to the widespread development of political election campaigns. Politicians need high-quality study results provided by political communication researchers to help them make decisions. What kind of communication strategy is the most effective, which can maximize the communication effectiveness of the election, that is, can be converted into more votes? This is the most direct application of political communication research in Western political life. For this purpose, investigative research has been widely applied in the study of political communication. Political communication scholars use this method to study the political attitudes and voting tendencies of voters, focusing on analyzing the correlation between candidates’ campaign strategies and voting behavior, which factors affect the voting tendencies and behaviors of ordinary people, and how media use changes the political attitudes and positions of ordinary people. It laid the foundation for the study of political communication from the beginning, serving political propaganda, election campaigns, and party image packaging (Lu & Ma, 2019). For example, researchers studied how information was disseminated and diffused through election campaigns, the role of news media in agenda setting, and the process by which people’s political attitudes are formed (e.g., Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986).

(2) Experimental study

Classic experimental designs often use the simplest comparison between two groups. Generally, two groups that can be paired are randomly selected from a population, and one of the groups is subjected to experimental stimuli (in political communication study, it can be a news report, a documentary, a political advertisement, etc.), and then divided into experimental group and control group for scientific measurement and comparison. During World War II, Yale University experimental psychologists Carl Hovland and his team led a research project, attempting to measure the extent to which Frank Capra’s promotional film “Why We Fight” influenced soldiers’ attitudes, including attitudes towards the Allies and motivations for joining the military. The experiment was conducted by sampling in platoons, with the sampling units matched on several key demographic variables. The experimental design involved two camps, one receiving experimental stimuli and being exposed to a movie, while the other did not receive stimuli (Lu & Ma, 2019). These classic experiments have further influenced numerous subsequent researchers, who have attempted to use

the same experimental research methods to establish new models of attitude change (e.g., Ansolabehere, 2006).

As a pioneer in communication psychology, Hovland advocated the use of experimental research methods and borrowed analytical paths from psychoanalysis and group psychology to explore the impact of mass communication on attitude change (Hovland et al., 1953). This research method and path have had a profound impact on subsequent political communication study. Subsequently, scholars gradually adopted experimental study methods to explore political communication.

(3) Content analysis

In political communication, content analysis emphasizes not only the study of the form of political information content, but also the analysis of the political communication process and the evaluation of communication effects, which requires linking the content of political information with other constituent elements of the political communication environment. Lasswell (1971) analyzed the propaganda techniques used by participating countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and the United States during World War I, combined with wartime newspapers, manuals, flyers, movies, posters, pictures, and interviews with some scholars and government officials. He then conducted a specific analysis of war propaganda from four levels: propaganda organization, propaganda symbols, propaganda process, and propaganda role. His discussion on war propaganda techniques such as demon worship, victory fantasies, and maintaining friendship laid a basic research paradigm for subsequent political communication study. Actually, this study pioneered a methodology for measuring and disseminating information through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Chen, 2015). Gradually, content analysis has been widely used in political communication study as a relatively good way for this field. For example, researchers proposed that “frame” in media dissemination of political information and reporting of political news should be accurately identified, of which Chong and Druckman believed that in order to accurately identify a political communication framework, one must first choose specific political issues, politicians, or events (Entman, 2004).

(4) Integrated analysis based on second-hand data

Political communication scholars also use second-hand data for political communication analysis, especially in studying political communication focal issues such as public opinion and political elections. For example, Kioussis and McCombs (2004) used data from American National Election Studies to assess the strength of public attitudes and identified this variable as a potential mediator in the relationship between news media and major political figures. Holbert (2005) used data from American National Election Studies to investigate how news affects public perceptions of government size and how government budgets should be allocated across different areas of social welfare.

All of these methods have advantages as well as shortcomings. The key of which method to adopt lies in whether it is suitable for the theoretical problems, research objects, and empirical materials. In view of this, Lu and Ma (2019) called for an integrated method, advocating breaking down methodological barriers within political communication study, strengthening cooperation among different research paths and methods, and more effectively promoting political communication study.

4. The Research Trends of Political Communication

4.1 Political Communication in the Digital Age

4.1.1 The Characteristics of Political Communication in the Digital Age

Since the beginning of the 21st century, especially in the second decade, emerging digital technologies have continued to empower communication audiences, and a clear new political communication model has gradually emerged. This new model of political communication is summarized as the “fourth age of political communication” (Blumler, 2016), and is also expressed as “political communication in post industrial societies” (Norris, 2000), “political communication in media surplus environments” (Aelst, 2017), and so on. The so-called “fourth age of political communication” is a new model developed from the first “three age” of political communication based on the theory of the evolution of political communication technology.

The emergence of ChatGPT further confirms that the audience orientation of political communication will be further strengthened, which is a manifestation of the transformation of contemporary political communication from a media centered approach to a set of methods, techniques, and technologies centered on understanding the audience (Su, 2020). This means the dissolution or gradual withdrawal of traditional concepts such as “propagandism” and “journalistic professionalism” in political communication. Generative artificial intelligence represented by ChatGPT is likely to bring political communication into the “fifth age”, and at the same time, a new world of intellectual environment and political state that echoes it will inevitably emerge. The “fifth age of political communication” continues the characteristics of the “fourth age”, with the main development direction being the increasingly intensified audience orientation since human beings entered a democratic society. The “fifth age of political communication” also has new features that the “fourth age”

does not have, which are prominently manifested in: machines joining human public dialogue and its possible consequences. In an information environment constructed jointly by humans and machines, the essential attribute that distinguishes humans from machines --- subjectivity becomes more meaningful (Su & Wang, 2023).

Zhang (2023) found that the study of political communication in the digital age is undergoing a paradigm shift. That is, the perspective of theorization has shifted from vertical to horizontal political communication and the focus of research is shifting from media effects to effects of information dissemination. The scope of research has rapidly expanded from state-society interaction within nation states to political communication in a global arena. The research methods of political communication have been evolving from a multidisciplinary to a post-disciplinary approach.

4.1.2 Artificial Intelligence and Political Communication

Artificial intelligence technology has brought many new changes to the political communication practices of political parties/governments/countries, media, platforms, and the public, and has also sparked new explorations in the academic community on political communication in the era of artificial intelligence (AI). At present, relevant studies mainly focus on the following four aspects: 1) study on AI and national governance. The existing study on AI and national governance mainly focuses on governance decision-making and effectiveness, and has not yet touched on the institutional level; 2) study on AI and media effects. The existing study has explored how artificial intelligence technology can enhance the effectiveness of media political communication, and believes that AI has promoted the iterative upgrading of the entire process of political communication; 3) study on AI and platform power. With the increasingly prominent role of digital platforms in infrastructure, platform is going to become a core area of political communication study in the era of AI. The future study may conduct a more in-depth political economy analysis of the challenges and opportunities of algorithmic platforms from a broader institutional perspective; 4) study on AI and subjectivity. The existing study has explored how artificial intelligence technology affects the issue of human subjectivity in political communication. The above studies all focus on humans as the only existing subject in political communication, ignoring the increasingly prominent subjectivity of machines. The research on human-machine relationships in the era of artificial intelligence should be paid more attention.

In view of this, Wei and Chen (2024) proposed that to promote theoretical innovation in political communication in the era of AI, researchers can focus on the following four new topics: 1) spread from people to human-machine communication. From the perspective of positivist research paradigm, individual perspective and social perspective are two important directions for innovation in political communication theory in the era of AI. From an individual perspective, how intelligent machines, as a subject, influence people's political cognition, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors will become a new topic in political communication study. 2) digital inequality in the era of AI. From a social perspective, whether the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology will lead to new digital inequalities is a question that political communication researchers should pay attention. 3) media is an extension of human, or human are an extension of media. From the perspective of humanistic research paradigm, cultural studies and political economy criticism are key areas of innovation in political communication theory. In the field of cultural studies, a profound question worth studying in the era of AI is: Is media an extension of humans, or are humans an extension of media? The urgent issue to be explored in the field of political economy is whether human history has "come to an end", and how artificial intelligence technology will drive changes in the political and economic systems of human society.

Jing and Liu (2024) think that the greatest impact of AI on "politics" is undoubtedly the change in the production, dissemination, and reception of "political information". Firstly, AI is reshaping a "new politics". If it is believed that politics has a dual attribute of "idealism" and "reality", and that politics is an activity that constantly transforms its idealism into reality, then the application of AI is accelerating this transformation process like never before, constantly presenting politics in new forms. Secondly, AI has greatly reduced the operating costs of human politics and improved the operational efficiency of human politics. Thirdly, the reshaped new politics has led to a revolutionary change in the overall nature and appearance of political communication based on the original political foundation.

4.1.3 Image and Political Communication

Visual images have always been a unique content and form in political communication. With the popularization and popularity of emerging media such as electronic screens and social platforms that heavily rely on visual images, a digital age centered around visual images is taking an obvious forward. Nowadays, people's understanding of the world is not through language, but through visual images (Lester, 2000). In this era, people gradually resort to images to understand political behavior and phenomena. The shift towards image-based political communication is not limited to the transformation of communication content and methods, but also continuously spreads towards the thinking and behavior of communication subjects and objects, thereby triggering systematic adjustments and structural changes in political communication elements, structures, and relationships. As the "nerve" and "blood" of the political system, the visual shift of political communication has a significant impact on the political system. Unfortunately, the visual shift in political

communication has not received sufficient attention and urgently requires further research, which is not commensurate with the development of reality and theoretical needs (Schill, 2012). In view of this, Pang and Zhao (2023) focused on the visual shift of contemporary Western political communication, aiming to systematically explore the origin, development, impact, and challenges of this new phenomenon on contemporary Western democratic politics. It has found that the visual shift in political communication, while deconstructing the traditional structure, framework, and rules of political communication, has given rise to new forms, contexts, and trends of political communication, resulting in contemporary political communication exhibiting distinct visual political characteristics: an increasing focus on image, even surpassing the examination of power and viewpoints; the pursuit of individuality and differences has become increasingly intense, to the point where the pursuit of consensus has gradually been neglected; the operation of political persuasion is more proficient and sophisticated, to the point where the entire public opinion field is mixed with true and false information, and facts are fabricated and intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish.

Farkas and Bene (2021) argued that existing studies of visual political communication: (1) treats images predominantly as illustrations, (2) is limited to single-platform studies, and (3) does not investigate the engagement effects of images. To make up for these limitations, they investigated images as objects of interest on their own, adopting a cross-platform comparative approach and examining the engagement effects of visual cues by applying a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis. The results show that images are often used to personalize communication. While on Facebook the individualization dimension of personalization is more common and popular, on Instagram its privatization dimension prevails. Furthermore, on Facebook, users like more politics-related candidate-centered images, but on Instagram they could not find similar effects for more informal visuals.

In addition, news comics, as one of the visual and discourse tools for political communication in online media, are directly related to breaking political biases and changing and reshaping political cognition at the individual level. At the international community level, they can influence the guidance of international public opinion, control of international news discourse power, construction of national image, protection of national interests, and even play a role in preventing and resolving ideological risks. The political dissemination function of digital news comics in online media is also within this framework. Specifically, digital news comics have functions of political information exchange, public opinion guidance and manipulation, and promoting the formation of online public opinion groups and cultural circles (Ji & Ru, 2022).

4.2 Political Communication Study and the Government

Firstly, the relationship between political communication and authority construction has attracted the attention of many scholars of politics and communication studies. Political communication can shape the political world of the people and is an important channel for the government to argue and construct authority (Liu & Xiao, 2023). Jing (2021) pointed out that political communication can construct institutional authority from the perspectives of rulers, institutions, and communities. Su and Yu (2021) believed that the Party and the government adapt to changes in the political order and development environment through “authoritative communication”, thereby continuously enhancing national capacity and autonomy. Shuai et al. (2021) operationalized the recognition of authority as the political attitude of the public, and believed that political communication can influence the political trust, political identity, and other political attitudes of the public.

Secondly, political communication plays an extremely important role in the national governance system. Yu (2015) pointed out that political communication is a prerequisite for the modernization of national governance. In order to achieve the goal of “good governance” that maximizes public interests and the optimal state of the relationship between the state and society, as well as the government and citizens, there must be political communication as a mediator and coordinator. Only through political communication and the negotiation dialogue constructed from it can national governance be achieved. Therefore, although the governance systems of various countries have different natures or types, the political communication system is an important constituent element (Zhang, 2022).

Besides, political communication has a close relationship with national image construction. In the political communication process of national image construction, the strength of mass media is of paramount importance, as it not only determines the scale, scope, and intensity of external propaganda, but also determines the initiative and direction of public opinion, and ultimately determines the effectiveness of communication. To influence and win public opinion in political communication, and build or improve its national image, a government must first effectively utilize its own mass media, set agendas, or implement checks to maintain consistency with the government and form a unified external voice; secondly, they need to learn to leverage opportunities, that is, consciously influence the reporting tendencies and priorities of foreign media through cooperation and communication with mass media, and thus influence the decision-making process (Li, 2006).

4.3 Political Communication Study and Media

As an interactive process, political communication often needs to rely on specific carriers. Mass media and new Internet media have become the most important political communication channels in the current society by virtue of their intermediary characteristics. As American scholars Bennett and Entman have observed, political communication in today's society has been highly mediated. Although some traditional forms of political communication still exist, the importance of modern media in forming public opinion, political domination, social integration and other fields has been recognized by more and more political organizations. Because of this, a series of changes in the field of political life since the 21st century cannot be separated from the deep participation of the media. The media is not only the cause of these changes, but also provides them with further changes (Bennett & Entman, 2000).

4.3.1 Social Media and Political Communication

In the era of Industry 4.0, the connection between political communication and social media has become increasingly close, presenting characteristics of media politicization and political media. In recent years, social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, and WeChat have gradually become important platforms for users to express their political views, thus opening up a new way of political communication. With the rapid development of social media political communication practices, researchers have examined the unique impact of platforms that encourage people to share instant information with each other from different social structures and cultural psychology perspectives on changing political operation patterns and development trajectories (Liu et al., 2018).

With the significant increase in the diversity of topics people participate in and their desire to express themselves on social media, researchers have also begun to pay more attention to the relationship between these usage behaviors and the political tendencies and activities of netizens. They have found that the use of social media is directly or indirectly related to various online and offline political participation behaviors (Bakardjieva, 2009; Jung et al., 2011). In addition, scholars have paid attention to the role of social media in election campaigns, such as the predictive role of social media in elections (Ceron et al., 2014; Houshoulder & LaMarreb, 2015).

Social media plays the role of "political actors" and participants in political communication activities, with functions such as strengthening political information dissemination, political relationship connections, and political cultural identity. In social media, the function of political communication is to maintain harmony, consistency, and symbiotic development between information civilization and political civilization. The process of political communication on social media is the gradual deepening of the political community's understanding of the political operating system and political behavior from sensibility to rationality (Zhang & Ji, 2021).

The positive functions of political communication of social media are embodied in the acculturation of mainstream political environment, the identification of political situation, the integration of political relations, the compensation of political psychology and the supervision of political behavior, etc. Its negative functions include the generation of secondary public opinion, the translocation of political value, the proliferation of moral rhetoric, the limitation of participation cognition and the offside of power supervision (Zhang & Ji, 2021).

Young media users increasingly engage with public affairs via social media such as YouTube, where content is increasingly produced by influencers who neither represent established professional news media nor political parties. Although the audience of these channels is already substantial in absolute terms and still growing enormously --- making alternative influencers serious competitors to professional journalism --- we still know little about their ways of attracting and monetizing audiences, the topics they emphasize, or the specific content they provide. To address this void, Fischer et al. (2022) examined political videos and their producers on YouTube in an explorative and comparative way for English-and German-speaking YouTube channels. They conducted a content analysis of the five most popular YouTube videos for each of the 20 most successful English-and German-speaking political influencers in 2020. The results show that, although English YouTubers already appear to be more professionalized, similar patterns emerge in both language regions, particularly with regards to increasing efforts to manage microcelebrity status. In terms of content, two main types of political YouTube videos were identified: "partisan mockery" and "engaging education".

4.3.2 Mainstream Media and Political Communication

Currently, political parties and governments remain the main body of political communication in various countries around the world, and mainstream media plays a crucial role in political communication, guiding public opinion, values, and culture. 5G technology will further unleash the spread potential of the Internet. The shift of mainstream media towards new media platforms to provide timely information guidance to people will become an inevitable trend in political communication. Political communication is not only more interactive and convenient, but also reflects the following characteristics:

(1) Diversified participants in political communication. In the traditional process of political communication, political

parties or governments play a leading role as the main body of communication, while the public serves as the target of communication, receiving political information such as policies and regulations issued by the government. Currently, the trend of diversified political communication subjects has expanded the reach of political information. The application of 5G technology can enable the public to participate in politics more conveniently and quickly, strengthen political communication between the public and the government, and further expand the depth of public political participation, greatly improving the “virtual space” of government governance.

(2) More approachability of political communication discourse. Traditional political communication content is serious and rigid. Conference news or propaganda preaching style news is the norm of political communication, with the aim of strengthening the authority of the communication subject and reflecting the official nature, thereby achieving the goal of political propaganda. With the development of mobile communication technology and the popularity of social media, political awareness and participation have greatly increased. Political communication is closer to the public through more down-to-earth communication methods, and the media responds to the public’s enthusiasm for political participation using more everyday and colloquial expressions (Gao & Liu, 2020).

4.3.3 News Parody and Political Communication

News parody is a genre that sparks debate in public discourse and academic research. Reporting current events in a way that is not completely different from traditional news media, this type of political satire constitutes a unique form of political communication. Although its hosts and anchors consider their content to be nothing more than entertainment, research shows that their audience does indeed receive political information and political orientation from them, thus demonstrating the true effects of exposure to this political communication (Bode & Becker, 2018).

For news parody, research mainly focuses on the effects on political knowledge acquisition (Jennings et al., 2019; Becker, 2021), effects on political attitudes and candidate evaluations (Morris, 2009) and effects on political participation (Lee, 2012). Based on these studies, Leicht (2023) proposed that while news parody as a form of political communication has been at the center of various studies, related research has been spread across a plethora of disciplines and sub-fields and some limitations and gaps in the literature remain substantially unexplored. For example, the relevant study has suggested that different types of political humor and indeed different shows of the same type of humor have vastly different effects on its audiences. There is a need for further examination and confirmation of these initial findings. Comparisons between types of humor, formats, or programs should continue to be part of the research agenda; however, there needs to be a clear distinction between and examination of different types of political humor, formats, and programs or content. Indeed, such comparisons would also make studies more representative and generalizable as the inherent bias of single stimulus or single issue experimental studies would be avoided. Therefore, effects of such programs should continue to be studied by expanding on the existing methodological approaches, diversifying sampling techniques, and looking at more contemporary phenomena such as comedians outside of their typical realm.

5. Conclusions

This article systematically reviews and sorts out political communication studies mainly from the perspectives of politics and communication study, in order to clarify its research trends and provide its future research direction. From the above analysis, it can be found that in the field of political communication, on the one hand, digital technology is quietly and powerfully changing the communication mode between the government and the public, the political expression and participation of the people, and shaping a new political communication landscape; on the other hand, political communication research is also showing an increasingly strong trend of interdisciplinary intersection and integration, with computational and experimental social science methods continuing to empower and become new research directions.

With the gradual improvement of the application of big data and data analysis software in the field of information technology, current study on political communication also tends to focus on macro level of network communication data and communication object data statistics in the field of communication. It makes researchers ignore the political communication rules of micro individuals to some extent. Although the study of macro level can indicate the political communication trends of groups, from a historical perspective, the influence of “key individuals” and “key events” in the political process on political trends cannot be ignored. Therefore, the dissemination of individuals and events in political communication from a micro perspective should not be ignored either. In addition, the interdisciplinary study of political communication and AI will also be an indispensable field for future study. The impact of AI such as ChatGPT on political communication has been noticed by political communication scholars, but this is still limited to the research object of text. With OpenAI’s Sora model, which can generate video content that is difficult to distinguish between real and fake, the ability to shape a fake “real world” has unpredictable cognitive effects on the public. The simulation of the “real world” generated by the Sora is bound to carry specific ideological imprints. Researchers in

political communication should continue to pay attention to and be vigilant about the potential impact of the Sora and its influence on audience political cognition. The large-scale practical application of this technology may trigger changes in the way political communication is conducted globally. Therefore, adapting to technological development and responding to the needs of the times, political communication research urgently needs to break through the constraints of old perspectives, theories, and methods, seek new theories, and explore new methods. For example, the combination of linguistics and political communication, not only focusing on image or rhetoric, but also the other aspects of language in the communication; that is, using language to promote political communication.

In short, political communication is a very important research topic in politics and communication study and related fields, and the study of political communication in these fields has a very broad research space. Future study can adopt interdisciplinary research methods to further improve its theoretical and empirical studies.

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Authors' contributions

Yansong Lin was responsible for study design and revising. Yang Yang drafted the manuscript and Yansong Lin revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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No additional data are available.

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