

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A New Era of Minimal Effects? A Response to Bennett and Iyengar

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This article takes up Bennett and Iyengar's (2008) call for debate about the future of political communication effects research. We outline 4 key criticisms. First, Bennett and Iyengar are too quick to dismiss the importance of attitude reinforcement, long recognized as an important type of political media influence. Second, the authors take too narrow a view of the sources of political information, remaining fixated on news. Third, they offer an incomplete portrayal of selective exposure, exaggerating the extent to which individuals avoid attitude-discrepant information. Finally, they lean toward determinism when describing the role technologies play in shaping our political environment. In addition, we challenge Bennett and Iyengar's assertion that only brand new theory can serve to help researchers understand today's political communication landscape. We argue that existing tools, notably the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), retain much utility for examining political media effects. Contrary to Bennett and Iyengar's claims, the ELM suggests that the contemporary political information environment does not necessarily lead to minimal effects.

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We thank Professors Bennett and Iyengar for the good service they have provided the discipline by introducing a series of provocative arguments in their recent work, "A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication," published in *Journal of Communication* (December 2008). These authors focus on a number of emerging sociological and technological issues that they feel have been overlooked in current political communication scholarship, and they argue that the failure to address these issues has led to the publication of studies which lack sufficient interpretability, social significance, and which fail to cohere in a productive manner. In outlining their agenda for the future study of political communication, Bennett and Iyengar emphasize such issues as channel proliferation, audience fragmentation, selective exposure, partisan echo chambers, and broader sociotechnical change. In addition, their essay details a largely dysfunctional role for media relative to a set of normatively desirable democratic outcomes.

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We wish to state at the outset of this response essay that we do not disagree with all of Bennett and Iyengar's conclusions (as will become evident later in this work). However, we do take issue with some of the core assumptions and conceptualizations offered by Bennett and Iyengar, and these assumptions and conceptualizations shape their conclusions. Our perspective leads to some unique conclusions, as well as a series of judgments that match those of Bennett and Iyengar but are based on qualitatively distinct processes of influence. We agree with Bennett and Iyengar's observation that political communication scholarship owes a significant debt of gratitude to the discipline of psychology, and so we ground many of our arguments in theory from this field. More specifically, a number of Bennett and Iyengar's arguments and conclusions concern issues of persuasion and attitude change, and we feel an infusion of psychological theory will serve the current debate well given that field's defining role in the social scientific study of these research areas.

Our title echoes the core question concerning minimal effects addressed by Bennett and Iyengar because we consider this matter still open for debate. Our distinct theoretical perspectives, presented in light of current sociological and technological change, do not lead us to predict that the field of political communication will soon be traveling down an empirical pathway paved with minimal effects. Our conclusion is that a full range of effects is not only plausible, but distinctly probable, even amidst the extraordinary sociotechnical change occurring in our media system and democracy. We begin our response with a critique of Bennett and Iyengar's approach to the fundamental issues of persuasion, limited effects, political information exposure, media selectivity, and sociotechnical change. Next, we apply a social-psychological perspective to several of the core persuasion-based issues raised in the Bennett and Iyengar essay, using this perspective to present many of our arguments and alternative conclusions related to what we see as the future of media effects research in political communication. We conclude our essay with a discussion of the future role of media in democracy. Bennett and Iyengar have challenged political communication scholars to a debate about the future of the field. We agree that a proper debate is in order (and perhaps overdue), and here put forward some alternative theoretical perspectives in the hope that greater breadth and depth of discussion will flow within (and ultimately outside) our community of scholarship.

Critique of Bennett and Iyengar

Conceptualizing persuasion and processes of influence

A central conclusion, perhaps *the* central conclusion, of Bennett and Iyengar (2008) is as follows: "The increasing level of selective exposure based on partisan preference thus presages a new era of minimal consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects is concerned" (p. 725). Let us first focus on the concept of "persuasive effects" as envisioned by Bennett and Iyengar. In terms of their discussion of persuasion, it is clear that these authors are equating persuasion with attitude change. Bennett and Iyengar offer the following statement on this matter: "We anticipate that the

fragmentation of the national audience reduces the likelihood of attitude *change*” (p. 724, emphasis added). However, classic social influence scholarship has identified persuasion as consisting of not only attitude *change*, but also attitude *formation* and attitude *reinforcement*. As cogently argued by Miller (2002), the study of persuasion involves analyses of response shaping, response reinforcing, and response changing processes of influence, not just the latter of these three. It is essential to take a broader view of persuasion when analyzing Bennett and Iyengar’s arguments and assessing the conclusions these authors reach about persuasive outcomes and the future of political media effects research. We argue that any discussion of the future of effects-based research in political communication and all conclusions offered as to what may be a preponderance of small versus moderate versus large media-based persuasion effects in future political contexts needs to account for the full spectrum of persuasion-based processes (i.e., formation, reinforcement, and change).

Relative to media-generated political persuasion outcomes, Bennett and Iyengar argue that “Those who say they read a particular newspaper or watch a network newscast are likely to differ systematically in their political attitudes, and it will be imperative that survey-based analyses disentangle the reciprocal effects of media exposure and political attitudes and behaviors” (p. 724). Slater (2007) has made a similar argument in introducing his reinforcing spirals approach to the study of media influence, arguing that “the fullest and most accurate depiction of a media effects process can typically best be modeled by assessing both selectivity and effects [over time] within the same analysis” (p. 282). Slater argues that media use is often best treated as endogenous given the field’s wealth of theory and empirical insights concerning how a wide range of individual-difference variables can impact media use. However, he also stresses that treating media use as endogenous does not presume marginal or nonsignificant media effects. Instead, Slater argues that media influence is part of a dynamic process that unfolds over time, and the role of media within this process can only be fully understood as the result of a thorough decomposition of effects.

A central theme of Bennett and Iyengar’s essay is the rise of a “more polarized electorate” (p. 724). Greater polarization is a reflection of attitude strengthening and reinforcement, and we argue that this outcome is a persuasive effect that derives in part from the consumption of political media. More importantly, polarization is a media effect that is worth studying, and it is a persuasive outcome that has the potential to be moderate to large in size. It is certainly the case that political party identification and political ideology lead individuals to consume specific types of political media, but—as Bennett and Iyengar acknowledge—the media also play a role in promoting polarization. If you believe that political media use is nothing more than the sum of pre-existing political identities, ideological orientations, attitudes, and opinions, then the influence that can be attributed to it directly would be small because media consumption is simply the manifestation of prior predispositions. If, however, you share our belief that a citizen’s political media use is influenced by that which exists prior to the media act, but that it also has consequences for the individual subsequently, then the potential for stronger political media effects becomes evident.

Let us take a closer look at evidence concerning use of one of the more partisan outlets in today's political media environment, conservative political talk radio. Even those studies which have shown the strongest connections between political individual-difference variables (e.g., political ideology, political party identification) and exposure to this political communication information outlet have reported only moderate effect sizes (e.g., Stroud, 2008). We are not arguing that party identification and political ideology are unimportant variables for predicting conservative political talk radio exposure. However, what we wish to stress is that engaging a political media outlet, such as conservative political talk radio, is more than just a behavioral manifestation of an individual's political orientations.

In addition, Lee and Cappella (2001) have argued that there is a fundamental difference between partisans who choose only those political media outlets which reflect their pre-existing political affiliations and partisans who choose to engage political media outlets which run counter to their partisan leanings (more on this point later in this response essay). These authors argue that in reference to the latter group, "The behavior of choosing a host or program that counters their avowed partisan predispositions is likely more important information about their real values than their stated political party affiliation or leaning" (p. 389). In other words, there are times when media behavior says more about an individual than his or her self-reported political affiliation.

The demise of the inadvertent news audience

In addition to what Bennett and Iyengar see as increasingly partisan political-media-use decisions being made by dedicated news consumers is the general shrinking of the news audience as a result of greater media choice. The rise of what Prior (2007) defines as a "postbroadcast democracy" has given the power of media choice to individuals who are not interested in politics (and who never really wanted to consume news in first place), allowing them to seek out media content that offers more of the types of gratifications they desire (typically entertainment related). The question is whether a shift away from news and news-talk content and a general shrinking of the news audience automatically translates into a weakening of political media effects.

It is clear that Bennett and Iyengar are limiting their discussion of political media effects to influence derived from news and news-talk consumption. Let us extend the quote offered earlier in this critique concerning Bennett and Iyengar's decision to limit their discussion of persuasion to change: "We anticipate that the fragmentation of the national audience reduces the likelihood of attitude change *in response to particular patterns of news* [emphasis added]" (p. 724). We argue that limiting political media influence to news alone places an artificial boundary condition on the field's conceptualization of political media effects. We are not alone in this assessment. Williams and Delli Carpini (2002) argue that "the political relevance of a cartoon character like Lisa Simpson is as important as the professional norms of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings" (p. B15). If media influence on politics includes more than just news, then conclusions regarding the inescapability

of limited effects become increasingly suspect. This point becomes all the more important when we treat the study of political media influence as being inclusive of both intended and *unintended* effects (see McLeod & Reeves, 1980). The primary intention of entertainment media may be to entertain (and even this assumption is open to debate for programming like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), but these nonnews outlets can still generate a host of unintended political outcomes.

Today's media landscape provides an ever-expanding range of entertainment content options that focus to varying degrees on political matters (see Holbert, 2005). Audience members can come into contact with the presentation of a wide range of political topics through their viewing of a variety of animated situation comedies (e.g., *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*). This type of political storytelling represents a meaningful distinction between entertainment-based programming and the political content provided through traditional hard news (see Cantor, 1999). In addition, citizens are turning in large numbers to a wide variety of entertainment media options devoted almost exclusively to matters of politics and public policy. There are satirical news and news-talk programs like *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, each of which have been shown to produce potentially important democratic outcomes (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2007; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). There are also all the entertainment-based soft-news programs that are the central focus of Baum's (2003) work and which have the potential to impact political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. In addition, there is the work of Young (2006) pointing to some very interesting political influences derived from late-night talk show consumption (e.g., *The Late Show With David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*). All of this empirical research leads us to conclude that a host of non news content options have the ability to produce political media effects.

The evidence for partisan selective exposure

Returning to the quote cited in the beginning of this section, we observe that Bennett and Iyengar have positioned partisan selective exposure as a key theoretical tool for understanding what they foresee as the decrease in measurable persuasive effects in the contemporary era. This focus is noteworthy, perhaps even surprising, given that controversy concerning the concept dates back over 40 years (see Sears & Freedman, 1967). The belief that individuals desire an information environment that is entirely consistent with their political preferences is at the core of Bennett and Iyengar's argument, but it is not clear that this assessment is correct.

There is a substantial body of research that challenges the premise that ideological homogeneity is psychologically desirable. The authors briefly acknowledge the criticisms of selectivity raised by Sears and Freedman (1967), but this is not the end of the debate. In his comprehensive review of this research, Frey (1986) observes that individuals exhibit a consistent pattern of selectivity across a wide range of contexts, but this pattern deviates in one crucial way from the portrait presented by Bennett and Iyengar. Frey finds that individuals exhibit a stronger bias toward attitude-consistent information than against attitude-discrepant information. In other words, people are

attracted to information with which they agree, but they do not show much aversion to information with which they disagree. Although this is a subtle distinction, it has important implications for people's exposure to political messages, and to the future of persuasive effects. Bennett and Iyengar return repeatedly to the argument that partisans will "ignore sources or arguments from the opposing side" (p.723), yet this overly broad characterization misrepresents how people seek information. Empirical evidence suggests that selective exposure does not necessarily preclude contact with attitude-discrepant information.

Concerns over the traditional interpretation of selective exposure, with its emphasis on selective avoidance, also continued within field of communication. As recently as 2001, Chaffee and colleagues argued that despite a profound lack of empirical evidence, "the pessimistic assumption that media audiences primarily seek support for fixed attitudes, rather than adjust their opinions to changing political situations, took deep root in the scholarly literature" (Chaffee, Saphir, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2001, p. 248). Although Chaffee was vehemently critical of selective exposure, he did not deny that some conditions and characteristics promoted exposure to attitude-consistent information. His objection was to the assertion that these same characteristics lead individuals to avoid attitude-discrepant information.

Evidence of this important distinction between seeking attitude-consistent information and avoiding attitude-discrepant information persists in the increasingly personalizable political information environment of the early 21st century. Studies examining people's interactions with online information resources provide additional evidence that Bennett and Iyengar have incorrectly characterized individuals' information exposure preferences. For instance, survey data collected during the 2004 U.S. Presidential election show that strong supporters of a candidate are more likely to visit web sites of their preferred candidate than weaker supporters, but that strength of support does not influence visits to opposing candidates' web sites (Garrett, 2009b). Even more striking, those survey data also show that Americans who use online news sources encounter a greater number of arguments both for *and against* their preferred candidate than those who do not. A behavior-tracking study conducted the following year examined the separate influence of attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant information on individual's use of online news stories (Garrett, 2009a). Results indicate that the inclusion of attitude-consistent information promotes news item exposure, measured both in terms of the decision to look at an item and the time spent examining it. Consistent with the previous study, though, attitude-discrepant information does not produce a significant decrease in the likelihood of examining a news item. Furthermore, it is associated with substantially *longer* read times.

Webster's (2007) analysis of the Fox TV News audience offers more evidence against selective avoidance. Webster finds that Fox News viewers spend on average only about 7.5% of their total television viewing time with that particular political media outlet. In addition, "roughly 85% of them watched at least one of the big-three affiliates, and, on average, they spent more time watching those sources" (p. 322). He concludes that "this audience is not just a polarized enclave, but a group that

spends considerable time with general interest programming” (p. 322). The totality of political media consumption must be assessed when addressing the role of media in generating political outcomes. The more expansive the analysis of a citizen’s total media diet, the more we begin to see that an individual’s media consumption is about more than just political party identification or political ideology.

A number of scholars suggest that selective exposure, including the forms described by Bennett and Iyengar, will occur in some contexts. For instance, Frey (1986) observes that issue commitment promotes selective exposure, a finding echoed in more recent work by Stroud (2008). Fischer and colleagues (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005) show that information limits can also promote selectivity, noting that when people’s ability to search for and consume information is restricted, attitude-based biases are more pronounced. Also, Lavine and colleagues (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005) demonstrate that threat can promote selectivity, especially among authoritarians. It is somewhat surprising, then, that a discussion of content and context is entirely absent from Bennett and Iyengar’s discussion of selectivity.

This is particularly important because context can also promote behaviors that deviate significantly from those predicted by Bennett and Iyengar. There are several conditions that are associated with greater exposure to other viewpoints. For example, there are times when it will be more valuable to understand an issue fully than to avoid discrepant information, such as when an individual needs to defend a position or to critique the opposition. In these circumstances, the utility of exposure to other perspectives outweighs its potential costs (Frey, 1986). Others note that individuals hold complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes (Zaller, 1992), which could be an obstacle to systematic selective exposure. When multiple attitudes have bearing on an issue, which one guides selectivity? A third factor that can promote exposure to attitude-discrepant information is the individual’s attitude certainty, or the stability of the cognitive system (Albarracín & Mitchell, 2004). If an individual is sufficiently confident in her ability to refute all opinion challenges, the costs of exposure to other viewpoints are trivial. This may help to explain why individuals are *drawn* to attitude-discrepant information when it is easily refuted (Frey, 1986).

We do not mean to suggest that selectivity is unimportant. To the contrary, ideologically motivated selectivity clearly shapes people’s exposure to political news, and this can have troubling normative implications. When news consumers choose among ideologically narrow outlets, they will likely prefer attitude-consistent sources, which will produce a *de facto* avoidance of attitude-discrepant information. But the relationship between selective exposure and the contemporary information environment is more complex. There is ample evidence that people’s preference for attitude-consistent information is tempered by a willingness to engage with other attitudes in certain circumstances. And despite the pressures that encourage media bias, the work in theoretical economics that Bennett and Iyengar cite also indicates that there are a variety of factors that simultaneously act to keep bias in check, including competition among news outlets (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). This suggests that outlets providing access to a mixture of attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant

information are unlikely to disappear entirely, which means that news consumers are not always choosing between partisan extremes. In such an environment, selective exposure and encounters with attitude-discrepant information can coexist. By premising their claim of a new era of minimal effects on a notion of selective exposure that is incomplete, the authors call another facet of their prediction into question.

Conceptualizing sociotechnical change

Another element of Bennett and Iyengar's line of reasoning that merits closer scrutiny is their take on the nature of sociotechnical change. The authors appear to be of two minds on the subject. On one hand, they observe that "we are entering another important turning point not just in communication technologies *but in social structure and identity formation* that affect the behaviors of audiences" (p. 716, emphasis added). In making this argument, they briefly examine increasing self-reflexivity, identity management, and the pairing of content consumption and production, which they describe as typifying a younger demographic oriented toward flexible identity formation. This depiction suggests that the authors are sensitive to the complex dynamics underlying sociotechnical transformations.

On the other hand, Bennett and Iyengar also write that "There is a much wider range of media choices on offer, providing much greater variability in the content of available information. This means that something approaching information 'stratamentation' (stratification and fragmentation) is going on" (p. 717). These statements suggest that changing technologies are a driving force behind the predicted transformations. This perspective is carried to a logical extreme in the section entitled "The future is now." In it, the authors describe how participants in a 2007 study exhibited dramatically higher levels of political selective exposure than participants in a study conducted in 2000. Although the two studies employed strikingly different designs, they suggest that new technologies best explain the inconsistent results, arguing that today's choice-enhancing media environment is transforming Americans from largely open-minded political information consumers to single-minded ideologues. And in their conclusion they write that empirical evidence is "consistent with the argument that *technology* will narrow rather than widen users' political horizons" (p. 724, emphasis added). But is technological innovation the powerful causal force that they claim it to be?

Describing sociotechnical change is a notoriously difficult balancing act, in which scholars commonly strive to avoid the rival pitfalls of technological determinism and social constructivism (see Bijker & Law, 1992). Our concern is that Bennett and Iyengar inadvertently slip into placing too much of the blame for the problems that they observe on the technologies themselves. In these moments, the authors appear to suggest that individuation, stratification, and fragmentation inhere in these new information and communication technologies. Specifically, they focus on consequences of a few key attributes, while paying little attention to a variety of other factors that have the potential to influence their predictions in substantive ways.

Let us first consider the technological affordances that the authors emphasize. According to Bennett and Iyengar, the unprecedented volume of information and the high degree of choice afforded by new technologies are essential aspects of the contemporary political communication environment. We do not dispute that these changes in news consumers' capabilities are profound, and agree that scholars have shed considerable light on the role these factors have played in politics (e.g., Bimber, 2003). These are not, however, the only novel capabilities associated with new technologies. For instance, in addition to increasing the availability of partisan news sources in general, new technologies facilitate access to a broader spectrum of political information (Bimber & Davis, 2003). The increasingly diverse information environment includes more than Fox News, an outlet situated within the mainstream of the conservative movement. Other sources, such as Alternet or the DailyKos on the left or NewsMax and Power Line on the right, represent relatively well known outlets that fall farther toward the margins of mainstream U.S. politics. And lesser-known groups have long had a presence online as well (e.g., see Garner, 1999; Zook, 1996). The breadth of viewpoints demonstrated by these examples is significant to this discussion of persuasive effects. Although Bennett and Iyengar appear to be most concerned with political conversions, the availability of outlets representing a more diverse range of viewpoints could produce other types of attitude shifts. For example, as Bennett and Iyengar note, liberals and conservatives alike could be swayed toward more extreme positions through increasing awareness of a broader cross-section of the political landscape.

Bennett and Iyengar have chosen to exclude a variety of other technology-enabled capacities that could facilitate changes in the flow of political information that are as dramatic as the transformations that we have already witnessed. Social network sites such as Facebook, the microblogging service Twitter, and the video-sharing service YouTube are just a few examples of the new conduits over which political information flows, and early uses of these technologies are sometimes startling. Journalists treat Twitter as a complement to traditional wire services (Niles, 2009), and Iranian protesters used it to connect with one another and the world in the face of government censorship following that country's controversial Presidential elections (Grossman, 2009). In the United States, individuals create videos in support of their favored candidate that reach a national audience (Vargas, 2008), and millions share political information with one another online (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2008).

Systems that recommend information goods based on past preferences, identifying content that exhibits similar characteristics, or that people with similar tastes have expressed a preference for are also potentially important to our understanding of political information flows. News recommendation services such as Digg (<http://digg.com/>) and the technology-oriented Slash Dot (<http://slashdot.org/>), though relatively unsophisticated when compared to recommenders in other domains (e.g., Amazon.com), demonstrate how individual user preferences can shape broader media consumption patterns.

Taken together, social networking tools and recommendation systems could create an unprecedented opportunity for large groups of individuals to play a role in the filtering of political messages. This could be seen as an updated alternative to the traditional two-step flow, in which “the wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004) substitutes for individual opinion leaders. Such a dynamic would be a stark contrast to a one-step flow established through tailored marketing and audience segmentation (Bennett & Manheim, 2006). On this view, technology allows news consumers to become agenda setters.

Another notable potential change in the information landscape revolves around a collection of emerging technologies that are designed to counteract the tendency toward selective exposure that Bennett and Iyengar have decried. There are efforts underway to create tools that encourage news consumers to compare contrasting political viewpoints using side-by-side presentations of divergent coverage on key political issues. For example, Memeorandum (<http://memeorandum.com/>) aggregates blog posts from the left, right, and center, organizing them around the mainstream news stories to which the posts link. Researchers are also examining ways to automatically identify the ideological leanings of political news content by analyzing patterns across inlinks from blogs (Efron, 2004; Gamon *et al.*, 2008). These emerging developments highlight the fact that technologies are still rapidly evolving, and that unforeseen innovations will alter the information environment.

Thus far, we have focused our critique of Bennett and Iyengar’s treatment of technology on their incomplete catalog of technological affordances. But a larger question concerns the relationship between these new affordances and the changes in political information consumption that follow. It is insufficient to argue that large volumes of accessible information and technology-enabled choice necessarily yield the predicted outcomes. As we have argued, technology makes many things possible. Which technologies are adopted and which are abandoned is the product of a complex sociotechnical process, and use of the technologies that are embraced occurs at the nexus of individual preferences, historical contingencies, and macrolevel social dynamics (Edwards, 1995; Hughes, 1987; Smith & Marx, 1994).

Although there is ample evidence that news consumers are shifting away from traditional news media to newer media, including cable television and the Internet, it is not clear that the potentially destructive patterns of practice noted by Bennett and Iyengar have stabilized around new technologies. There is evidence, for example, that despite earlier signs of homogeneity in the political blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005), bloggers do in fact engage their ideological counterparts (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008). And although there is worrying evidence regarding audience segmentation and fragmentation and the effects that this can have on political behavior (e.g., DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2006; Morris, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005; Webster, 2005), claims of widespread balkanization and polarization continue to be disputed (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008; Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008), especially with regard to the contribution of the Internet (Brundidge & Rice, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

When scholars seek to make claims about the significance of new technologies, it is essential that they account for the diverse range of factors that contribute to processes of sociotechnical change. We are confident that Bennett and Iyengar do not intend to take a deterministic, technological dystopian view, yet broad generalizations about the inherent threats to society posed by a technology push the scholarly debate in that direction. The alternative is to make claims that are less sweeping and more deeply grounded in their human, social, and technical context.

A social-psychological approach to political media effects

Bennett and Iyengar argue that the sociotechnical changes that are afoot demand “the need for theory building” (p. 725). We agree with their call for theory building, but offer this sentiment from the vantage point that theory building has been and always will be the driving force of political communication research. The rise of new sociotechnical developments has not altered the discipline’s primary function. However, we do not agree with Bennett and Iyengar if they are arguing that political communication scholarship needs to start from scratch theoretically in order to best address what they envision to be a new set of political realities created by various elements of societal and technological change. In particular, we have chosen to employ existing social-psychological theory to demonstrate how theoretical insights we already have at our disposal can shed a great deal of light on the issues and consequences raised by Bennett and Iyengar, and that existing theory can serve as a solid foundation from which to assess the present and future role of political media. In short, we are not ready to toss the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to existing theory and our desire to push forward theory building within the field.

In an effort to speak to the broadest audience possible, we have chosen to utilize a popular dual-processing model of persuasion that originated in the field of social psychology and that is well known in the field of communication, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). The ELM details two different processes by which persuasion can take place, the central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996; Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002), and its approach to persuasion is similar to other social-psychological models (e.g., the Heuristic-Systematic Model [HSM]; see Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). The varied consequences of persuasive acts dominated by the central versus peripheral routes are well documented in the social psychology literature (see Petty & Wegener, 1999). Persuasive processes which are engaged through the more cognitively oriented central route tend to produce longer lasting effects than those outcomes generated by the peripheral route. In addition, stronger attitude–behavior associations are formed as a result of engagement of the central route. The central route also produces greater resistance to subsequent counterattitudinal messages, and resistance of this kind is generally seen as a desirable trait given the vested interest individuals have in maintaining well-established attitudes and the hard work which goes into forming these mental structures.

Petty and colleagues identify two questions which are central in determining whether the central route of persuasion will be engaged (Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005). First, does the recipient have sufficient *motivation* to want to attend to the persuasive act? Second, does the recipient have the *ability* to consume the persuasive act? If the answer is “yes” to both queries, then the central route of persuasion/attitude change will be engaged. The fact that these two questions center on the individual who is *receiving* the persuasive act has direct bearing on several of the core issues raised by Bennett and Iyengar. The concepts of recipient motivation and ability are at the heart of such issues as selective exposure, increased audience choice within the new media landscape, and the underlying media consumption motivations of audience members. With this in mind, we feel that the basic tenets of the ELM have a substantive influence on the status of persuasive outcomes in the new media environment.

Bennett and Iyengar argue that the new media environment offers citizens the freedom to seek out whatever media content they desire, in whatever formats they want, and within contexts of time and place which are most desirable. As a result, news media audience members seek out a greater proportion of politically oriented messages which serve to reinforce pre-existing worldviews. In addition, Bennett and Iyengar lament the loss of the inadvertent audience for political news content that results from this newly found sense of power and control within the citizenry. As a result of these altered processes, Bennett and Iyengar argue that the future of political communication scholarship will be defined by minimal media effects. Contrary to the minimal-effects assertions offered by Bennett and Iyengar, our use of the ELM as a theoretical lens leads us to some very different conclusions on this most important matter.

Attention must be paid to the persuasion processes most prevalent in a “push” media environment. The push-versus-pull dichotomy now commonly used to describe old versus new media was first popularized by Negroponte (1995), with the concept of push best reflecting traditional media forms (e.g., broadcast television, newspapers, magazines). Push media are defined by internal media-organization decisions about what finite pieces of content to present to a public and how, where, and when these messages will reach that public. Decisions are made by media elites in the push media environment as to when various politically oriented messages are to be offered (e.g., the 6:00 PM broadcast television newscast) and elite gatekeeping functions remain strong, given that push media organizations have to deal with finite amounts of space and firm time deadlines (see Shoemaker, 1991).

In the context of politics and audience members’ motivation and ability levels, the top-down processes which define traditional push media are more likely to foster peripheral routes of influence than central routes of influence at the individual level of analysis. Choices are made by media elites concerning (a) when members of the general citizenry can consume political media content and (b) what issues or individuals the citizenry should be made aware of. These elite-based decisions concerning message content construction and distribution are often not optimal for individual audience members when it comes to their motivation or ability

to consume political media messages. Less-than-optimal times for political media consumption and any perceived media-elite-to-media-audience disconnect over what issues or individuals should be given coverage point to a greater likelihood of audience members lacking sufficient *motivation* to want to consume potentially persuasive political media messages and/or not being sufficiently engaged to have the *ability* to dissect politically oriented persuasive arguments. In short, the old media environment, defined by push processes, tends to create a proclivity for the peripheral route of persuasion over the central route. And if there is any way to insure minimal political media effects, it is establishing an information environment in which there are well-established barriers to the engagement of the central route of persuasion.

Contrast the traditional push environment with the emergence of “pull” media. The new pull media environment has been outlined and carefully compared to push media by Chaffee and Metzger (2001), the article singled out by Bennett and Iyengar for being ahead of its time (an assessment with which we agree). The pull media environment is where the user or receiver (not the sender) is in control, self-actualization (not identification) is the defining ego concept, need satisfaction (not arousal) is the primary motivation for media consumption, and the dominant means of transmission is defined by interactivity (not one-way, time-specific communication) (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 373). When you have the user in control, pulling down political media content, what do you have from the standpoint of the ELM? You have *motivation*—audience members who want to consume potentially persuasive political media messages. In addition, audience members in a pull media environment are more likely to consume their chosen political media messages at desirable times, in preferred places/contexts, and utilizing formats that best match their particular learning styles. Each of these characteristics of the media-use experience facilitates greater *ability* to process political information. From the perspective of the ELM and political media effects, a solid case can be made that the pull media environment provides a stronger foundation for the emergence of the central route of persuasion than was possible in a push-media-dominated system. With a greater likelihood of central-route engagement comes increased opportunity for attitudinal and behavioral influences that are more robust and longer lasting and which are built to withstand subsequent counter persuasion.

Indeed, we are already beginning to see our most important political actors capitalizing on the new persuasive environment being created by the sociotechnical changes outlined by Bennett and Iyengar. Take, for example, one of the defining moments of the historic 2008 U.S. presidential election: Barack Obama’s now famous speech on race given in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008. As reported by Jonathan Alter (2008), Obama and his closest associates “took great care to make sure that no sound bites were included” in the speech. Why did Obama and his handlers rid the speech of all sound bites? Because they correctly anticipated the dominant means by which the speech would be consumed by the citizenry—it was going to be pulled down by audience members via the Web and consumed from beginning to end at a

time and in a place that would allow for proper motivation and ability to attend to what the future president had to say on this important topic.

Obama crafted a persuasive message that was intended to be processed centrally (i.e., cognitively), and this was a revolutionary communicative act when compared to the dominant message strategies of push media campaigning (i.e., push media being defined by sound bites). Except in only the rarest of circumstances, a central-route-oriented political message was simply not a practical option for political actors who had to function within a push media environment because they knew that the most likely means of audience consumption of their persuasive messages would be defined by peripheral processing. However, thanks to many of the sociotechnical changes outlined by Bennett and Iyengar, political elites now have the ability to craft political messages that can be offered directly to a public for possible consumption and which are intended to be consumed via the central route of persuasion. It is in this environment—an environment where the central process of persuasion has a more pronounced seat at the media effects table—where we can begin to see the possibility of meaningful and sizeable persuasive media influence in politics, not an era of minimal effects as argued for by Bennett and Iyengar.

In addition, we wish to stress that a social-psychological approach to the study of persuasion and attitude change in the context of politics addresses what Bennett and Iyengar perceive to be as a “growing disjuncture between the prevailing research strategies and the sociotechnological context of political communication” (p. 707). McGuire (1989) has identified five communication input variables—message, source, recipient, channel (i.e., form), and context—that have come to serve as a foundation for the social-psychological approach to media influence on attitudes (see Petty *et al.*, 2002). Bennett and Iyengar stress that “transformations of society and technology need to be included more explicitly in communication models” (p. 709), yet the technology transformations they outline deal squarely with the “channel” input, and the societal transformations they describe are centered on the “context” input. Whether the channel or contextual factors observed by Bennett and Iyengar have an influence on politically oriented persuasion processes is an empirical question and it can be addressed, at least in part, through the employment of existing social-psychological theory.

Consequences of a changing political information landscape

As suggested earlier in this work, we agree with the notion put forward by Bennett and Iyengar that emerging sociological and technological issues are politically consequential, and we applaud the authors' efforts to highlight the importance of attending to the normative implications of these issues within the context of “broader democratic perspectives” (p. 716). Before concluding, however, we would like to comment briefly on Bennett and Iyengar's call for more theoretical work and normative discussion (pp. 715, 726). Although the recommendations are certainly laudable, our concern is with the somewhat casual way these suggestions are put

forth. Specifically, acting in a normatively thoughtful manner requires more than merely attending to the political implications, or even democratic implications, of one's findings *as one sees them*. Rather, it requires reflexivity regarding our own normative *a priori*s, awareness of alternative conceptions of a "properly functioning democracy," and the willingness both to acknowledge our subject positions and allow our work to be evaluated through the prism of alternative perspectives. In the absence of such openness, we cannot expect to attain any greater degree of interpretability, identifiable social significance, or coherence in the body of our scholarship as a whole.

Although it is beyond our purview to offer a particular conceptualization of democracy as the metric by which the implications of political communication findings should be evaluated, we offer several suggestions in this regard. First, when determining whether a finding related to individual-level phenomena bodes well or poorly for the welfare of democracy, one must first consider what that individual's role in the political system is, or ought to be. Is it her vote that matters, and nothing else; or stated differently, what is her role in the political system during nonelection periods, and what should it be? Is this role impacted by the findings of our research, and how? More broadly, what is the role of public opinion and what should it be—is it strong and prescriptive, weak and consultative, or should public opinion be dismissed by policy makers as an overly produced and/or ill-informed phenomenon?

Second, when such findings suggest some sort of antagonism toward the political system, they should not immediately be labeled as dysfunctional or normatively undesirable. When, for example, one finds that individuals are losing confidence in the media or politicians, it will not do simply to note that the implications of this are necessarily bad on the assumption that trust and confidence are unqualified goods. Trust and confidence are *not* unqualified goods; they must be earned or warranted. Thus, the analysis of the normative implications of one's findings must be such that one is open to considering where the apparent "dysfunction" lies (e.g., at a macro- or microlevel).

Third, when considering more macrolevel phenomena, such as "culture wars" or the alleged ideological polarization of the electorate, one must be similarly conscience of the alternative views of democracy that are implicated. For some, strong partisanship is a boon to democracy as it suggests a high level of ideological constraint (Converse, 1964). Others argue that a "malleable middle" is all that is necessary for democracy to function as intended (Marcus, 1988). More generally, there are many variants of democracy put forth by many reasonable people—and few require anything approaching the ideal informed citizen envisioned by so many political communication scholars. Even those committed to the idea of an active public, for example, within the context of a deliberative model of democracy, vary widely in the extent to which they assert that consensus and/or preference change are necessary or desirable (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006).

There is also the issue of recognizing the normative tension within findings created by multiple implications. Findings that appear desirable on one level (e.g., an increase in one's psychological self-efficacy) may, in fact, have potentially discordant normative implications on other levels (e.g., a false sense of one's influence within

the political system with no concomitant gains in material power). Few things in the political realm are so simple that they can be labeled “good” or “bad.” Rather, the best that we can hope to do is identify the potential benefits and drawbacks of our findings based on a well-rounded understanding of democratic theory.

We have identified several issues with Bennett and Iyengar’s assertion that the world is entering a new era of limited persuasive political media effects, and have offered an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the influence of the contemporary political communication landscape on persuasion and attitude change. Despite these differences, we concur with the authors on some of their predicted outcomes. Most notably, we agree that counterpersuasion is less likely in this environment. Attitude change is a distinct and important subset of persuasion, and all the arguments laid out in this debate thus far suggest that people are growing more resistant to change. From our perspective, this is not because individuals are becoming more partisan, more close minded, or more oblivious to other views, as Bennett and Iyengar have argued. Instead, we suggest that increasingly robust attitudes are the product of more extensive elaboration, resulting from a confluence of factors that include deeply ingrained individual preferences regarding political information consumption and a sociotechnical environment that motivates and enhances people’s ability to elaborate.

The difference between these two accounts of increasing resistance to attitude change parallels the difference between political ignorance or ambivalence and political conviction. An explanation grounded in the assumption that individuals systematically work to avoid exposure to (all) attitude-discrepant information presumes that attitudes remain constant because those who hold them simply do not know any better. Our explanation, in contrast, emphasizes the cognitive processes—and resulting certainty—that lead individuals to maintain a set of beliefs despite evidence and arguments to the contrary. In both cases, individuals will sometimes cling to beliefs that would seem to be indefensible, but one is premised on the assumption that people do not care what the other side thinks, whereas the other presumes that people value the confidence that comes from knowing (sometimes incorrectly) that the other side is wrong.

We are quick to acknowledge that the more robust attitudes we are describing here are not equivalent to sophisticated political understanding or profound political convictions. Although we believe that central processing of political messages is becoming increasingly common, we simultaneously recognize that baseline levels of political understanding are exceedingly low (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Although change is afoot, we anticipate that its magnitude will be modest. Modern communication systems, including the Internet, on which these changes are premised, are far from the first revolution in information accessibility to influence political information consumers (Bimber, 2003), yet American’s political engagement levels have remained remarkably stable. On this view, we expect that changes in the contemporary environment will also progress slowly. At the same time, we note that subtle, incremental

changes accrete over time and can ultimately culminate in the appearance of more radical change (see Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005 for a related discussion).

Once again, we wish to thank Professors Bennett and Iyengar for initiating a debate on what we agree are some of the core issues concerning the future of political-communication-based media effects research. We offer this response essay with the intention of fostering activity within our subfield's marketplace of ideas. We are not, however, taking on the role of contrarian for the sole purpose of generating debate. We have communicated within this work some fundamental differences between our own views on the future of political media effects research and those detailed by Bennett and Iyengar. We feel it is important to offer these points of view in order to reflect the vibrancy of the field, to show that there are several disagreements which remain unresolved, and to stress that the only way to seek resolution of these matters is through systematic empirical research that is grounded in theory. We by no means envision ourselves better prognosticators than Bennett and Iyengar when it comes to the future of political media effects research, but we do hold to the ideal that the best way for our field to move forward is to continue a vigorous debate about our core assumptions, conceptualizations, and operationalizations. It is only through this constant assessment that the field can produce research that is "interpretable, cumulative, and socially significant" over the long term (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 709). It is our hope that this response essay provides a positive step toward this shared goal.

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