POLITICAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH A QUALITATIVE LENS

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of the political communication discipline as the goal, the qualitative inquiry, in a field that is dominated by the quantitative inquiry, has been recommended to be placed alongside quantitative research in some literature. This is not a novel recommendation. The mixed methods approach in the pursuit of theoretical understanding is emulating the traditional political communication research practices of previous scholars. The discipline's growth should be spurred by answering new research questions, developing old theories, innovating new theories and making new recommendations that would benefit from the interpretive paradigm of the qualitative inquiry. There is greater engagement between political actors with the advent of social media, an inevitable importance of image and identity in political brand communication, inequality in obtaining political messages, the interdisciplinary nature of political communication and the political public sphere – all these characterized political communication. Political communication benefits from the interpretive paradigm by allowing an examination of perspectives from participants encompassing insider information obtained from political parties and the discourse analysis of political actors on social media that underscores the profoundness of qualitative interpretations.

Keywords: qualitative research, political communication, political public sphere, political actors, political brand communication

INTRODUCTION

As we think of political communication, we are possibly reminded of the images of election campaigning, the scenes of political debates commonly found in the United Kingdom where politicians put forth facts and opinions, political news stories on the media and politicians who passionately sell themselves as evident through their tone when communicating to voters in Malaysia. The evolving definition of political communication and the qualitative inquiry surrounding it is intriguing. By understanding the development of the current inquiry, it is hoped that future inquiries in the endeavour of expanding the field could be planned for. New theories have to be created, old theories developed, new research questions answered and recommendations made; these goals quench the thirst for acquiring new knowledge on political communication and meet the need to make it more effective for politicians and voters. The paper commences by defining political communication, then it proceeds to the discussion on qualitative research methodology and political communication research from the qualitative research lens.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

It is apt to commence the paper by defining political communication due to its various definitions. There is the mentioning of political communication as being deemed notorious to define with precision as 'political' and 'communication' in political communication have several definitions (McNair 2011). Nevertheless, a better understanding of political communication is attempted by this paper. The first part of the paper begins by examining the evolution of political communication, the flow of information involving political actors in political public spheres, political brand communication, the interdisciplinary nature of political communication, inequality in the acquisition of political information, and, the political public sphere.

Evolution of Political Communication in Postwar in Many Democracies

The once simple political communication messages conveyed through mass media that were satisfying to voters at first have been affected by complex media developments and globalisation putting countries less able to function in silo.

In the past, political communication scholarship focused its attention somewhat narrowly on publicly visible forms of mass communication featuring organized actors who are addressing core political issues in the setting of liberal democratic nation-states. These conditions are no longer tenable. Today, political communication is in many ways characterized by a mix of public and personalized communication, mass media and social media, established and non-established communicators, blurred boundaries between political seriousness and entertainment, a frontier that extends to non-western political systems, and increasing globalization, all of which affect the status of the nation-state as a default variable in comparative research (Esser & Pfetsch, 2006, p. 2).

The changes in the degree of loyalty to political parties from being very loyal to the loosening of this, the underscoring of the populist culture for voter engagement and the proliferation of media messages were evident in the three-phase evolution of political communication. Political communication has passed through three phases in many democracies during the postwar period (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). According to the writers, during the first age, the political system was regarded as the main source of initiatives and debates for social reform and several voters associated themselves to politics by identifying political parties that they were loyal to against the background of debates. The second age emerged during the 1960s with the advent of limited-channel television, less group loyalties, non-partisan norms (fairness, impartiality) impressed through political communication, higher audience penetration with television, and personalised presentations by leaders. The third age saw the proliferation of the key means of communication comprising radio, television, and computers amongst them marking the need for professional help by politicians for campaigning, increased competition for the attention of gatekeepers and voters, the need for a popular idiom in communication with the lack of a top-down approach from politicians to voters, a "pick and choose" culture by audience members of the abundant media messages and fragmented audiences.

It is apparent that the political communications ecology is changing with the emergence of the Internet. Some have argued that the Internet has changed the ecology by replacing television in the United States and increasing the variety of political sources leading

to fragmented audiences resulting to less audience members to each media vehicle and interactive audiences who need arresting content (Gurevitch, Coleman et al. 2009) while others have mentioned the media mix of traditional and digital media political communication sources that have extended globally and affected the definition of the nation-state (Esser & Pfetsch, 2006). The relevance of examining traditional media in political communication is apparent as traditional media does play a complementary role with digital media here (Jungherr, 2015).

The contribution of television to political communication is also stressed in other literature. In the past, television played a big role as it took centre-stage as it produced with politicians, messages on politics that changed from being issue-based to personality-based and penetrated households thus increasing audience members (Gurevitch, Coleman et al. 2009). The Internet penetration rate per household would affect its usefulness in political communication; a lower penetration rate would ensure that traditional media (newspapers and television) takes centre-stage. Other than the penetration rate, the education level of voters could also be an influence on the media choices of audience members. Television remains to be the main source of political communication for lower educated readers as several newspapers are written in a manner that is considered abstract (Jerit, Barabas et al. 2006) hence seemingly too complicated.

Social media is an important communication channel in politics represented by the past few years that encourages political institutions to interact with one another however, it is marred by the politicians' lack of knowledge of current topics (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). The lack of knowledge coupled by the lack of quality in political communication beckons for further inquiry centred on ideals. It is found that the quality of the abundance of media content from a variety of sources has also alleviated with the expanded media landscape that focuses on celebrities, rumours and attacks as politics transforms into a disparaging game (Gurevitch, Coleman et al. 2009). The ideals of quality political information, better engagement, and appropriate changes brought about by politics to making a better life for citizens could be recommended by further qualitative inquiry that focuses on examining profoundness in concept development.

Flow of Information, Exchange of Messages, Political Actors, Citizens and the Media in Political Public Spheres

Political actors, citizens, the media and political public spheres are components of political communication. 'Political communication refers to the flow of information and the exchange of messages among political actors, citizens and the media. All three participants contribute to the creation of political public spheres' (Esser & Pfetsch August, 2006, p. 2). Political actors are described as engaging in the production of messages in the form of government communication, parliamentary communication and election communication but it is not immediately clear as whom they comprise.

'Political actors' is defined by Habermas (2006) as journalists and politicians who are at the centre of the political system as they write and address public opinions together. Other political actors in the public sphere are named as lobbyists representing special interest groups; advocates representing general interest groups or marginalized groups with no effective communication opportunities; experts in an area offering advice; moral entrepreneurs who focus on neglected issues and intellectuals like writers or academics who engage in public discourse to uphold general interests. The agreement between all political

stakeholders or political actors is important to attain for effective changes to be made in society and effective political communication should be used for this goal. A discourse analysis that examines not only the spoken word (text) but also the production process of the text makes for its profound understanding (Fairclough, 1989) from a qualitative perspective.

Political Brand Communication

What comes to mind at the mere mention of political communication are images of the elections with politicians selling themselves as they attempt to pull voters to their side. There is an apparent larger definition of political communication that is all-encompassing as it goes further than the euphoric happenings during the campaigns before the election days themselves. The notion of branding is brought into the picture as political image and political identity are put forth in defining political communication.

…all political discourse is included in our definition. By political communication, therefore, I, like Graber, have in mind not only verbal or written statements, but also visual means of signification such as dress, make-up, hairstyle, and logo design, i.e. All those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political 'image' or identity' (McNair, 2011, p. 4).

The definition associates a politician or political party with the idea of products and branding. Political branding encompasses political images, political identities, brand cues, and product differentiation. Branding is now commonly associated with political parties and political personalities in the discourse on politics with the example of the 'Trudeau brand' from the previous Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau who in 1968 had the brand image that was exciting, progressive and modern to son, Justin Trudeau (Marland, 2013). Voters are regarded as consumers who need to perceive a positive political brand image. Brands are important in politics as they simplify the choices that voters have, they maintain a good relationship through marketing for 'repeat sales' through votes and personal brands promoted by party leaders that focus on a few key characteristics making them stand out as with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's association with a period of smaller governments, lower taxes, individual self-sufficiency and a strong defence policy (Needham, 2006).

Politicians paint a political identity through the use of brand cues such as taglines, logos, colours, personalities that would provide political products with a more profound meaning than what they would stand for by themselves on a superficial and literal level. Political branding is put forth as a consumer model of political communication; it marks a consumerised paradigm of political communication where politicians have to listen to voters, be more personal and interactive with electorates, and practise sending out brand messages that are both hard (policies) and soft (emotional) (Scammell, 2007). According to the writer, branding is evident in political campaigns; in former Prime Minister, Blair's rebranding by connecting him with disgruntled voters (consumers) before the 2005 U.K. General Election and also in communications by the U.K. government over the previous fifteen years.

Political communication conveys the different identities of politicians and political parties underpinning the marketing strategy of product differentiation that is used to distinguish a political candidate from others when selling themselves to voters. Product differentiation refers to focusing on product differences that is attractive to the target market (Moriarty, Mitchell et al. 2015). In this case, the expectations of voters like other types of

consumers have to be known first before political communication can be effectively created and disseminated in terms of product differentiation. Product differences are communicated in a manner that is persuasive as evident in political advertising that uses mass media to 'differentiate' political products (i.e. parties and political candidates) and give the brand meaning akin to the manufacturer of soap that endeavours to distinguish its brands of detergent from another in a competitive market (McNair, 2011). Other than the brand cues in the form of taglines, logos, colours, a distinguished political candidate could be associated ideally with charisma as a powerful human quality that differentiates successful personal brands by connecting to voters emotionally and stirring interest in disenchanted non-voters (Marland, 2013). Political candidates are not lifeless products hence an attractive charisma is appealing to voters.

Another thread of political communication is branded political communication that is found by linking political issues to a brand to obtain awareness from the public deemed as a creative way activists use to communicate on political issues like Nike and the issue of sweatshops (Bennett & Lagos, 2007). The writers mention that reach would be less if a well-known brand were not linked to the political issue. Commercial brands have also entered into image politics (Hartley, 2012) with examples found in The Body Shop's Stop Sex Trafficking campaign (2012) and the EU Animal Testing Ban (2013) with its website promising a new campaign in 2017.

Political Communication is Interdisciplinary

Political communication is influenced by multiple disciplines encouraging more research studies from several perspectives. Despite political communication having its roots in classical studies by Aristotle and Plato, modern political communication research is characteristically an interdisciplinary field of study that is influenced by communication, journalism, political science, history, sociology, psychology, rhetoric, and other fields (Kaid, 2004).

The pioneers of the political communication field, Harold Lasswell, and subsequently Murray Edelman, adapted perspectives from intellectuals in sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, journalism, public relations, and economics (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) marking the influence of other fields on political communication. The writers mention the influence of political science on political communication as diminishing and believe there is more inclination to sociology, psychology and economics. A framework has been created for the examination of online political discussion spaces that involves operationalisation derived from a body of interdisciplinary studies also comprising efforts by Jürgen Habermas and Lincoln Dahlberg (Freelon, 2010). Qualitative research studies from different disciplines would encourage the growth of political communication contributing to a more multidimensional perspective.

Inequality in the Acquisition of Political Information

Political information is not attained in equal amounts with the abundance of media choices and imbalanced technological experience. Greater consumer media choices equates to an unequal scenario in the acquisition of political messages (Bennett & Iyengar 2008). The writers claim that despite the advent of technology and the allowance for an abundance of information, audience members are categorised into the "haves" and "have-nots" reflecting the various levels of demand for political information; the "haves" would access political

information from favoured sources and the "have-nots" would elude them. The implication of this is a higher cost of producing political communication (that is effective) and waning media effects.

The "digital divide", coined by Lloyd Morrisett, former president of the Markle Foundation, differentiating between the information "haves" and "have-nots" as categories of audience members (Hoffman and Novak 1998). DiMaggio and Hartgittai (2001) and Tapscott (1996) allude to the digital divide in their writings. DiMaggio and Hartgittai (2001) call audience members who are more likely to access the Internet as the "haves" (the online) and those who would not prefer to access the Internet as the "have-nots" (offline). They blame the imbalance on new technology that aggravates inequality than improves it. The digital divide also describes the "haves" as those who have access to technology and the "have-nots" as those do not have access to technology; the gap between them is growing and will cause problems to society in future (Tapscott 1996). Consumer insight could be obtained through qualitative research in the pursuit of understanding target audiences on a more profound level so as to encourage selective attention to political communication messages and in the formation of creative concepts apt for more effective political advertisements.

Political Public Sphere in Political Communication

The political public sphere is underscored in the definition of political communication by Esser and Pfetsch (2006). Public sphere is a place where politics meets specific goals and reinforces group values, ideals, and belonging (Dahlgren, 2005). Dahlgren further describes this as having three dimensions: the structural dimension (media organisations, their ownership, control, regulation and legal frameworks defining freedom of expression), the representational dimension (mass media messages and "minimedia" messages such as newsletters and promotional materials), and the interactional dimension (citizens' interpretation of the media output and interactions between citizens themselves). The public sphere is also mentioned as a realm of our social life where individuals come together to form a public body where they express themselves freely and influence others using means such as the media and political public sphere (Habermas, Lennox et al. 1974). The writers define the political public sphere as a place where discussions take place by the public on the state's activities in which the state does not participate. The young voters have become more discerning in Malaysia as they are accessible to information from several political parties in the public sphere on social media before making their choices as to which political party and political figure to vote for (Mokhtar, 2017). From these understandings of the political public sphere, it is apparent that freedom of expression is underlined in a realm where group values are reinforced upon one another in citizens' interactions to a discerning audience.

On the other hand, there are people nowadays who are remote from the public sphere against the backdrop of the media explosion marring political influence. This perhaps foreshadows the emergence of a minimal effects era marking a time when people are disconnected from institutions such as public schools, political parties, and civic groups that previously provided a shared situation of interpretation (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). The group values said to be reinforced before are affected by the disconnection of people from these institutions. The opposing scenario is raised by the writers where there is disinterest by people to media messages with the media becoming more proliferated and individualised and thus, giving birth to audience fragmentation and isolation from the public sphere.

RESEARCH FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

More political communication research studies should be carried out inspired by the wide definition of the concept that is interdisciplinary in orientation. Most political communication research has been quantitative (Nielsen 2014). The predominantly quantitative research tradition has encouraged new generations of researchers to be trained and socialized in this tradition (Karpf, Kreiss et al. 2015). The next part of the paper defines qualitative research studies and examines political communication research from the qualitative tradition.

Defining Qualitative Research Studies

Akin to political communication, it has been pronounced that a comprehensive definition of qualitative research is difficult to attain (Ormston, Spencer et al. 2014). Nevertheless, an attempt is made here by drawing from several literature. It is determined that qualitative research is driven by words not numbers, philosophical debates are important to comprehend, there are several features of qualitative research and the research questions are distinguished from quantitative research.

Qualitative research generates non-numerical data as opposed to the generating of numbers in quantitative research (Patton & Cochran 2002, Bryman 2008, Babbie 2012). Qualitative research relates to meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions whereas quantitative research refers to numbers and experiences that could not be articulated through numbers (Berg & Lune 2012). There could be many interpretations of text as evident through a semiotic analysis of political advertisements. The words of documents and interviewees are central to qualitative research marking their interpretation of phenomena.

Qualitative researchers adopt various approaches and in order to comprehend these better, it is imperative to know of the philosophical debates related to ontology (the nature of the social world and what there is to know of it) and epistemology (how we could learn of the social world and the basis of our knowledge) that support the development of social research in general (Ormston, Spencer et al. 2014, Merriam & Tisdell 2016). There are two ontological positions: realism and idealism (Ormston, Spencer et al. 2014). According to the writers, realism posits that there is an external reality that exists independently of people's beliefs or comprehension of it and idealism explains that reality is understood through the minds of humans whose meanings are socially constructed and no reality exists by itself. The epistemological perspective is related to the nature of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell 2016) and the means of acquiring knowledge about the world and how we could learn about reality with key issues dominant: induction (theories are generated from data) and deduction (hypotheses are developed and data collected supports or rejects them) (Bryman 2008, Yin 2011, Ormston, Spencer et al. 2014).

There is seemingly the absence of exclusivity that defines qualitative research with regards to inductive and deductive approaches as although it may seem that induction fits well with qualitative research; a deductive approach may also be used in qualitative research (Yin 2011). This could be demonstrated by some qualitative research studies where the researcher collects data using a theoretical framework as a form of parameter that determines what data should be sought. The assumptions about the grounds of knowledge; how to understand the world and convey this to others; forms of knowledge obtained; how to categorise whether true

or not is related to the epistemological approach (Burrell and Morgan 1979). The writers proceed by explaining about the two poles with regards to social research: subjectivism and objectivism and the four paradigms associated with them: radical humanist, radical structuralist, interpretive and functionalist. Of concern here are the interpretive and functionalist paradigms.

Interpretive research is the most accepted type of qualitative research that is with the assumption that reality is socially constructed and there are multiple observable realities (Merriam & Tisdell 2016, p. 9). The interpretive paradigm is about comprehending the world through the participants' perspectives than the observers'; they tend to be nominalist (idealist) and anti-positivist (Burrell & Morgan 1979). The positivism and anti-positivism debate is raised to demonstrate the types of epistemologies; positivism pursues to explain and predict what happens in the social world by looking for regularities and causal relationships between its variables whereas with regards to anti-positivism, the social world is essentially relativistic and can only be comprehended from the point of view of individuals involved in the activities that are examined. It is further explained that the functionalist paradigm represents the objectivist point of view and examines issues from a realist and positivist standpoint.

Qualitative researchers are attentive in comprehending how people interpret their experiences, form their worlds, and the meaning that they associate to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). The role of the researcher is also important in qualitative research. The human, interpretative aspects of knowing about the social world and the importance of the investigator's own interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon being studied is imperative to qualitative research (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). As the meanings raised by participants is important to qualitative researchers, the researchers perform an activity that transforms the world that is studied in a natural setting into data collected represented by field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos in an attempt to interpret phenomena in view of the meanings people associate with them (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

There are several common features of qualitative research that have been mentioned in previous literature are the natural setting of the qualitative research and the perspectives of participants. The features of qualitative research are: studying the meaning of people's lives in the real world, examining the opinions and perspectives of participants, scrutinising the contexts within which people live, conjuring insights into existing or emerging concepts used to explain social behaviour of humans and using many sources of evidence than depending on one source (Yin 2011). According to Ormston, Spencer et al. (2014), the common characteristics of qualitative research are: in-depth and interpretative aims and understanding of the social world through the perspective of research participants; non-standardised methods of generating data that are sensitive to the social context of the study; data that are elaborate, rich and complex; data analysis that preserves data complexity and respects the individualism of each participant; openness to new theories emerging from the data; detailed outputs; and a reflexive approach underlining the role of the researcher.

According to Berg and Lune (2012), there are several assumptions in relation to qualitative research approaches: active individuals, worlds of meaning from the participants' perspective and multiple truths. With regards to active individuals, the writers claim that qualitative researchers perceive the world as composed of active, interpreting individuals who carry out actions every day. Meaning has to be understood by researchers because behaviour follows meaning, the idea of shared meaning is sought by researchers so as to comprehend

human behaviour and meaning should also be understood in terms of the meaningful objects in the minds of the audience. There are multiple truths to those who believe in them as a result of shared beliefs and shared realities.

Other than the use of words in qualitative research and its common characteristics, the research questions of quantitative and qualitative research studies are also different. Qualitative research understands the experiences of participants by asking: 'what', 'how' or 'why' of a phenomenon rather than 'how many' or 'how much', which are used by quantitative methods (Patton & Cochran 2002). Research questions that focus on 'what' and 'how' are best answered through qualitative research and research questions that examine how many should be answered by quantitative survey research (Morrison, Haley et al. 2002, Ritchie, Lewis et al. 2014). In political communication research studies, the political campaign objectives could be best understood by interviewing politicians leading campaigns. There is no one research tradition that is superior to another, each answers different questions and contributes differently to the field.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

For the political communication field to flourish, it is essential to conduct research studies to form new theories, develop old theories and make recommendations that would allow more effective communication to voters by improving the image of politicians or political parties image and increase votes. In view of this, the question - What is the responsibility of a political communication scholar? – is posed.

The political communication scholar is expected to improve readers' comprehension of communication dynamics that influences political outcomes in terms of the range of effects (exposure and attention), political behaviours (voting and other types of political participation) and post-behaviour (perception to the campaign, vote count accuracy) (Holbert & Bucy 2011). It is evident that political campaigns have phases and outcomes that need to be examined for them to be more effective. Research studies examining the awareness of campaigns and the reasons for them, examining communication that leads to political behaviours and the concepts of credibility and perception post campaign could be carried out in a qualitative manner through focus groups and interviews from an inductive perspective. The weaknesses in achieving the campaign goals of establishing awareness, changing behaviour and maintaining credibility post campaign could be understood better through lengthy explanations from research participants after which recommendations could be made for improvements in political communication to take place.

However, most political communication research studies are quantitative. A content analysis was carried out of 258 articles published by *Political Communication* spanning over the last 12 years from 2003 to 2015 and it found only 43 of the articles qualitative based mainly on interpretative, historical, critical, and rhetorical analyses and qualitative fieldwork (16.7 percent) (Karpf, Kreiss et al. 2015). This is further supported by the fact that most political communication research studies are dominated by the survey method (Holbert & Bucy 2011). The survey research studies employed for political communication are used for examining attitudes, cognitions, and behaviours in politics and communication (Hoffman & Young 2013). Prominent qualitative techniques like grounded theory, emergent category designation, analytic induction, conversation and discourse analysis are less common in political communication but more common in sociological studies and cultural and critical cultural works (Jarvis 2011). There are several recommendations in the literature that

encourage the use of mixed methods or qualitative research studies instead of purely quantitative methods with the predominant use of social media for political communication and the limitations of current quantitative social media monitoring (SMM) tools.

As the political ecological transformation involves social media at centre-stage; it is important to study the platform in terms of public opinion on policies and political positions. Of course research studies on social media should be carried out without disregarding traditional media because of the complementary role it plays in political communication. Examinations of the interaction in politics online and offline have to be conducted in order to understand today's politics (Jungherr 2015). A study finds that newspapers generally did not mention issues that were perceived to be important by the different ethnic groups in Malaysia during the elections and this discrepancy is important to address for better engagement between politicians and voters (Idid & Chang 2012).

Social media is likely to increase political participation and discussions among citizens as Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites are ideal platforms for users to communicate their political opinions online (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2013). Twitter is widely used in political campaigns globally with posts and interactions between political elites, journalists, and the general public that constitutes a political communication space (Jungherr 2015). With the popular use of social media in politics, there seems to be an abundance of public opinion on social media that could be examined by researchers. Social media is the ideal platform to measure public opinion on policies and political positions for politicians, political parties, and governments and encourage community support for individuals pursuing public office (Zeng, Chen et al. 2010).

SMM is described in the literature as a process having several steps such as preparation, data collection, data analysis and reporting; there are dashboard services that provide a synopsis of online activities such as Hootsuite, Netvibes and Trackur (Ruggiero and Vos 2014). The tool is observational, passive and quantitative as it collects opinions on brands and analyses in an automated way using software but in-depth interviews should be carried out due to their strengths (Branthwaite and Patterson 2011). The writers argue that there are limitations of the quantitative SMM due to the issue of validity, social media culture questioning how closely it represents the lives of everyday people, and whether bloggers attitudes and opinions reflect real life, the benefits of in-depth interviews are:

> *The direct, interactive dialogue or conversation between consumers and researchers; the facility to "listen" and attend to the (sometimes unspoken) underlying narrative which connects consumers' needs and aspirations, personal goals and driving forces to behaviour and brand choice; and the dynamic, interactive characteristics of the interview that achieve a meeting of minds to produce a shared understanding. Philosophically, it is this "conversation" that gives qualitative research its validity and authenticity which makes it superior to SMM' (Branthwaite & Patterson 2011, p. 430).*

Other than interviews, SMM has been made more qualitative with the emergence of a software package like Issuecrawler that is for researchers who are qualitative or from the humanities (Jungherr 2015).

The nature of politics itself and the limitations of examining social media from a quantitative perspective motivate the need for more qualitative research in political

communication. Politics is an instrumental activity used to achieve specific goals, it is an expressive activity, and a way of affirming values, ideals and belonging in the public sphere supporting the use of qualitative research rather than quantitative research (Dahlgren 2005). The writer raises the lack of certainty with regards to the numbers of people participating on social media and this beckons us to question the credibility of response in terms of intention, role and duplication. There could be participants who have been paid to disseminate political campaign information and the same person could be having several social media accounts.

A new era of qualitative research is put forth as the method of the previous and mixed-method tradition of political communication research supported by the older works of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang that employed mixed-methods to examine the interaction of citizens, journalists and political elites in political communication as it has since narrowed in our understanding of the field; qualitative research is deemed excellent at answering questions for developing new theoretical comprehensions (Karpf, Kreiss et al. 2015). The importance of obtaining further theoretical understandings for the development of the field is central to the collaboration of qualitative and quantitative inquiries.

The political brand could be examined using qualitative research approaches. The first reason being that academicians have not established an agreed way to gauge personal brands and leadership, this should move the academic scene to concept development and qualitative research gesturing the need for inside information from interviews so as to understand further the management of the Trudeau image, for instance (Marland 2013). Brand research is also well-known as qualitative in nature diving beneath the surface of quantitative polling (Scammell 2007). Qualitative research provides more depth to the understanding of the political image and political identity in the pursuit of product differentiation by politicians.

Political communication research could also be inspired by audience research and journalism studies that use more an assortment of theories and methodological tools (Nielsen 2014). According to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), there is the need for more observational research on the evolving political communication scene by examining how political communicators and media organisations change, redefine their purposes and solve their conflicts; research that pursues agenda setting in the various outlets of political communication; tracking research that looks at a political communication with undefined boundaries in several matters such as public and private concerns for one; research on what citizens think of the new political communication system; and research on the flourishing forms of populist communication and how they affect the perception of politicians and the like. These could be carried out in a qualitative research orientation to give the outcomes more depth.

Other literature has supported the combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for political communication as the field is said to reach an intellectual passé and is too focused on quantitative research (Nielsen 2014). Political communication research could go further in scope helped by its interdisciplinary orientation. Research studies in political communication have to go beyond social psychology, some parts of political science and mass communication research on effects to explore into other areas:

…parts of the field's problems are rooted in the way in which political communication research has developed since the 1960s. In this period, the field has moved from being interdisciplinary and mixed-methods to being more homogenous and narrowly focused, based primarily on ideas developed in social psychology, certain strands of

political science, and the effects-tradition of mass communication research (Nielsen 2014, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

The paper commenced by examining the expanding definition of political communication and proceeded by defining qualitative research and subsequently, political communication and qualitative research. The sole use of quantitative research has been said to be creating an intellectual passé. There is the need to include qualitative research for political communication to flourish. For the growth and sustainability of the political communication field, it is essential that public opinion is examined through an interpretive lens in addition to the functionalistic lens that allows the richness of data to be collected and analysed. New theories have to be churned, old theories developed, new research questions answered and a bigger scope pursued in political communication qualitative research.

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