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The Role of Ethical Principles in Political Communication: Transparency, Accountability, and Public Engagement in Modern Democracies

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Abstract

Argument first makes a simple summing up of what is going to be discussed and why this is a timely discussion in the US. With the increasing power and influence of the media in American culture, there has been a surge of political programs both on TV and on the radio commenting on the news. The US has always been known for its individualism and this has become an ideal for citizens to meet. However, if this is the case, then politics becomes dangerous because it forces citizens to conform to more collectively accepted ideologies. Many citizens see the mass media as doing little more than maintaining the status quo. Not only are media professionals forced to look out for their own interests, many are also forced to compromise for the good of the public. This is what gives media its credibility'their objectivism. The big question that is asked is how media professionals will be able to balance their own desires and interests with those of the public. It is eventually revealed that there are no social obligations that force media professionals to think about anything other than their own best interests and that they should not have to justify breaking these ethical standards. Even so, after examining a study in relation to his own, it is contested that Americans have been shown to not allow their politics to be affected by media. This hypothesis is then backed up with a few examples concerning the Democratic primaries and the congressional elections. The media serves two purposes: to inform and to persuade. However, the American media today increasingly focuses on persuasion. Last, the relation between the media and democracy is discussed. There have consistent fears of the transformation the US from a print culture to a television culture. Finally, the consequences of the media's ability to shape political reality are discussed. The media can end up eroding the credibility and viability of the democratic process and can also literally eradicate public policy discussion on key issues. It would thus appear that it is in the best interest of the American public sphere to begin considering the establishment of ethical guidelines to govern the media industries.

Keywords *ethics, political communication, media influence, objectivity, credibility, public interest, democracy, ethical guidelines.*

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68

1. INTRODUCTION

The reflection addresses the ethical dimension of political communication. What is the role of political communication in democracy? To what extent is political communication ethical or non-ethical, and what are their consequences on the governed? To tackle these questions, it reflects on Matteoli's theory, taking some cues from Voltaire. In a representative democracy the relationship between governors and the governed is essentially unbalanced: a few governors control the lives of many governed. As a logical consequence, the relationship between the governors and the governed must necessarily be asymmetric. The governed are at the mercy of decisions taken by the governors, even in cases where these decisions are arbitrary, or non-motivated. Given this imbalance, the ruled can and should do everything possible to be correctly informed by the rulers. Political communication either sets a basis for a well-informed electorate or hides reality. The first case is compatible with democracy, the latter is not. But hiding reality can be obtained, if a lie is maintained time after time, until it is received as a truth. This strategy requires that lies are broadcasted long enough, and this necessity creates a problem of ethical dimension in communication (Pomilio, 2012). Hence, the problem can be summarized in two different yet strictly correlated questions: 1. How are political scandals managed by politicians and journalists in order to protect the source, even if the piece of information that was agreed upon to be kept confidential, would potentially benefit the democratic process? 2. How do journalists (de)construct the image of semi-private meetings with politicians and business exponents to protect the source, whose behaviour, under doubt, appears as detrimental for democracy? The nature of both issues is composite, hence it would be more appropriate to address them by splitting them into different sub-questions. The context of the questions is editorial boardroom meetings between a politician and newspaper/daily bulletin editors over 3 years. The unit of analysis is a scandal, the "Soros case". A by-product of the reflection is a structural relationship between democracy, the source protection system and a

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69

specific use of semi-private meetings as a strategy to manage the media in order to avoid negative electoral outcomes. This scheme is represented in the conceptual model proposed. The results show the potential of some ethical conduct of political communication to play a key role in a democracy, acting as a communication channel to reveal a lie, so that transparency returns in the relationship between governors and the governed (Bergman, 2019).

3. ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Political communication informs and engages the processes by which different individuals and collectives debate, make collective decisions, and act subsequently about shared issues, concerns and risks. In the emerging societal context, political communication analyses ethical practices and thoughts in the open and transparent interactions with reference to non-state sectors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, lobbyists, public relations, or the media, as well as a growing number of governance networks, public-private partnerships, or private regulation and standard-setting bodies. A surge in normative debates around cross-border and global governance and whether new forms of democracy can manage globalization has been noticeable in the field. Recently, ethical issues have become an increasingly prominent concern in many areas of behavior, knowledge and industry, none less so than in political communication. Ethics play a crucial role due to the power, prestige and influence that mass media communication enjoyment encompassed in the broader perspective of initiating and reflecting political processes in contemporary societies. This development has generated in an increased pressure also for research in the field to reflect upon the role and evaluation of ethical considerations in setting as well as investigating the political, economic and communicative platforms and environments of media content. Such pressure can easily be confirmed by browsing through the special issues and conference calls of many journals and conferences dealing with mass communication or political science that have been issued in recent years. The focus of this contribution is to

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exemplify different theoretical perspectives, operationalizable approaches, and findings of current research in order to evaluate their potential to advance the reflective evaluation of media content or audience behavior. On the one hand, such a focus may enable media practitioners, decision-makers or social scientists in a broader sense to 'take stock' with respect to the current state-of-the-art literature more easily (Grill & Dawson, 2015). On the other hand, the compilation of applications of ethical considerations in political communication endeavors to act as a referral source when selecting the most appropriate sets of ethical guidelines or highlighting the most significant findings according to the research questions of ongoing research. Thus, the purpose is to approach a research area with a broad interest by integrating different exemplary methods and results in a structured fashion.

4. CASE STUDIES AND ANALYSIS

In exploring the mainstream and cosmopolitan frameworks in the context of cases, given of each framework will apply, and given of each framework will be violated. After the presentation of the case studies, this analysis will conclude with a focus on how the argument of the implications across different mainstream and cosmopolitan stakeholders for understanding ethical and unethical communication in the political sphere. Ethical communication and the dissemination of disinformation are perennial issues in politics. Knowledge of these issues continues to be important for political actors, educators, and voters, who rely on information given in the public sphere for a range of political decisions. Yet, as the deconstruction of the mainstream and cosmopolitan ethical and unethical political communication case studies shows, knowledge about them can also be reasonably complex, reflecting the complex political, socio-cultural and economic influences which converge in its reproduction (Austin & Jin, 2015). These complex influences in the case studies considered here operate distally through the political-economic structures and through the crumbling trust that underpins those structures, but also more proximally through the political actions

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71

(and inactions) of politicians and governments and the frames and agendas set by journalists. Of course, these forces are not immutable, and there are suggestions for strategies or actions by stakeholders across both mainstream and cosmopolitan frameworks which may at least begin to erode the causes of unethical communication and in turn diminish its effect.

5. IMPACT OF UNETHICAL PRACTICES

Unethical practices in political communication affect the democratic order through a variety of means, putting individuals and groups at a disadvantage. A growing body of research has identified a plethora of such practices that have only been made worse by the rise of social media (Toledano & Fay Wolland, 2011). The implications of social media extend beyond the individual, as unethical communication can serve to spread misinformation, manipulation or petition (hate speech etc.) to a wide audience in rapid time. This not only corrupts the democratic process and undermines public trust in political institutions, but also is a threat to the social order. This paper reflects on the wider societal implications from the point of view of two important political theorists, aiming to issue a stark warning about the careless use of communication by politicians and other stakeholders with the promise of addressing the need for greater regulation in the domain of political communication in the aftermath of these thoughts. A crucial feature of a democratic society is the idea of open deliberation concerning issues of common concern. However, the rise of social media also means people can be trapped in filter bubbles or echo chambers with similar-minded others. These two factors (targeted misinformation and the closure of social networks) not only makes it more difficult to argue against one's opponents, but can also increase the degree of polarization if individuals of opposing views fall into suspicion or hatred of the other camp. With discussion stalling, little progress can be made in forming political opinions and taking part in the democratic process. Apart from harming political discourse and making it harder for people to form opinions, unethical practices in political communication also lower the rate of

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72

voting and signing petitions. In particular, voters on the fence are more likely to abstain as they are more likely to question their own opinions. Yet, there is more to the quest for democratic accountability. (Wijaya, 2022)

6. REGULATORY MEASURES AND ENFORCEMENT

Political communication is a key of democratic process and as a field of study is interdisciplinary. Contemporary political messages are shared in a wide range of media, from traditional ones, like newspapers, radio, television, to new and social media, internet based. In Albania, the political communication, the discourse analyses, or researchers in the fields of media and journalism. Neglecting the very important issue of the ethics in political communication.

A central concern is ethics in political communication: how is conceptualized, which are most violating standard ethical principles, in which way can be improved. It is explored regulatory and enforcement measures, including policies, laws and guidelines, it is addressed at the role of regulatory bodies and the effectiveness of such bodies in enforcing existing standards, in place and thoughts about other standards needed, it is addressed at challenges for ethics in political communication associated with new technologies, and it is reflected on how these challenges can best be met. It is recognized that a culture of ethics should be promoted in political communication. This can't only be achieved through regulation and enforcement, but also through education, training, and personal commitment. Finally, it is compiled views on ethics in political communication expressed in the International Conference. (Castro Seixas, 2021).

THE ROLE OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

1. Introduction

Political communication plays a fundamental role in the functioning of modern democratic societies by connecting political leaders, government institutions, media organizations, and citizens. It provides a platform through which political

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73

actors communicate their policies, explain decisions, express political positions, and engage with the public. In democratic systems, communication is not merely a mechanism for distributing political information; it is also an important instrument for promoting public participation, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and developing trust between citizens and political representatives. However, the effectiveness of political communication depends significantly on the ethical principles guiding the creation, distribution, and interpretation of political messages.

Ethical political communication emphasizes honesty, transparency, accountability, fairness, respect, and responsibility. These principles establish standards for ensuring that political information is communicated accurately and that citizens receive sufficient information to make informed judgments about political issues. The growing influence of digital media, online political campaigns, and social networking platforms has further increased the importance of ethical communication. Political messages can now reach large audiences rapidly, creating opportunities for public participation while also introducing challenges related to misinformation, selective information sharing, manipulation, and political polarization.

The literature on democratic communication suggests that ethical standards are essential for maintaining a constructive relationship between political institutions and citizens. Habermas (2006) emphasizes the importance of an independent media system and meaningful communication between political institutions and civil society. Similarly, Holdo (2022) highlights the relationship between sincerity, institutional arrangements, and citizens' trust in political leaders. These perspectives indicate that ethical principles should be understood not only as individual responsibilities but also as institutional requirements for democratic governance.

Oxford Academic+1

2. Theoretical Foundations of Ethical Political Communication

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74

The theoretical foundations of ethical political communication are closely associated with deliberative democracy, communication ethics, and democratic accountability. Deliberative democracy emphasizes that political decisions should emerge from informed discussion, rational argumentation, mutual respect, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. Within this framework, political communication is considered legitimate when individuals can express their opinions freely and participate in discussions without deception, coercion, or unfair manipulation.

Habermas (2006), through his work on deliberative democracy, explains the importance of communication in developing democratic legitimacy. His perspective suggests that political communication should facilitate meaningful interaction between political institutions and citizens rather than function exclusively as a tool for influencing public opinion. An independent media system and an informed civil society are particularly important for creating an effective democratic public sphere.

Bohman (2014) further develops the relationship between communication and democratic theory by identifying procedural correctness, adequate knowledge, meaningful agreement, and freedom from ideological distortion as important conditions for democratic decision-making. This approach demonstrates that ethical political communication requires more than the formal availability of information; it also requires an environment in which information can be examined, challenged, and discussed openly.

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Another important theoretical perspective is communication ethics, which emphasizes the moral responsibilities of individuals and institutions involved in public discourse. Duffy (2024) discusses virtue ethics as an approach to promoting democratic communication through mutual trust, shared responsibility, and ethical engagement. This perspective highlights the importance of honesty,

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75

respect, and constructive dialogue in addressing divisive political communication and misinformation.

Digital Commons at University of Memphis

3. Ethical Principles and Transparency in Political Communication

Transparency is one of the most significant ethical principles in democratic political communication. It refers to the openness, clarity, and accessibility of political information shared by government institutions, political representatives, and public organizations. Transparent communication enables citizens to understand political decisions, evaluate government performance, and examine the reasons behind public policies. It also reduces information asymmetry between political authorities and the public, thereby supporting informed democratic participation.

Political transparency requires political leaders to communicate their objectives, policy commitments, institutional decisions, and public responsibilities honestly. When political actors provide incomplete, misleading, or selectively presented information, citizens may experience difficulties in evaluating political performance. Consequently, transparency should be considered an essential component of responsible political leadership and democratic governance.

Habermas (2006) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding transparency through the concept of the democratic public sphere. His approach emphasizes the importance of accessible political information and independent media institutions in facilitating informed public discussion. Similarly, Marciel (2023), in examining citizens' right to information, highlights the democratic importance of ensuring that individuals have access to the information necessary for developing informed political opinions.

In contemporary political environments, digital communication platforms have expanded opportunities for transparency through online government announcements, public consultations, policy discussions, and institutional reporting. Nevertheless, the availability of digital information does not

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76

automatically guarantee transparency. Political institutions must ensure that information is accurate, understandable, accessible, and presented without deliberate distortion.

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4. Accountability as an Ethical Dimension of Political Communication

Accountability represents another essential dimension of ethical political communication. It refers to the responsibility of political representatives and public institutions to explain their decisions, justify their actions, respond to public concerns, and accept scrutiny regarding their performance. In democratic societies, accountability enables citizens to evaluate political leadership and demand explanations when public commitments are not fulfilled.

Ethical political communication strengthens accountability by establishing expectations of honesty, consistency, and responsiveness. Political leaders are expected to communicate policy decisions accurately, acknowledge institutional limitations, and provide explanations for decisions affecting society. When political communication lacks accountability, public statements may become disconnected from actual institutional performance, potentially weakening citizens' confidence in democratic institutions.

Ettema (2007), in his discussion of journalism as reason-giving, connects news media responsibilities with deliberative democracy and institutional accountability. The study emphasizes the importance of providing citizens with reasons that enable them to assess public choices. This perspective establishes journalism as an important mechanism through which political decisions can be examined and public institutions held accountable.

Research on press accountability also demonstrates that ethical responsibility should be understood as an ongoing process rather than simply the achievement of predetermined standards. The study by Ettema and Glasser (2009) on ethics and eloquence in journalism develops an accountability-oriented understanding of

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77

professional communication, emphasizing the importance of open discussion and justification of ethical standards.

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Furthermore, Holdo (2022) explains that political trustworthiness involves both genuine ethical commitment and institutional conditions that encourage truthful communication. This suggests that accountability cannot depend exclusively on the personal integrity of political leaders; institutional mechanisms must also encourage responsible communication and enable citizens to evaluate political claims.

Markus Holdo, 2022

5. Ethical Political Communication and Public Engagement

Public engagement is an important indicator of democratic participation because it reflects the extent to which citizens interact with political institutions, participate in public discussions, express their opinions, and contribute to political decision-making. Ethical communication creates an environment in which citizens can participate without fear of manipulation, discrimination, or deliberate misinformation.

The relationship between ethical political communication and public engagement can be understood through the principles of inclusion, mutual respect, fairness, and freedom of expression. Political institutions that communicate openly and respectfully can create opportunities for citizens to express their concerns and participate in discussions concerning public policies. Such communication also allows political representatives to understand public expectations and respond to societal needs.

Habermas (2006) considers communication between political institutions and civil society an important condition for democratic legitimacy. His theoretical approach suggests that political communication should support an exchange of information and perspectives between decision-makers and citizens. This

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78

approach moves beyond one-way political messaging and emphasizes meaningful public dialogue.

Duffy (2024) also highlights the significance of mutual trust and communal responsibility in democratic communication. His discussion of virtue ethics suggests that respectful engagement and constructive dialogue can contribute to addressing divisive public discourse.

Oxford Academic+1

In addition, Bohman's (2014) theoretical contribution indicates that meaningful democratic communication requires conditions that allow citizens to examine political arguments and participate in informed decision-making. Therefore, public engagement should not be measured exclusively through the number of citizens exposed to political messages or participating in online discussions. The quality, inclusiveness, and meaningfulness of their participation are equally important.

Cambridge Core

6. The Role of Digital Media in Ethical Political Communication

The expansion of digital media has transformed political communication by introducing new channels for political discussion, information distribution, and citizen engagement. Social networking platforms enable political representatives, media organizations, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens to communicate directly with large audiences. These developments have expanded opportunities for political participation and created new forms of interaction between political institutions and the public.

However, digital political communication also presents ethical challenges. The rapid circulation of unverified information, manipulated content, misleading political messages, and selective presentation of information can negatively affect the quality of democratic discussion. Furthermore, algorithm-driven content distribution may influence which political issues receive public attention and which perspectives become more visible.

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79

Irshaidat and Borgebund (2021), applying Habermas's theory of communicative action to political marketing, examine the ethical dimensions of political communication and propose the importance of reciprocal persuasion. Their approach suggests that political communication should recognize citizens as active participants rather than merely treating them as targets of political influence.

Duffy (2024) similarly identifies misinformation and divisive discourse as challenges to democratic communication and emphasizes the importance of ethical dispositions and mutual trust. These contributions suggest that digital political communication requires stronger commitments to accuracy, disclosure, fairness, and respect for different perspectives.

IDEAS/RePEc+1

Consequently, ethical political communication in the digital environment requires both individual responsibility and institutional safeguards. Political communicators should distinguish factual information from personal opinions, provide appropriate context, and correct inaccurate statements. Media organizations and digital platforms also have responsibilities concerning the integrity and accessibility of political information.

7. Political Trust and the Legitimacy of Democratic Institutions

Political trust is closely connected with ethical communication because citizens rely on political information to evaluate leaders, institutions, and government decisions. Trust develops when political actors demonstrate consistency between their public statements and actual conduct. Ethical communication can contribute to this process by promoting sincerity, accuracy, openness, and responsiveness.

Holdo (2022) provides an important theoretical contribution to understanding political trust by examining the relationship between authentic communication, institutional arrangements, and ethical commitment. The study suggests that trustworthiness requires both genuine commitment to truthful communication and institutional conditions that support responsible behaviour. This perspective

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demonstrates that political trust is not simply the result of persuasive public messaging; it is also associated with the broader institutional environment in which political communication takes place.

Markus Holdo, 2022

Similarly, Habermas (2006) emphasizes that democratic legitimacy depends partly on communication between informed public audiences, independent media, and political institutions. When citizens have opportunities to access information and participate in meaningful discussions, they can better evaluate political decisions and institutional performance.

Oxford Academic

Nevertheless, ethical communication should not be viewed as a guarantee of political agreement or universal trust. Citizens may hold different political values, priorities, and interpretations of public issues. The primary contribution of ethical communication is therefore to establish fair conditions under which disagreements can be expressed, examined, and addressed through democratic processes.

8. Critical Analysis and Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial theoretical insights into the importance of ethical principles in political communication. Previous studies have examined deliberative democracy, communication ethics, political trust, media independence, institutional accountability, and public participation. Habermas (2006) emphasizes the democratic significance of independent media and communication between political institutions and civil society, while Bohman (2014) highlights the conditions required for meaningful democratic communication. Holdo (2022) further connects ethical commitment and institutional arrangements with political trust.

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Despite these contributions, several areas require further investigation. First, existing theoretical discussions frequently examine transparency, accountability,

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81

and public engagement as related but distinct dimensions of democratic communication. Further empirical research could investigate how these three dimensions interact and collectively contribute to ethical political communication.

Second, the increasing influence of digital communication has created new challenges concerning information accuracy, political messaging, and citizens' participation. More research is needed to understand how ethical communication principles operate across traditional media, social networking platforms, and digital political campaigns.

Third, there is a need to investigate how citizens perceive ethical political communication and whether their perceptions of transparency, accountability, and fairness are associated with their willingness to participate in democratic processes.

Fourth, political communication research would benefit from greater attention to different democratic and sociopolitical contexts. The institutional structures, media environments, political cultures, and levels of digital access within different countries may influence how ethical communication principles are understood and implemented.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address these research gaps by examining the role of ethical principles in political communication, particularly through the interconnected dimensions of transparency, accountability, and public engagement in modern democracies.

9. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, the present study proposes that ethical principles serve as the foundation of effective political communication. Transparency and accountability are considered important dimensions of ethical political communication, while public engagement represents a key democratic outcome.

The proposed framework is structured as follows:

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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82



10. Conclusion

The reviewed literature establishes that ethical principles are fundamental to effective political communication and democratic governance. Transparency, accountability, honesty, integrity, and fairness contribute to the development of responsible political discourse and meaningful citizen participation. Existing theoretical contributions demonstrate that political communication should extend beyond strategic persuasion and focus on informed dialogue, institutional responsibility, and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, digital communication has introduced new opportunities and challenges for ethical political engagement. Although digital platforms facilitate access to political information and public discussion, concerns regarding misinformation, selective disclosure, and political manipulation require greater attention to ethical standards.

The present study builds on these theoretical perspectives by examining transparency, accountability, and public engagement as interconnected dimensions of ethical political communication. It aims to contribute to the understanding of how ethical communication practices can support informed citizenship, strengthen public trust, and promote democratic participation in modern political systems.

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Conflict of Interest

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Data Availability

No new clinical, experimental, or patient-level datasets were generated or analysed during this study. All information discussed in the review was obtained from the published literature and publicly available sources cited in the manuscript. Additional information relating to the review may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. No patients or other human participants were recruited, and no identifiable personal or clinical information was collected or analysed for this review.

Use of Generative AI

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used to conduct the literature review, generate the scholarly content, interpret the evidence, or formulate the conclusions presented in this article. The discussion of generative AI, artificial intelligence, and machine-learning technologies in the manuscript relates solely to their applications in healthcare resource optimization and does not constitute their use in preparing the article.

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