

# A systems model for Political Communication

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**POLITICAL COMMUNICATION** as a recently emerged subdiscipline of the Communication Science is rapidly expanding. However, it needs not only to continue its research but also to develop models for further research and theory construction. This paper proposes that in order to get a comprehensive view of the field, a holistic perspective is required. The process of political communication is described as a systemic activity. Aspects of a systems approach are discussed and a systems model for political communication is advanced. In this model the major components with its functions are political institutions, the media and the public operating within the qualifying political culture that characterises the system. It is concluded that a systems approach is, at this stage in the development of Political Communication as a field, preferred to more reductionist approaches.

## 1. Introduction

Human action is often political since man rules and is ruled, coerced and persuaded. Man negotiates, makes promises — and breaks it — agrees with some men and fears and fights others. A political movement is thus seen by Lasswell and Kaplan (1969:240) as “a continuing act performed by an aggregate of persons in a power perspective of elaborated demands and expectations.”

From this follows the view of politics as the authoritative allocation of scarce resources such as prestige, power and access to the channels of communication (cf. Elau, 1963; Easton, 1965a, 1965b).

*Politics* can therefore be described in terms of the continuous defining of collective action in the context of a mutual power relationship characterized by differences and conflict re-



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garding the authoritative allocation of scarce resources.

Politics as an activity involving “an aggregate of persons” cannot take place without communication.

*Political communication* can then be described as the exchange of messages and symbols that have a significant influence on the functioning of the political system, or are influenced by it whilst the political system influences the quality and flow of communication.

In studying Political Communication as a

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subdiscipline of Communication, a variety of approaches can be followed, *inter alia*:

- Functional approach;
- Organisational approach;
- Environmental approach;
- Linguistic approach;
- Symbolic approach; and a
- Systems approach

The absence of a grand theory for Political Communication is not necessarily detrimental. This paper agrees with Fisher (1982) that the variety of approaches can even be seen as symptomatic of a healthy and dynamic discipline.

This paper will propose a systems model for studying Political Communication. This does not imply that the other approaches are rejected, but that for the purpose of obtaining a holistic perspective with the emphasis on the relationships between the components, a systems approach is favoured.

## 2. A systems approach

Throughout this paper the term "systems approach" is preferred to "systems theory" since the systems approach is not a uniform, monolithic framework, but includes a number of paradigmas, e.g. the General Systems Theory (GST), cybernetic systems and structural-functional systems (cf. Monge, 1977).

Holism says that social phenomena such as communication must be viewed on a macro level, i.e. the whole is bigger as the sum of the constituent parts and communication can therefore not be studied from an atomistic and reductionist perspective (cf Kriek, 1976).

This view is in line with the transactional approach to communication which emphasises that people communicate *with* each other rather than *to* another (cf Tan, 1981).

## 3. Aspects of a systems approach

In order to develop a systems model for Political Communication, the major aspects of a systems approach must be briefly mentioned.

### 3.1 Non-summativity

A system can be described as a "whole which functions as a whole by virtue of the interdependence of its parts" (Rapoport, 1968:xvii). In other words, the components of a system do not characterise the systemic nature of the

whole, but the interdependent *relationships* of the components provide the system with its unique characteristics of wholeness.

Interdependence, of course, implies mutual dependence among components in as much that any change in one component automatically and inherently affects every other component (Fisher, 1978a:197).

Nonsummativity and wholeness can be viewed as two sides of the same coin with wholeness implying that the system is different from the sum of components that, taken together, form the system. But when the component parts are related to each other interdependently, the result is a collectivity that takes on its own identity separate from the individual identities of the components.

### 3.2 Structure, function and evolution

The interdependent relationships among the components can be described according to the three interrelated elements of structure, function and evolution.

**Structural relationships** imply a spatial relationship among components in the sense of *beside, above, under, face-to-face*. In a democracy two of the crucial components, the press and the government, would function beside each other and not with the government above the press.

**Functional relationships** emphasise that *events* rather than material objects are the components of the political communication system, i.e. by virtue of the functions of the press such as the dissemination of information, agenda setting, persuasion, and socialisation, the press is a component of the system.

**Evolutionary relationships** trace the entire system's history through time. "The evolution of a system contains within it structural and functional relationships along with changes in those relationships that occur during the passage of time" (Fisher, 1978a:199).

### 3.3 Openness

Systems are classified according to its measure of openness. "Open" and "closed" systems are ideal types and all social systems are, by definition; "open" systems though its degree of openness may vary between systems and also within a system over time.

The most common aspect of openness as

characteristic of social systems is the free exchange of information (as its energy) between the components of the systems, and between the system and its environment.

While (relatively) closed systems experience difficulty in maintaining itself, an open system can through the principle of equifinality achieve a fair degree of *homeostasis* or balance.

This is done by obtaining additional information from its environment. In addition open systems possess the ability to generate its own information within the system. Open systems are goal-oriented and possess the ability of self-regulation and can adapt to changed circumstances in order to perpetuate itself.

### 3.4 Hierarchical order

For every system there can be a larger system that encompasses it — a suprasystem — and there is also a smaller system — subsystem — included within it. Naturally, systems, suprasystems and subsystems are all systems: a system becomes a suprasystem or a subsystem only because of its relationship with another system. Every system is a suprasystem to the systems within it, and every system is a subsystem to the system that environs it.

Because systems are capable of generating information (from subsystems) the relations between the subsystems (components) and the flow of information (the energy of the political communication system) is of crucial importance.

## 4. Pros and cons

The preference given to the systems approach does not imply elevating it to the level of Grand Theory. Accepting one theoretical approach above others implies accepting it — with its pros and cons — as the most suitable for a particular purpose (cf. Fisher, 1978b; Monge, 1977).

Communication in general and political communication in particular is generally accepted as a complex process. The implication is that it can then not be studied by a simplistic and reductionistic approach. Monge (1973:13) emphasized that “(T)his suggests that we need an explanatory model sufficiently complex to account for the complexity of communication.”

The single most important con of a systems approach is its weakness in making accurate

and quantifiable predictions regarding the future state of the system. One reason for this is that the systems approach's principle of equifinality (referred to above) states that “the same final state may be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways” (Bertalanffy, 1968:40). Then, too, different open systems with the same initial condition could well achieve different final states!

However, what a systems approach lacks in predictive power it makes up for in explaining communication as a complex process. Monge (1977) defends the systems approach on this point by indicating that a theory must primarily explain, and predict only after that. In particular the systems characteristics of openness and equifinality indicate that systems are likely to change and adapt to the environment and changing circumstances.

One of the most significant contributions of the systems approach is the potential to integrate existing knowledge, particularly since the need for this is great (cf Monge, 1973, 1977). This is partly the result of the rejection of a reductionist and the acceptance of a holistic perspective by the systems approach. Fisher (1978b:101) also supports this view: “Integration in the domain of inquiry reflected in the study of communication across a broad range of disciplines is certainly a benefit, whose potential, while not yet achieved, is blatantly obvious.”

Monge (1982) adds other advantages of a systems approach. He says that the theoretical framework consists of concepts and relationships that are theoretically and logically linked. The systems approach is also economical in that it involves fewer concepts and theories than alternative approaches.

For the study of Political Communication the systems approach is particularly well suited since its focus is on the group rather than on the individual, on the relationships rather than the structural components. Groenewald *et al.* (1985:20) support this view. They say that in a systems approach communication is allowed to develop fully as a social process and contributions of individual communicators are seen as part of the overall communication event: “Navorsing volgens die sisteemperspektief kyk nie eerstens na mense wat kommunikeer nie, maar vra wat gebeur *tussen* mense wanneer

hulle kommunikeer. 'n Individu kommunikeer dus nie, maar word deel van kommunikasie."

## 5. Political communication as systemic activity

Chaffee (1975:85-86) rightly said that the most pervasive image of political activity is that of a system. There is good reason to believe that some unique kinds of understanding might be gained by research that is specifically conceived in system-level terms. It is, after all, the actions of individuals that give life to the structural properties of political systems, just as the latter in turn constrains the behaviour of individuals.

He adds that communication, being by definition a process, should presumably be studied in connection with changes over time in the state of a system, or of individuals within a system. This view is closely related to our earlier definition of political communication as the exchange of messages and symbols that are significantly influenced by, or have consequences for the functioning of the political system which, in turn, influences the communication system.

### 5.1 Easton's general systems model

Easton's general model for political systems is well-known (cf. Easton, 1965a, 1965b) and fits in with the earlier definition of politics as the authoritative allocation of values and scarce resources. In his model there are the *decision makers* (the authorities) and the *members* (the public).

The members provide the system with *inputs* that can take the form of demands or support. Acting through the authorities, the system itself continuously performs a *conversion process* that yields *outputs*. The outputs can be in the form of decisions, policies, actions or services. In order to maintain and perpetuate itself, the system is concerned with balancing the inputs and the outputs, while maintaining the support in relation to the demands made on it.

The process of political communication can be viewed in similar terms. It is, after all, through communication that the constituent components of the political system are linked with each other for the whole to be more than the sum of the parts.

## 6. A systems model for political communication

The major components of a political communication systems are political institutions, the media, the public *interacting* within the political culture that characterises the political communication system.

The public is not only an important destination of messages in the process of political communication, but also the origin and sender and in a democracy the holder of power. Consequently, the focus ought to be on the *process* of communication rather than only on the authorities as political communicators and their messages.

The political institutions and the media (as subsystems of the political communication system) interact on a horizontal level to prepare messages. On a vertical level they collectively and individually disseminate political communication messages to and from the public (Figure 1).

Efforts to control the flow of (especially political) information come from the historical recognition of the fundamental social principle that power assumes knowledge and that he who controls the flow of communication, controls knowledge and consequently holds great powers (cf. Bagdikian, 1971).

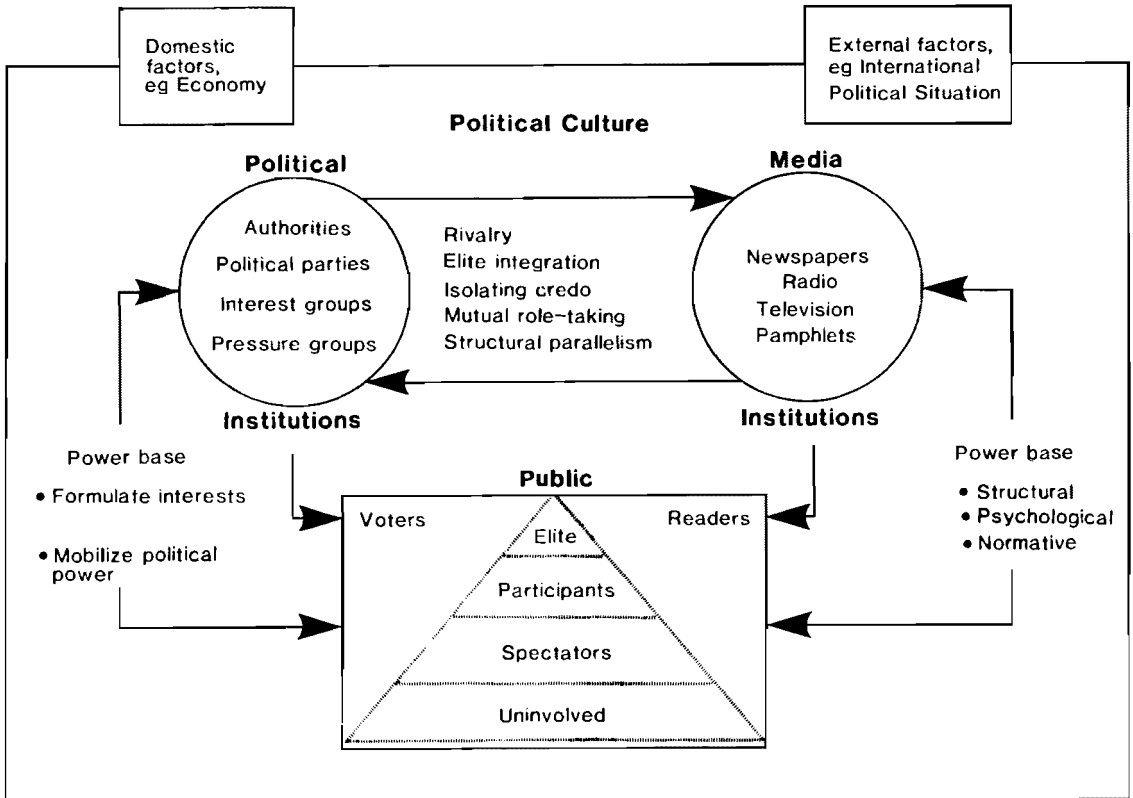
Since most political systems tend to work for its own maintenance by achieving some measure of balance between the inputs received and the outputs possible (or convenient), all political systems tend to try and regulate the flow of information for this purpose. This is *inter alia* because the media (in a democracy) have an independent power base and a fair degree of political influence. Political institutions also rely to a great extent upon the media for access to the public at large.

The media, however, is not placing mere consumer products on the market, but indeed plays a vital constitutional role in the democracy with functions such as the dissemination of information, socialization, interpretation, persuasion and act as watchdog over the powerful.

The media is therefore co-determinators of the public agenda and acts as gatekeeper as to which inputs will be forwarded to the decision-making bodies and which will be virtually ignored.

In a democracy it is assumed that the press

**FIGURE 1: A Political Communication System**



will play a significant role in the communication between the citizens and the government. This is because the government is normally not allowed to have direct control over a communications medium. The furor over the secret funding of *The Citizen* being a case in point (cf. the report by the Erasmus Commission). This fundamental principle places the press out of reach of the government in order to maintain a free and unbiased flow of information, frequently leading to some measure of confrontation between press and government.

The relationship between press and government, often wrongly characterised as exclusively one of conflict, is also characterised at the same time by structural parallelism (cf. Seymour-Ure, 1975). This is because of the symbiotic relationship between the two. The press needs the government as one of the biggest beats and the government needs access to the public through the mass media (cf. Gieber and Johnson, 1961).

This press-government relationship is also

characterised by elite integration where the elites of the political institutions, the media and the public sector interact in informal and even social settings. In principle this is to the advantage of all since influence is a double-edged sword. Guarding the press against undue influence is its isolating credo. This credo will guide press actions and help to maintain freedom of the press and its watchdog role.

At the same time there is a variety of mutual role-taking in the political communication system between the public, the press and the political communicators. If the public is partisan, the party spokesman will tend to act as gladiator with newspapers assuming the role as editorial guide. With the public observing the political scene as spectators, the party spokesman will tend to take on the role of actor performing on the political stage with the media playing the part of impresario that provides the spectators with entertainment and the political communicators with an audience (cf. Gurevitch and Blumler, 1977).

The relationship between the various components of the political communication system assumes each will hold a measure of power over the other. This implies that each component has its own power base in society.

The power of political institutions is inherent to its function as formulators of interests and mobilisers of social power with the purpose of political action.

The power base of the press is often less obvious (and sometimes even ignored by those who see the press as merely a conduit between other political communicators). Notwithstanding this view, the press does have a power base independent of the political system. This power base is threefold.

The *structural* origin of the power of the press results from its unique ability to give politicians access to the public which would be denied to them otherwise.

The *psychological* origin of the power of the press is based upon its credibility and the esteem with which the public at large views the press — if independent. This is also based on the readers' relationship with a favourite newspaper based upon the uses and gratifications of the readers.

In addition the press has a *normative* power base. In a democracy the principle of press freedom and freedom of speech is universally accepted. This normative foundation of the press legitimises the independent, watchdog role the press is playing in the political communication system. It also guards against efforts to place the press under political or other forms of control.

It is, however, important that the frequently conflicting positions taken by the press and government vis-à-vis each other *not* be taken as exclusive characteristic of their relationship. Both these (sub) systems are complementary to each other.

"The notion that such powers are bound together in a political communication system alerts us to the influence of other forces as well" (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1977, :255).

## Conclusion

As indicated earlier, a systems approach is not noted for its predictive power. However, it more than compensates with its holistic perspective

and ability to integrate existing knowledge. Furthermore it provides new insights into the complex process of political communication.

This model will hopefully serve to emphasise that political communication, being a systemic activity, should ideally be studied with regard to the **relationships** within the (supra) political communication system and the changes within the system over time.

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