

[The International Encyclopedia of Communication](#)

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Communication research and politics

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Communication research is intimately related to politics, especially if politics is understood widely as the deliberate management of society. Research on media and other aspects of communication such as election campaigns has typically been inspired and financed by political motives (→ [Election Campaign Communication](#)). On the other hand, research has influenced politics by producing concepts and findings about how communication really works in society. Historically, the origins of communication research are deeply rooted in politics, beginning with the rhetoric of antiquity (→ [Rhetoric and Politics](#); [Rhetorical Studies](#)) and ending with studies around each new medium – the press in the seventeenth century, film in the early twentieth century, → [Radio](#) and → [Television](#) in the mid-twentieth century, and the → [Internet](#) toward the new millennium (→ [Media History](#)). Histories of the field leave no doubt that each school of thought was founded as a consequence of a more or less direct political call of the day ([Hardt 2001](#); [Pietilä 2005](#); → [Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968](#)). It is less obvious what has been the opposite direction of influence – whether research has had a notable impact on politics.

The relationship between research and politics is an intriguing equation that has to be approached at different levels. The following three are most obvious: (1) *philosophy* – how communication-related concepts and paradigms of political thinking are generated and molded by research, and how research itself is shaped by prevailing political philosophy; (2) *policy* – how governance of communication is dependent on research and how research for its part is shaped by media regulation; and (3) *politics* – how political campaigns and specific political issues determine what research is being done and how research feeds back to politics.

POLITICAL THINKING AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Political philosophies everywhere and at all times include elements from the communication field – concepts such as transmission of → information from rulers to the

people; → [Persuasion](#) of people and the → [public opinion](#) prevailing among them; the influence of media on the public mind; and → [Interpersonal Communication](#) as an essential constituent of communities. The best-known element in this regard is freedom of expression and information, including media freedom, which is part and parcel of the idea of democracy (→ [Freedom of Communication](#); [Freedom of Information](#)).

In democratic theory, the press is typically understood as an independent branch of government, next to the three powers suggested by Montesquieu: legislative, executive, and judiciary ([Hamelink & Nordenstreng 2007](#), 227; → [Fourth Estate](#)). Freedom of expression and information is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 19), which was the basis for international law on human rights. The human right for freedom of expression and information is granted for individual citizens – not for media institutions, which, according to original liberalism, are supposed to serve as instruments of the people for an open and unhindered exchange rather than become a commercial marketplace by themselves ([Nordenstreng 2007](#); → [Freedom of the Press, Concept of](#)).

Democratic theory with the concept of freedom is a central construct of contemporary political philosophy, which is based not only on political science but also on communication studies. A similar paradigmatic case was the so-called Frankfurt School, which emerged in the 1920s, with its notions of cultural industries and their repressing influence on people's authentic mental space (→ [Critical Theory](#); [Culture Industries](#)). Contemporary followers of this critical line include scholars such as [Douglas Kellner \(2005\)](#) and [Robert McChesney \(1999\)](#). Thus, communication research feeds political thinking – both its grand theories and particular building blocks. An example of the latter is the concept of → [Media Effects](#), both as such and as a later variant whereby media exercise influence by choosing the topics for public attention rather than by direct impact of individual messages (→ [Agenda-Setting Effects](#)).

Research is not just an autonomous source to feed political thinking but research itself is influenced by political philosophies. Accordingly, research in each country at each time reflects the prevailing political system – its basic philosophy and its particular needs. For example, European integration and globalization have introduced new research priorities in most EU countries, with more attention to multiculturalism and → [international communication](#) (→ [Globalization Theories](#)). And everywhere the paradigm of a world order in the media field, first introduced under Cold War conditions, has evolved into a paradigm of global challenge highlighted by the World Summit on the Information Society ([Padovani & Nordenstreng 2005](#); → New World Information and Communication Order [NWICO]; [UNESCO](#)).

COMMUNICATION POLICY AS INTERFACE BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLITICS

At this level, communication research serves the legal and administrative regulation of communication and media, first and foremost by delivering data on the audiences, contents, as well as economics of media institutions (→ [Audience Research](#); [Media](#)

[Economics](#); [Media Production and Content](#)). These data may not always be regarded as research proper but rather routine statistics. Yet communication research has a vital role in the process of media governance – not only by furnishing empirical data but also by elaborating concepts such as responsibility, accountability, and self-regulation (→ [Communication and Law](#); [Media Policy](#)).

As above in political philosophies, policies are not only served by research, but research is determined by the system of regulation. Accordingly, the EU's audiovisual policies have given rise to research, often commissioned by the regulatory agencies, concerning the TV and radio program structures, particularly the share of local/national productions and those originating from Europe against those imported from the rest of the world (→ [European Union: Communication Law](#)). General development of digitization and convergence has created research on structural changes and challenges of both print and electronic media (→ [Digitization and Media Convergence](#)). The institutions of self-regulation, for their part, have solicited research on news content and its various biases (→ [Bias in the News](#)).

ACTUAL POLITICS BEHIND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

This level includes, first of all, *election studies*, mostly around campaigns – the classic among them discovering that media influence proceeds in two stages: first indirectly by media and then through personal contacts ([Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955](#); → [Two-Step Flow of Communication](#)). Today, → [Political Communication](#) research has expanded a lot, along with the → [mediatization of politics](#), whereby politicians pay more and more attention to their images and resort to so-called → [spin doctors](#), leading to a professionalization of political communication ([Holtz-Bacha et al. 2007](#)).

Second, this level includes the research projects and programs that have been launched as a *response to specific political issues*. The history of communication research is full of examples of these, including the Payne Fund Project in the 1920s, which was a response to moral and political concern about the new film industry. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were similar research projects in the UK and the USA on the influence of television on children, focusing on the potentially detrimental effects of the medium in general and its violent content in particular (→ [Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of](#)). The role of media in development belongs to the same category of research which was motivated by political concern about getting developing countries on the path of modernization and at the same time on the side of the Americans in the Cold War struggle with the Soviets ([Lerner 1958](#); → [Development Communication](#)).

All this shows how politics has determined research by setting out the topics, defining the problems, and mostly also financing the exercise. Although the projects have been temporary, lasting for just a few years, the research tradition has been drastically shaped by this politically driven applied research. The basic research pursued in universities independent of political calls has always been more limited, but still vibrant enough to maintain tension between what is known as “administrative” and “critical” research.

While the other two levels were dominated by research influencing politics, here it is mainly politics that shapes research. But naturally there is also some influence in the other direction, from research to politics. All those politically determined projects do have an impact on political and other spheres – both empirical results and theoretical concepts have a bearing on society. Moreover, there are cases when even individual studies and scholars have stirred up political heat – an old classic being Max Weber in the 1910s ([Hardt 2001](#), 140) and a new classic being → [Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann](#) in the 1990s ([Koivisto & Thomas 2007](#), 64).

→ SEE ALSO: [Agenda-Setting Effects](#) → [Audience Research](#) → [Bias in the News](#) → [Communication and Law](#) → [Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968](#) → [Critical Theory](#) → [Culture Industries](#) → [Development Communication](#) → [Digitization and Media Convergence](#) → [Election Campaign Communication](#) → [European Union: Communication Law](#) → [Fourth Estate](#) → [Freedom of Communication](#) → [Freedom of Information](#) → [Freedom of the Press, Concept of](#) → [Globalization Theories](#) → [Information](#) → [International Communication](#) → [Internet](#) → [Interpersonal Communication](#) → [Media Economics](#) → [Media Effects](#) → [Media History](#) → [Media Policy](#) → [Media Production and Content](#) → [Mediatization of Politics](#) → [New World Information and Communication Order \(NWICO\)](#) → [Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth](#) → [Persuasion](#) → [Political Communication](#) → [Public Opinion](#) → [Radio](#) → [Rhetoric and Politics](#) → [Rhetorical Studies](#) → [Spin Doctor](#) → [Television](#) → [Two-Step Flow of Communication](#) → [UNESCO](#) → [Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of](#)

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