Communication and Political Understanding as Political Participation[1]
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Communicating as Acting Politically

Current writings in the ever-expanding field of political communication point in a direction of special interest for political scientists studying citizen participation in politics. The news is that information-seeking, information-providing, information-retrieving, and information interpretation *is* political participation. Communication and political understanding—the need for individuals to inform themselves and others about goings-on in society and to situate themselves politically—is moving from its conventional classification as a precursor for political participation and part of the prefabricated package provided by party and organizational membership to a form of political participation in its own right. Not only that. Societal forces like the media, advocacy groups, corporations, and even established social movements and political parties invite ordinary people to involve themselves directly in communicative actions. Growing numbers of citizen networks and advocacy groups ask people to take information materials offered on their web sites and tailor-make their own political understanding and messages. Political communication and political understanding have entered the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) era.

Communication is no longer just a way of getting across messages. It is action in its own right. It mobilizes and structures political thought and engagement, and it affects the internal and external workings of social movements, corporations, and other societal actors. All kinds of citizen groups acknowledge the importance of strategic communication for successful goal attainment. They even offer "toolboxes" for communication on their web sites for people to build their own DIY meaning and communicate values in a personalized fashion (for examples see Micheletti & Stolle, 2005a).

Communication has become a business in itself. A multitude of firms now offer communication guidance to political, civil society, and market actors. Political consultancy has to a great degree become communications programming. Politics Online News Tool & Strategies was started by former Stockholm University International Graduate School student Phil Noble and "provides news, tools and strategies for using the Internet in politics and public affairs" (Nobel & Associates, 2005). The appropriately-named "Spin Project" has as its goal to "strengthen the social justice movement by strengthening its communications infrastructure" (The Spin Project, 2005). These communication consultants as well as others help societal actors brand their identity and channel their energy and creativity (see e.g. Radley Yeldar, 2005).

Educational institutions have also caught on. Special units, like the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at Seattle's University of Washington, have been established because "the ways people communicate, to whom, and with what effects are crucial elements of vibrant public life, democracy, and social relationships" (CCCE, 2005). Even politicians are getting into the act. Niklas Nordström, controversial politician and former President of the social democratic party's youth organization, started Votia, a

[1] Mette Tobiasen (Allborg University, Denmark) and Alexandra Segerberg (Stockholm University, Sweden) offered valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. Olof Petersson (SNS, Stockholm, Sweden) pointed out a few bad formulations in the earlier version. Thomas Denk (Karlstad University, Sweden) generously took of his time to listen to my ideas for this commemorative volume and asked the kind of questions that kept pushing me to work onward.

communication and opinion-making company for interactive democracy, whose mission is "involving, activating, and engaging individuals in all segments of society" (Votia, 2005, my translation). In the summer of 2005 former U.S. Vice President Al Gore revealed Current, a new TV channel that aspires "to make television /…/ a two-way conversation" by using new digital tools that "make it possible for citizen journalists, new filmmakers, average citizens to participate and make this medium a multi-way conversation" (Journal Sentinel, 2005).

New academic terms highlight these developments in political communication and understanding. Media scholars analyze "participatory journalism," a bottom-up process giving individual citizens and groups opportunities to engage in "acts of journalism" by playing "an active role in the collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Business scholars show how corporations "write together" with their stakeholders. They may bring consumers directly into marketing by, as Crest toothpaste and others now do, asking consumers to participate hands-on in shaping their marketing campaigns and e-vote for the flavor, color, or shape of their choice (NYT, 2005). Or, as they grapple with demands for corporate social responsibility, they may open their corporate doors for dialogue with political consumerist activists (Boje, 2001; Knight& Greenberg, 2003, Conley, 2005). Social movement and communication scholars venture the conclusion that communication is now an ontological force in the world today.[2] It is more than just getting across one's message. It is the message, the meaning, and the action all in one.

Weblogs (blogs), chat sites, yahoo groups, personalized news, and other Internet opportunities not only facilitate information-seeking, information-giving, information creation, information interpretation, and political understanding. They are pushing along the development of informing and understanding as political participation (Van de Donk, 2004; Meike, 2002). Blogging, googling, clicking, and constructing websites are civic skills that can enhance social capital and political understanding, and they should definitely be included in the question batteries used in citizen surveys to probe civic skills and forms of political participation. Online involvement or cyberactivism is now offering growing numbers of citizens abundant opportunities to participate directly by creating, reconstructing, interpreting, and critiquing information in order to craft politics in the world today.

Interesting, the authors of *We Media*, the report on participatory journalism, conclude that the future of journalism will depend not only on how well it informs but how well it encourages and enables conversations with citizens. Engaging citizens in conversation has also become important in the business world. The web sites of corporate giants like Nike, H & M, and Shell Oil offer ordinary citizens opportunities to seek and provide information and to develop political understanding.[3] They want to communicate with activists and ordinary people about their corporate social responsibility. Nike says that it hopes that talking might help it improve its reporting tools in the future (Nike, 2005). Shell Oil describes "Tell Shell Forum" as concerning global communications and "how we get our message across to you and how you get the chance to air your views about us" (Royal Dutch Shell Oil, 2005). The very large Swedish multinational corporation H & M offers the web service "Make a Difference" in several languages and urges visitors to participate in simple survey questions on corporate social responsibility (H & M, 2005).

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[2]This signifies that information is a communication structure that is displacing and, thereby, changing the structure and meaning of actors as well as traditional and modern social structures (See Lash, 1997; W. van de Donk et al., 2004).

[3]Of course it can be argued that these opportunities are "sweatwash" and "greenwash," meaning that corporations can whitewash their image and just give the impression of concern about sustainable development without doing anything to improve their policies and practices. But this argument needs to be investigated empirically. Among other things, it is necessary to know how the corporations use the information in their activities. It can also be debated whether they are similar to the function of deliberative democracy, which many scholars claim is to create democratic and system legitimacy.

Political Science and Acts of Political Communication

Informing oneself, keeping oneself informed, informing others, contextualizing one's information (a form of reflexivity), and creating information and news is an important political task in the world today. It is just as important as voting. In some cases, for instance in the areas of global social justice in the global garment industry, communication in the form of fact-finding, speaking out, interpreting information, defining problems, and talking with corporate giants is one of the few ways for workers, consumers, and activists to craft politics and affect change. Traditional forms of participation—voting, membership in political organizations, contacting public officials—and even market-based actions—boycotts and "buycotts"[4]—may not be available or not considered to be preferred and effective alternatives.

How does political science view the increasing importance and centrality of communication in political participation? Research on democratic theory's implications for participation scholarship, academic debates on the proclaimed proclivity for Western citizens to disengage in civic life as well as scholarship on newer ways of understanding politics and collective action are the political science contributions that can help answer this question. Their contribution to the discussion will now be reviewed.

Enlightened understanding is one of the criteria that Robert Dahl developed in his highly-influential theoretical work on liberal democracy (Dahl, 1979). For him and others who use liberal democracy to frame their work, good democratic government requires enlightened citizens who are and stay informed about government and politics. Otherwise, citizens will not be able to assess relevant policy alternatives and make informed choices (vote) at election time, the main focus of political participation for scholars of the liberal democracy school of thought. "Acts of knowledge seeking"[5] lay the ground for participation. They are precursors, prerequisites, and the "givens" for using representative democratic government's means for people to influence politics. Liberal democracy theorists do not assume that citizens are active communicators, but they expect them (somehow) to know their political preferences at election time and in other settings that demand citizens to make informed choices among alternatives relevant for politics.

Survey work influenced by liberal democratic theory reflects this assumption. It does not study citizens' struggles for information. Survey questions generally only scan media consumption, interest in politics, and knowledge of political facts and positions. The explanation for the use of these survey questions is liberal democracy's view of political participation as an instrumental act through which citizens attempt to make politicians respond to their will.[6] Participation is efforts and attempts to influence government primarily through choice (voting) among a set of alternatives (parties and candidates). This definition excludes all activity dealing with politically informing oneself and others from the realm of participation. At least some political scientists state that they have made this choice consciously. In the now classical study on participation and role model for other studies *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, authors Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady declare openly that "communications—political discussions among friends, letters to the editor, calls to talk radio shows—in which the target audience is not a public official" are not included in the questionnaire (1995, 39-40).[7] Swedish citizen studies have also been inspired by Robert Dahl and the liberal democratic tradition (Petersson et al., 1987, Petersson et al., 1998). They have broadened the definition of politics to concern attempts to exercise influence

[4]"Buycotting" is a word that was made up a few years ago by an unknown source to refer to citizens who deliberately choose certain products over others. It is the opposite of a boycott. For more information on preferred alternatives see Micheletti, 2003.

[5] The term "acts of knowledge seeking" is taken from Virginia Sapiro (no date).

[6] This is a common definition that can be found in investigations on Sweden, Europe in general, the United States and elsewhere. See Teorell 2006 and the concluding chapter in Norris, 1999.

[7] This book offers a broader view of participation than many other American studies. Information-seeking is also excluded from the definition of participation in another Verba and Schlozman collaborative book with Nancy Burns (Burns et al., 2001, 55).

over societal (and not just governmental and parliamentary-oriented) issues, but they do not consider information-seeking, the quest for political knowledge, and the creation of personal political understanding as political participation. Well, at least they (we) have not included these ideas in the measurements. Like other surveys, political knowledge (measured as answers to factual questions) and information-seeking (basically questions on media consumption) are used as independent factors that explain a citizen's political participation. Political understanding is not really given much focus in these path-breaking studies. Electoral scholars openly admit this.[8]

Possibly surprisingly given the new term "participatory journalism," another important strain of democratic theory, participatory democracy or self-government, does not focus on communication as a form of direct and immediate citizen participation in decision-making.[9] Participation in these settings can, of course, be learning-by-doing and include learning new facts and perspectives, but this process is viewed as more of a side effect of participation than participation in itself. Neither does this democratic theoretical strain acknowledge the "ontological force" of communication for democratic action. Instead, just as with its liberal democratic cousin, information-seeking, information-relaying, and various forms of knowledge management and interpretation are shelved away as precursors to or secondary to "real" political participation in the form of attempts to exercise hands-on political influence as illustrated by the making and implementing of policy at the very local level and in such smaller arenas outside the representative system as school boards and one's workplace.

One strain of democratic theory, deliberative democracy, gives prominence to political communication and political understanding. It challenges the other democratic theories' assumption about preference formation (a kind of political understanding) as a prerequisite and "given" for political involvement. According to this theory, developing one's political understanding and stands on issues *is* a form of participation. An important message that this theory sends to survey researchers is that the questionnaire alternative "don't know" needs follow-up questions that penetrate what "don't knowing" means for politics, political communication, political understanding and other forms of political participation.[10] If nothing else, and given the increasing gaps in political interest and factual knowledge in politics found in different countries, it seems necessary to focus more research attention on the impact of growing "citizen unenlightenment" on political processes and the public sphere in general.

For some scholars, the point of deliberation is participative talk to make consensual decisions on public matters. For others, deliberation's function is opinion formation, sharpening arguments, and figuring out where to stand on issues of public relevance (Teorell, 2006). Deliberative democracy theorists also debate how collectivist or individualized deliberation must be to fulfill its function for democracy and, therefore, to be considered political participation. The extreme positions are face-to-face, territorially-based reasoned dialogue in a collectivity of people (including deliberative polls, study circles, citizen panels, and public debates) and one individual seeking in a DIY way to improve her political understanding (find out what to think, write, and say as well as contextualize her views in the larger picture of things) through the collection, sifting through, and comparison of information with the help of such Internet functions as blogs, chat sites, testimonials, and frequently asked question (FAQ) captions (London, 1995). However, whatever one's position on the collectivist/individualized deliberation divide, when compared to liberal democratic theory, deliberative democratic theory is open for considering political communication, knowledge-seeking, and political understanding creation as a form of political participation. But there is a problem with

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[8] University of Essex electoral researcher Paul Whiteley admitted this research weakness in a comment to my 2006 ECPR paper "Communication and Political Understanding as Political Participation."

[9] Important theorists here are Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber.

[10] Perhaps people cannot answer a question because they have internal value conflict, have qualms over deciding their preference ordering, and/or cannot find an adequate survey alternative to express this problem. Perhaps people do not know because they cannot find adequate information in the media and/or from politicians and others in their search for political understanding. Research also shows gender, class, age, race/ethnicity, and educational differences in using the "don't know" alternative.

this theoretical perspective. Some of its proponents disregard an important quality of participatory democracy that was mentioned above because they—like proponents of liberal democratic theory—tend to stress the parliamentary sphere. For them, issues of representative government (the parliamentary arena) are the focus for political deliberation (e.g., Fishkin 1977). This is explained by their tendency to consider political deliberation as playing a legitimizing function in democracy.[11] For other representatives of this theoretical school (e.g., Dryzek, 2001), the focus of deliberative democracy is broadened to the entire public sphere, which includes global civil society and the global marketplace.

Viewing communication as political participation without attaching the functional strings of democratic legitimacy-making to it gives communication and the pursuit of political understanding another—and I would argue richer—meaning. When information-seeking, information-retrieving, information-relaying, and information interpretation are seen as full-fledged political participation, political scientists can explore the importance of trust, political organizing as well as power and political relations locally, nationally, and globally for political understanding. Thus, communicative political participation becomes a vital part of the scholarship of critical democracy and power studies (Blaug, 2002, 105f; Tarrow, 2002; Lash 1997; Van der Donk et al., 2004; Meike, 2002; Peretti with Micheletti, 2003).

When political participation is seen in this light, scholars can develop a new research agenda on the role of communication in politics. *Can it be* that citizen thirst for information and new venues of communication (as shown in increases in media actors and the fractionalized media environment) has become more acute, important, and engaging activities because citizen trust and interest in the actors and institutions of representative government have declined and social capital in many countries is on the wane? What is—if any—the implication of lower levels of traditional political participation (declining membership rates in large membership organizations like political parties and unions) and high levels of distrust of politicians and the mass media for how citizens these days develop personal political understanding?[12] Where (in which arenas, settings) and with what tools (technologies, civil skills) do citizens create their political understanding?

Unfortunately, the political science arsenal of rapid response to these provocative and crucial questions is fragmented, incomplete, and limited. It would be a research effort in itself to pull together the bits and pieces of scientific insights from our different fields to provide a complete overview of our state of the art on these questions. What follows is a partial summary from the perspective of participation studies. The summary offers a few initial thoughts based on survey results in the field of political participation and touches briefly on empirical work from the field of social movements, transnational advocacy campaigning, and cyberactivism.

Following the liberal democratic survey tradition, most studies classified under the heading of political participation scholarship use the simple measures of political interest and factual political knowledge that were briefly discussed above. Important studies in political science find high levels of factual political knowledge and political interest among citizens who still trust parties (and acknowledge that it is not possible to determine the causal direction), clear intergeneration differences in factual political knowledge and political interest (with the older generation as more knowledgeable and interested), fewer "newshounds" (as measured by a question on the need to get all kind of news every day) among younger people, a higher use of comedy shows and late night television as a source of political information among people thirty years and younger[13], and a disturbing relationship between the decline in social capital and declines in traditional political participation (including severe declines in membership in

[11] Different deliberative theorists represent this thought. Among them are Joshua Cohen and Bernard Manin. For a discussion see Teorell, 2003.
[12] For an excellent overview of the decline debate see Stolle and Hooghe 2004.
[13] I want to thank Gregg Bucken-Knapp, Karlstad University, for giving me information on this interesting development.

organizations and parties) (See Holmberg, 1999; Petersson et al., 1998, 55; Putnam, 2000, 36, 45, 222; Pew Research Center, 2004).

Other surveys and qualitative studies do not dispute these findings. However, they tell us that citizens are less authority-bound than in the past, when people believed more (trusted) what authorities and experts (hierarchical organizations) told them and what they were taught by their parents and in schools (Petersson, Westholm & Blomberg, 1989, Ch. 6; Inglehart, 1999). Although we should not romanticize the historical significance of the "bowling together culture" for politics, the impression from scholarship is that political information and political understanding were to large degree prepackaged and served to members. They were "givens" and not DIY-activities as they increasingly appear to be today. Citizens from the same social class or associational membership tended to hold the same opinions, viewpoints, world view, and political understanding (See Micheletti, 2003, 24-34; Sörbom, 2002, 103-112; Bowman & Willis, 2003, 50). Today, as concluded by Ronald Inglehart, people who generally "are becoming increasingly critical of hierarchical authority, are also becoming increasingly resistant to authoritarian government, more interested in political life, and more apt to play an active role in politics" (Inglehart, 1999, 236). A Swedish study of young people illuminates the relationship between system criticism and interest in political life. It shows that, while a growing number of young Swedes say that they were not interested in politics (which most likely means parliamentary politics to them[14]), almost all state that in order to affect social affairs they have been involved or could consider being involved in boycotting (a form of political participation using the market as its arena for politics and targeting multinational corporations more than national governments) (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2003, 12, 162 ff, 171). When seen together, these studies generate a number of titillating questions about political information communication, political interest, political understanding, and political participation. They are listed below.

Political scientists may agree that citizens today are more critical and cynical about politics. But we tend to disagree about the consequences of criticism and cynicism for politics. Some scholars—and most prominently Robert Putnam—draw the conclusion that a growing number of Western people are increasingly alienated and "turned-off" from societal concerns. They care less about politics and are less interested in seeking political understanding. They just do not care one way or the other about politics. Others argue that it is important to take a multi-dimensional view of politics and consider other issues, arenas, forms, and tools of political participation. When seen together, this latter group of scholars concludes that Westerners are elite-challenging and that political participation can be found in areas other than the representative democratic parliamentary system (see Norris, 1999, 2002; Stolle & Hooghe 2003, 2005). As well-articulated by Ulrich Beck (1997, 101), "[w]hat appeared to be a 'loss of consensus', an 'unpolitical retreat to private life', 'a new inwardness' or 'caring for emotional wounds' in the old understanding of politics can, when seen from the other side, represent the struggle for a new dimension of politics." Questing for new political understanding may be very important in this regard, and "political life" (as illustrated by the survey of young Swedes) seems to have a different connotation than in the past. Thus, according to this view and following Habermas, the apparent rise in communicative political participation may well be an effect of epochal change (globalization, individualization, information communication technology, and risk society) that leads citizens to seek and create new forums for rational-critical debate (for a discussion see Salter, 2003).

There is a number of exciting research topics here just waiting for us to craft them. One is to study *if* critical, reflexive, elite-challenging people are also those citizens who actively pursue political information and political understanding and who—like Al Gore, Niklas Nordström, Phil Noble, and others less well known—are leaders of participatory journalism and strategic communication.[15] In the era of political distrust,

[14] Hans Zetterberg, emeritus sociology professor, and I discussed the meaning of the survey question on "political interest" after a seminar he held within the International Social Science Seminar series, International Graduate Programme, Stockholm University, spring 2004.

[15] The 2nd Karlstad Seminar on Studying Political Action (2006) included an interesting paper with findings pointing in this direction. It was W. Lance Bennett's paper entitled "Digital Media and Protest

where do critical citizens collect their information, and how do they develop their political understanding? In short, where does their quest for political understanding take them? Perhaps these curious citizens pay attention to critical democratic networks and movements that challenge the shape of politics globally and use unconventional formats to communicate their ideas. Or perhaps they use conventional media and established political organizations in a different way (as touchstones) than trusting, non-critical, or alienated citizens. Has established politics—political parties, unions, and other representatives of old civil society—become an arena for retrieving but not processing and interpreting politically-relevant information for a growing number of citizens? Another important research task is, of course, to study how uncritical and politically inactive citizens understand politics and where these groups of citizens receive their political information and communicate their political understanding.

Results from studies on the market as an arena for politics offer a bit of assistance in pondering this laundry list of questions. They show that political consumers have a much more positive view of global protest movements than non-political consumers (that is, adults who have not boycotted or "buycotted" during a twelve month period). However, when asked where they seek and find information on products for political consumerist actions, they at least in Sweden rate Internet low and (conventional) mass media high. The study did not directly asked if elite-challenging global protest movements and media venues were a source of information or how political consumers develop their understanding of "politics behind products." But this research shows that part of the answer may lie in their involvement in networks and civil society associations, many of which are greener and more global in orientation (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005a).[16] Political consumers in the Scandinavian countries are also more interested in politics (using the standard survey measure) and all-round politically active in a variety of forms of political participation. They are also more highly educated than non-political consumers. Interestingly, in Denmark and Sweden they show lower levels of trust in multinational corporations and higher trust of consumer institutions than non-political consumers. Norwegian and Danish—but not Swedish—political consumers still have high trust in national political institutions (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005; Tobiasen, 2005; Strømnes, 2005). Unfortunately, the studies do not focus on trust in media actors and institutions.

A thought-provoking example of a critical, reflexive political consumer who decided to communicate politics in his own DIY way is Jonah Peretti, a former MIT graduate student working at the MIT media lab.[17] He decided to test Nike's new electronic customer service "iD program" by ordering a pair of customized shoes over Internet with the name "sweatshop" on them. (The word "sweatshop" is the master frame for the global social justice movement's focus on outsourced production in the Third World.) His order and the ensuing email exchange with the Nike customer service created a culture jam that expressed his and other citizens' views of Nike's use of outsourced labor to manufacture its shoes. A part of his Nike email exchange reads: "Your web site advertises that the NIKE iD program is 'about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.' I share Nike's love of freedom and personal expression. /…/ My personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order." Peretti collected his email exchange with Nike and communicated it via email to a dozen or so friends, who forwarded it to others and an estimated 11.4 million people around the globe. He began to receive email responses (3,655 emails over a four month period). He appeared on American national television and was interviewed in Swedish and other European newspapers. Peretti became a media celebrity, wrote magazine articles, gave lectures, and

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Mobilization: How Individual Level Political Networks Can Affect the Speed and Scale of Collective Action."

[16] This research has been financed by the Swedish Council of Research and includes Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle as its main scholars.

[17] Dietlind Stolle and I have analyzed the Nike Email Exchange as an interesting form of global engagement in politics. Preliminary results can be found in Stolle and Michelett, 2005.

built a blog about his Nike experience (see Peretti with Micheletti, 2003). Currently he works on contagious media and communication and presents himself as "/…/ director of R&D at the Eyebeam center for art and technology in New York City. Peretti co-created FundRace.org, a popular website that promotes transparency by allowing anyone to see the political contributions of their neighbors, friends and coworkers; ForwardTrack, an innovative social network platform that tracks and maps the diffusion of email forwards, political calls-to-action, and online petitions; and reBlog, open source blogging software for people who prefer curating content to writing original posts" (Peretti, 2005).

Thus, research on critical democracy, counter globalization, risk society, reflexivity, and political consumerism (which includes a good portion of political communication scholarship[18]) contributes a final political science response on the increasing importance of communication as political participation. These academic fields are showing that innovative politics (new problems, arenas, actors, tools, and issues) helps explain why information communication and political understanding are now mighty forms of political participation.[19] Considerable information and communication is necessary to construct a political understanding that supplants or corrects such disaffections in democracies as lower voter turn-out, flight from political parties, unions and many civil society associations, government and media untrustworthiness, and the inability of representative parliamentary politics to deal with globalized political problems in an effective way.

Communication of new political problems and the quest for political understanding is creating politics anew. This development is represented by a single individual's attempt through Internet and other means to understand her political life context that involve very everyday, local, and global problems in a variety of settings. The list of problems is long and includes environmental and social justice "politics behind products" offered for sale by retailers, problems with education resources in local schools, multicultural workplace issues, effects of the tsunami disaster and the Katrina storm on animal life, tourist risks associated with terrorism in British subways, effects of industrialization on global warming, and decisions to make on choosing which candidate and party to support at election time. It is also illustrated by new communities that communicate as a way of working through identity struggles, people who communicate interchangeably to create new interests, solidarities, networks, lifestyles, and imagined communities as well as discussion groups seeking and providing information to convince others that a particular issue is an important political problem.

These efforts are examples of purposeful political participation which not only posit new ideas but change the social relations in which the public discourse is embedded. For groups and social movements, "…intervening in public discourse and restructuring the surrounding social relations are not just intertwined activities, but two sides of the same activities" (Medearis, 2004, 55f). Communication tells us what is political. It is political power, and better communication strategies win the discursive battle over the definition of politics. Communication also decides our political identities. It is doing, and doing requires a considerable portion of political understanding and strategic information communication. This is one way for a political scientist to interpret the sociological and social movement scholarly claim about the "ontological force" of communication.

Sketching a Study on the Quest for Political Understanding

The importance of communication in politics today offers a challenge to political scientists to ponder critically how we define our concept of politics and study political participation. The call for rethinking the meaning and location of political life and participation is not a new one, as witnessed by the force of feminist, environmental,

[18] See, for instance, W. Lance Bennett's work on permanent campaigns and media markets that can be found on-line at depts.washington.edu/bennett/about-works.html.

[19] This standpoint can be pieced together from the Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2005; Amoore, 2005; Falk, 1998; Ho, Barber and Khondker, 2002.

multicultural, and postcolonial scholarship on our discipline. Our research philosophy on communication is clearly changing. Political scientists are now focusing on noise, nearness, and networks in their studies of political participation. Communication thus plays a more central role in political science research. We (or well, to be honest, a growing number of us) have opened up our concept of politics to include the marketplace and other "subpolitical" arenas for politics (Holzer & Sørensen, 2001). Communicative networks of various kinds have been spotlighted as essential for community-building, political identities, and the creation of politics (See Sapiro, no date, for historical examples). Social movement and media scholars as well as political philosophers focus on emotional displays, cognitive framing, narration, and discourse (e.g., Goodwin, Jasper & Polleta 2001). Today we are taking communication and "talk-building" seriously as a form of political participation in its own right.

Studying information communication and political understanding as political participation questions the assumptions of liberal, participative, and deliberative democratic theory. It asks why the purpose of participation *must be* interest representation and political influence and why politics *must be* confined to the representative parliamentary sphere. Neither does it consider democratic legitimacy as the main consequence of participation. A research design with this focus finds political life in a multitude of spheres where institutions and actors engage in the allocation of values in (global) society; communication is one such value.

Designing research on communicative actions and thirsting for political understanding from a participation perspective involves a number of theoretical and empirical research considerations. This final section begins to discuss them in a very initial form and offers a promise to continue this work in the near future. For starters, the term political understanding must be given a conceptual definition and not just—as is the case of enlightened understanding in Robert Dahl's and Amy Gutman's work—an important procedural one referring to equal opportunities for learning, education, and deliberating political issues (Dahl, 1979; Gutman, 1987). Conceptualizing political understanding is crucial for empirical studies wanting to go beyond the factual political knowledge, political interest, and civic skills questions that have dominated survey research. Rather, political understanding may entail communicative actions of "figuring things out," putting political puzzle pieces together in a cohesive frame, and getting a good cognitive and emotional (intuitive) grip on politics and life politics. These actions may, moreover, involve awareness of problems and other people, understanding relationships between facts, contextualizing events, relating self-interest to other-interest, taking in knowledge, processing experience as well as actively using new cognitive and emotional inputs to shape values, formulate political viewpoints, create political identity, and construct political understanding. Communicating reflexively with oneself and others may lead to "political maturity" and "life political" identity, meaning finding one's voice and formulating one's own opinion or judgment.[20] In this view, communication is political empowerment and community-building (White, 2004).

A theoretical and empirical analytical penetration of political communication and the questing for political understanding may end up arguing that the relationship between political knowledge, political understanding, and political participation is completely opposite from the one postulated in conventional political participation studies. The analytical conclusion may, surprisingly, be that conventionally-defined political participation is a precursor and prerequisite for political knowledge and political understanding. In all fairness, it should be mentioned that survey analysts are, actually, open to this interpretation.[21] A second research topic highlights the relationship between political communication and reflexivity. It would seem that a broadened and globally

[20] For Immanuel Kant, enlightenment is one's emergence from a self-imposed immaturity or the incapacity to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another (Schmidt, 1996).

[21] Sören Holmberg (1999, 111) writes in his chapter in *Critical Citizens* that the direction of causality between political interest/political knowledge and trust in parties and politicians cannot be determined. Jørgen Goul Andersen and colleagues (2000) discuss the "inverse" relationship between political interest and political participation. Similar ideas can also be found in Sidney Verba's work. The question is why these scholars have not given more attention to problematizing this relationship.

contextualized political understanding plays a central role in reflexive society because critical citizens most likely double check (falsify) information provided by established authorities (Delanty, 2000; Beck, Bonss & Lau, 2003).

An interesting departure point for all kinds of political science—theoretical, comparative, case study, and survey research—is the importance of trustworthy political institutions for political information and citizens' political understanding. Given this, it seems relevant to study whether declining levels of political and media trust and declining levels of involvement in conventional ideological information-interpreting organizations (like political parties and unions) have effects on contemporary political understanding. Do we understand politics differently today than in the past, and if so, what are the differences, how widespread are they, and how can they be explained? Do citizens who distrust political institutions search elsewhere for information and information interpretation in their quest for political understanding? How important are (global) networks and (transnational) friendship circles for them? Is there a "subpolitical" political understanding that differs from the "parliamentary sphere" variety held by trusting citizens? Can it be that in conflict-ridden times citizens consciously and increasingly avoid opportunities to communicate politically because it is not "polite" to talk and disagree about politics (Eliasoph, 1998)? Have political communicative interactions become politically incorrect in some democratic societies? Also, what happens to political understanding in undemocratic, dark ages as illustrated by the clamp down on the public sphere in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, the red scare in the United States in the 1950s, and the abandonment of free speech and press in Soviet times? And, if empirical materials are available, it would be interesting to add a historical perspective to the general research agenda (see Sapiro, no date, for ideas).

To begin to probe the subject matter on the individual level, questions about the current state of citizens' political understanding can be developed for interviewing purposes. Here the ambition is to go beyond the survey scan of media consumption and political facts. Interesting items to attempt to probe with the help of surveys and in-depth interviews are how individual citizens develop their political understanding, where they seek information on different political matters, how much time they devote to it, and how they assess (trust) different information providers and information interpreters (political parties, civil society associations, the media, corporations, global networks, and so on). These questions should be studied in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, social class, and other usual socio-economic indicators. Important research issues also concern the impact of the processes of globalization and individualization for citizens' political understanding. Both processes imply that citizens must juggle their lives in situations of unintended consequences, fragmentation, incomplete knowledge, contradictions, multiple choices, and risk-taking. Does this mean that political understanding is a more difficult citizen task today than in the past? Has political understanding (like other forms of participation) also become an individualized—and active DIY—political involvement on the part of a growing number of citizens? Are citizens who are more inclined towards individualized collective action rather than collectivist collective action (participation through membership organizations)[22] more apt to use DIY opportunities to craft their own political understanding, and does their political understanding differ substantively from other citizens? Can it, therefore, be that communicative political participation is more important for certain citizens (those less oriented toward the sphere of representative politics) than others?

A final point considers ideas about political responsibility, a central issue for all political study. Responsibility-taking is playing a key role in the normative theory of cosmopolitan citizenship and emerging discourse on sustainable citizenship because it views citizens as embedded in wider issues of responsibility for nature, unborn generations, and in a variety of settings representing a diversity of private and public spheres (Delanty, 2000; Micheletti & Stolle, 2005b). Responsibility-taking in the forms of leadership's accountability to citizens is important for normative liberal democratic theory. Perhaps an empirical study will show a need to distinguish theoretically between different kinds of political understanding, with cosmopolitan (or sustainable citizenship)

[22] For a discussion of these terms, see Micheletti, 2003.

political understanding as one alternative and representative political understanding as another.

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A long laundry list of half-baked but exciting research questions has been generated by the discussion of information communication and political understanding as political participation. Some of the questions should be developed more fully and can hold their own as research projects. Other questions should probably be cast by the wayside or at best consolidated and reformulated into more concise research concerns. But whatever the status of the laundry list of questions, exchanging ideas—communicating and intellectually jamming—is important to help craft this new research field. A good starting point for discussing new creative research ideas is over a bowl of soup or salad for lunch in the department's pantry, when one takes a break from weeding the garden plot, and while networking in international, European, and Swedish conference settings. Writing a chapter for a commemorative book for a colleague who has dedicated her life to the quest for scientific understanding by questioning the validity of theoretical models and research findings is one way to see if new research ideas have merit. We learn from communicating research with each other. Diane Sainsbury has achieved—albeit silently for many Swedish political scientists—international prominence as a Swedish political scientist. She has dedicated herself to academic development by actively attending international conferences, leaving no research stone unturned, listening astutely to criticism, and focusing herself on her international publications. Her commitment to her research is astounding. Few scholars have come professionally as far as Diane Sainsbury, a role model for all scholars domestically and internationally to contemplate and admire.

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