Content Analysis in the Research Field of Political Communication: The Self-Presentation of Political Actors

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1   Introduction

Political communication is a very wide-ranging, complex, and fluid subfield (see, e.g., Blumler 2017). In a broad sense, political communication can be understood as the central mechanism in the articulation of political interests, their aggregation and implementation, and the legitimation of political decisions (Donges and Jarren 2017)[1]. From this perspective, politics and political communication are inextricably linked (Blumler 2017; Donges and Jarren 2017; Schulz 2011). Within this broad field, this chapter focuses on the *self-presentational side* of politics, more specifically the *self-presentation of political actors.* In the process of political communication, the *self-presentation* of politics can be differentiated on the one hand from the *production* of politics and on the other hand from its *media representation* (Esser 2013; Meyer and Hinchman 2002). The logic of self-presentation prevails in the phases of interest articulation, preference mobilization, problem definition, the communication of policies, and the justification of outcomes (Esser 2013). In contrast to mediated political messages that are selected, filtered, and shaped by journalistic gatekeepers (i.e. political

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[1] For other definitions see, for example, Graber and Smith (2005); Reinemann (2014); Schulz (2008).

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news coverage), the self-presentation of political actors relates mostly to messages that proceed directly from the source—political actors—to the intended recipients (e.g., in the form of political advertising, party broadcasts, social media messages, and other online campaigns) (see Blumler 2017, for this distinction). However, in *hybrid media systems* (Chadwick 2017) political actors' self-presentation not only aims at circumventing traditional gatekeepers but also at gaining attention in the mass media, for example by way of political PR (Strömbäck and Kiousis 2011) or strategic news management (Strömbäck and Esser 2017). Thus, political communication by political actors has overlaps with the research fields of Politics/Policy Coverage and Election Coverage. Because trends in political communication often crystallize in election campaigns, the greatest overlap exists with the field of Election Campaigning Communication. Due to these overlaps and the breadth of the field, in the following this chapter will focus on a few selected aspects that have gained attention in the last few years such as issue ownership, personalization, populist communication, and self-presentational styles.

Content analysis is perhaps the most widely used method in the field of political communication (Graber and Smith 2005; Neuendorf and Kumar 2017). Historically, the analysis of political actors' communication can be traced back to Aristotle, who distinguished between three fundamental modes of persuasion in political actors' speeches: *Ethos, Pathos,* and *Logos* (see also Sheafer et al. 2014). Also in more recent times, political speeches have played an important role for the analysis of political actors' self-presentation, especially from a more qualitative or discourse analytical approach (e.g., Hawkins 2009; van Dijk 1993, 2015; Wodak 2013). In the field of political communication, studies of politicians' self-presentation have often investigated television news (e.g., Bucy and Grabe 2007), debates (e.g., Boydstun et al. 2013), talk-shows (e.g., Baum 2005; Schütz 1992, 1995), party or election manifestos (e.g., Merz et al. 2016), press releases (e.g., Dalmus et al. 2017), or political advertising (e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al. 1994). With an increasingly interventionist approach of journalistic news, politicians have looked for other self-presentational communication channels that offer them the opportunity to appeal to their voters directly with low journalistic interference (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In recent years, studies of political actors' self-presentation have increasingly focused on digital platforms such as websites (Stanyer 2008), or social media (e.g., Bene 2017; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2017; Golbeck et al. 2010; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018; Kruikemeier 2014; Magin et al. 2017). Moreover, in hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2017), politicians increasingly use a mix of various media outlets for self-presentational purposes.

2   Common research designs and combinations of methods

As in other fields, a broad variety of research strategies and designs are used in content analyses of political actors' self-presentation. Although *quantitative content analysis* remains the dominant method in political communication (Neuendorf and Kumar

2017), *qualitative content analyses* (e.g., Engesser et al. 2017; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017) as well as *linguistic approaches* (e.g., Chilton 2006) and *critical discourse analyses* (e.g., van Dijk 1993; Wodak 2013) are also common in research on the self-presentation of politicians—especially for studies that focus on rhetoric.

Empirical studies often investigate one single communication channel or platform such as political speeches, press releases, party manifestos, talk shows, advertisements, websites, Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. Yet, scholars increasingly compare political actors' self-presentation across different media or platforms (Bode and Vraga 2017). In the tradition of agenda-building research (Lang and Lang 1981), analyses of self-presentational channels are often combined with content analyses of political news coverage to investigate which messages or issues of political actors are picked up by the mass media (e.g., Ernst et al. 2019; Seethaler and Melischek 2019).

Researchers in the field of political communication often apply content analyses in combination with other methods. Studies combine *manual* and *automated content analysis* (e.g., Eberl et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2013), *semi-automated content analysis* (e.g., Ernst et al. 2017), and/or *social network analysis* (e.g., Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). Content analysis is also frequently combined with *expert surveys or interviews* with political actors to investigate the motives or strategies behind their self-presentational communication (e.g., Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Karlsen and Enjolras 2016; Magin et al. 2017). Furthermore, content analyses have been combined with *panel- or cross-sectional survey data* to analyze communication effects, for example on public opinion formation or public attitudes (e.g., de Vreese et al. 2017). Lately, scholars have applied content analysis to *digital trace data,* for example, to investigate the effects of specific communication content or style elements of social media posts on user reactions in the form of popularity cues (e.g., Bene 2017; Eberl et al. 2020; Heiss et al. 2019; Jost et al. 2020; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018; Staender et al. 2019).

3   Main constructs employed in content analyses of political communication by political actors

Content analyses on the self-presentation of political actors have not only investigated diverse communication channels but also diverse types of actors and constructs. Whereas many content analyses investigate the communication of parties or other organizational actors, studies on the self-presentation of political actors often focus on individual politicians or specifically on political leaders (e.g., Bracciale and Martella 2017; Davis and Taras 2020). In substantive terms, the field is very broad. Despite this diversity, several commonly analyzed constructs can be distilled from the field. However, it is important to emphasize that the following constructs are a small selection of aspects that are commonly analyzed with regard to the content (*what?*), the style (*how?*), and the rhetoric of political actors' self-presentation.

- *Policies or **issues** as message:* Focusing on the content (*what?*) that political actors communicate, one major goal of political actors' communication is to place their issues on the political agenda (Strömbäck and Esser 2017). Thus, studies often investigate what issues parties or individual politicians focus on in their self-presentation. Studies have found that political actors often focus on issues owned by their party, for example in parties' press releases (Dalmus et al. 2017) or politicians' social media use (Peeters et al. 2019). Furthermore, owned issues can induce social media reactions (Staender et al. 2019) and press coverage (Dalmus et al. 2017) (see, e.g., Walgrave et al. 2015 for a general conceptualization of issue ownership). In contrast, political actors can ride the wave by emphasizing issues that currently seem to be important to citizens, for example according to opinion polls or media coverage (Dalmus et al. 2017). Whereas issue ownership is usually linked to parties, an additional issue specialization can be identified for individual politicians, through which they can differentiate themselves from other politicians within the same party (Peeters et al. 2019). Studies of agenda building have compared the occurrence of issues in channels where political actors have high control to journalistic outlets where political actors have less control (Harder et al. 2017; Kiousis et al. 2006; Seethaler and Melischek 2019).

- *Person as message:* Instead of issues, political actors may focus on their *person or character as message*, for example by way of image or event management (Strömbäck and Esser 2017). It has been argued that there is an increasing personalization, meaning that the political weight of individual actors has increased, while the centrality of political groups or issues have declined over time (e.g., Adam and Maier 2010; Sheafer et al. 2014). This has mostly been studied with regard to politicians' appearance in the news media (e.g., Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; van Aelst et al. 2012; van Santen and van Zoonen 2010). However, these concepts can be applied similarly to the analysis of politicians' self-presentation. Several content analyses have shown that political actors' communication on social media often focuses on individual politicians' competencies and professional activities (individualization) or their private persona (privatization) (e.g., Golbeck et al. 2010; Kruikemeier 2014; Metz et al. 2019).

- *Function of messages:* Studies have investigated different functions of political actors' messages on various platforms. Especially with regard to social media, studies have differentiated for example between messages that focus on information, mobilization, or interaction (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016; Lilleker et al. 2011; Magin et al. 2017).

- *Populist messages:* Populism has been one of the major trending subjects in the field of political communication in recent years (see, e.g., de Vreese et al. 2018; Rooduijn 2019). Content analyses have analyzed the extent to which political actors communicate populist ideas or populist key messages (i.e., anti-elitism, people-centrism, sovereignty, and sometimes also the exclusion of specific social groups) across various self-presentational communication channels such as talk

shows or social media (Blassnig et al. 2018; Bos and Brants 2014; Cranmer 2011; Ernst et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2019a, b; Zulianello et al. 2018). These studies have identified several factors that drive populism in political actors' self-presentation such as party characteristics (e.g. extreme ideology, opposition parties, challenger parties, backbenchers) and characteristics of the communication channel (e.g., publicity, high audience orientation, mass or network media logic). Studies have also found that populist messages by political actors may contribute to high numbers of user reactions on social media (Blassnig et al. 2020; Bobba 2018; Jost et al. 2020). Populist key messages can be distinguished from populist styles (Ernst et al. 2019a; see also below). However, some authors (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007) speak of populism as a "political communication style" but use analytical constructs that refer to similar content-related elements. Other authors mix populist ideas and style elements (e.g., Moffitt 2016).

- *Self-presentational styles:* A large body of research analyzes *how* political actors communicate by differentiating various *communication styles.* For example, Schütz (1992, 1995) has differentiated between assertive, offensive, protective, and defensive self-presentational styles and compared politicians' self-presentation on talk shows to that of entertainers and experts. Current commonly investigated communication styles include emotionality, negativity, dramatization, intimization, simplification, or humour (Bene 2017; Heiss et al. 2019; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018; Staender et al. 2019). These constructs are reminiscent of journalistic reporting styles but are applied similarly in content analyses of political actors' self-presentation on various channels, specifically on social media. In this sense, these styles are sometimes seen as indicators for political actors' adaptation to *news values*, *mass media logic,* or *network media logic* (Bene 2017; Staender et al. 2019; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010). Other studies have investigated similar categories as **populist communication styles** (Bos and Brants 2014; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Ernst et al. 2019a; Ernst et al. 2019b; Wettstein et al. 2019). These constructs measuring communication style can be distinguished from contructs analyzing the content or substance (*what?*) of messages (see, e.g., Ernst et al. 2019a for this distinction with regard to populist communication). However, in content analyses, communication styles are still mostly assessed in relation to the content (i.e. the written or spoken word). Thus, the boundary between substance and style is not always clear in empirical studies. For example, Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw's (2018) distinction of pseudo-discursive, mobilizing, emotional, and entertaining styles combines both content and style-related elements. Metz et al. (2019) also integrate content-related (e.g., references to professional activities) and style-related (e.g. emotional expression and appeals) aspects in their operationalization of self-personalization (see also above).
- *Rhetoric:* Several studies investigate the rhetoric or rhetorical skills of political actors. These analyses are traditionally rooted in linguistic or discourse analysis and, thus,

typically examined using qualitative content analysis (van Dijk 1993; Wodak 2013). However, rhetorical constructs such as ethos (source credibility), pathos (emotional appeals), and logos (logical appeals) (Holtz-Bacha et al. 1994) or rhetorical fallacies (Blassnig et al. 2019) have also been investigated in quantitative content analyses of politicians' self-presentation. Yet, rhetorical theory has rather scarcely been incorporated in (quantitative) analyses of political actors' self-presentation in the field of political communication, despite of a growing understanding of the importance of rhetorical strategies (Sheafer et al. 2014).

4   Research desiderata

A major challenge for future research is to broaden its scope by following more comparative designs. Although comparative approaches across different countries have increased (e.g., Blassnig et al. 2018; Ernst et al. 2019b; Esser and Pfetsch 2017; Koc-Michalska et al. 2016; Lilleker et al. 2011; Zulianello et al. 2018), they are mostly small-N comparative analyses and largely focus on Western countries. Comparisons across time are still relatively rare, although they would be crucial to determine changes in the self-presentation of political actors. Moreover, future research should aim at multi-channel comparisons and incorporate both newer digital and more established platforms to account for hybrid media systems.

A majority of the studies focus on election campaigns. This is understandable as elections can serve as prototypical events in which current trends in political communication crystallize (Esser and Strömbäck 2013, p. 308). However, future research should also investigate political actors' self-presentation in non-election periods and compare election and non-election contexts. Furthermore, previous research has focused mainly on the national political level, whereas the supranational (e.g., Holtz-Bacha 2020) and subnational levels (e.g., Tenscher 2013) have been severely neglected.

One area that has been neglected in this chapter are visual aspects, which generally have been neglected in political communication for a long time (Schill 2012). With the rise of social media, especially of visual communication platforms such as Instagram, images and visual categories have gained interest in content analyses (e.g., Filimonov et al. 2016; Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017; Muñoz and Towner 2017; Towner and Muñoz 2018). Yet, existing studies have often remained exploratory (e.g., Filimonov et al. 2016; Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017).

Another major challenge are content analyses of large-scale textual data sets (e.g., Muddiman et al. 2019), which have gained traction especially with regard to digital communication channels. These data increasingly require more computational approaches to content analysis. Generally, research on political actors' online self-presentation remains methodologically challenging, due to a lack of access to data. For example, the self-representation of political actors in personalized ads (e.g. on Facebook) has hardly been researched so far (e.g., Anstead et al. 2018).

Finally, as in other fields, a more thorough sharing and re-application of research instruments would be helpful. Many of the studies measure similar analytical constructs with various operationalizations and instruments, making it difficult to compare their results. Thus, going forward a more detailed publication of codebooks and data (e.g. in online appendices) would allow for a more transparent and sustainable cumulative development of the field and for a more thorough assessment of how the self-presentation of political actors has evolved across different contexts.

2. Relevant Variables in DOCA—Database of Variables for Content Analysis

Political issues: https://doi.org/10.34778/4a
Populist communication – content and style elements: https://doi.org/10.34778/4b

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