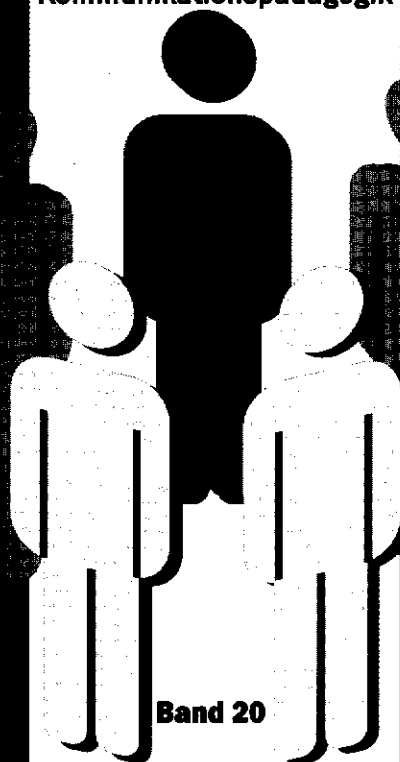


Henner Barthel
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

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Gary W. Selnow

The Vanishing Voter:
How One-way Communication Damaged Democracy and
How Two-way Communication Isn't Fixing It

“Democracy does not place endless faith in the capacity of individuals to govern themselves, but it affirms with Machiavelli that the multitudes will on the whole be as wise or wiser than princes, and with Theodore Roosevelt that ‘the majority of plain people will day in and day out make fewer mistakes in governing themselves than another smaller body of men will make in trying to govern them.’” (B. Barber 1984, *Strong Democracy*. p. 151. Berkeley: University of California Press.)

Growing Irrelevance of the People

It is curious that the lion's share of contemporary writing about political communication focuses on the messages from the politicians to the people and not the other way around. As a result, we all know what the politicians are saying, but hardly anyone looks at what the people are thinking except in the most superficial way. In a democracy, where it is said the people reign, you might think the analysts would pay more attention to how voters' interests are communicated to elected officials. Given the media's preoccupation with office holders, you would be forgiven if you jumped to the conclusion that the politicians are the foundations of democracies and not the people themselves.

In-depth studies of public thinking on significant national issues are rare. That is the problem, and that is one of the driving concerns of this paper. Where is the analysis of the voters' advice to elected officials and candidates about the course of Western democracies? We have become the unwitting disciples of elected officials. Our elected officials' utterances are examined for meaning, hidden and overt. A "good morning," from one Senator or MP to another will be analyzed for clues on upcoming votes. We read political speeches as though they were stone tablets, and yet we hardly notice what the people have to say.

Media coverage of the polls is about as close as anyone gets to examining the voters' beliefs and attitudes, and while the numbers, charts and graphs profess a rigorous voter analysis; they are almost always paper-thin representations of population views. Polls may accurately reflect respondents' beliefs of the issues at hand, but it is the selection of those issues and the multiple-choice assortment of answers that render most polls little more than guideposts for campaign strategies. Increasingly, we recognize that opinion polls are weather vanes – quite useful for top-of-the-head reactions – but assuredly not the digging-down to where attitudes and values are nourished.

The thinness of polls leads us to ask pivotal questions: Where is the public voice in the political dialogue of Western nations, and how have these celebrated democracies allowed the communications of the politicians to trump the messages of the people? How is it that political communication in many countries has evolved into a one-way flow of information, and how is it that academics have accepted this without raising a red flag? Ironically, much of what passes as public opinion is nothing more than the ideas of our leaders, multiplied by media, picked up by the people and parroted back to the politicians, as if the ideas were their own. This is not public opinion; it is national ventriloquism.

It is inevitable that the views of elected officials get more public attention than thoughts of the masses. It is easier for the press to cover the words of a select few instead of the words of the many; moreover, making sense of public views is difficult. Our pluralistic publics, unprecedented in their variance and size, come at every issue from every angle, which is why studies that characterize public sentiments on even the simplest matters are sure to miss the eddies as they chart the public mainstream.

In other words, no analysis of public attitudes can reflect reality any more accurately than a snapshot can depict a train of events. Worse, the labor and time required to do a proper job is enough to frighten off most news organizations. The default lies in the reductive nature of polls, and in the inadequate way polls are covered and reported.

What the coverage of the public lacks is sizzle. There is no public “face” to splash across the front page or to run on the evening news short of a mob scene or the mugs of a few people-on-the-street singled out to exemplify the thoughts of everyone else. These anecdotes have a limited theatrical value because they are not very flashy. From the perspective of news editors, polling statistics are even worse, they are not only cold but impersonal, and “personality,” defined as color and charm, is the only way they know how to hold an audience.

Politicians Grab the Spotlight

Cover a politician, though, and you are on to something newsworthy – no, let’s call it *media*-worthy. Here the papers and the television networks, especially the networks and their local affiliates, have a subject worthy of the effort. It is so much easier to cover the views of a handful of officials

than it is to cover thoughts of the muddy booted masses. There is a singularity of opinion, i.e., this MP's or this senator's take on a subject represents just that personal opinion. Not much interpretation or analysis is necessary as in contrast to saddling someone on the street with the burden of "speaking" for everyone in the voting population.

Reporters give the eager public figure a microphone and a softball question to prime the pump, then up and away with an easy-to-edit answer. The savvy politicians these days are well schooled to generate sound bites that make the reporter's job so much easier. A three-second question and an eight-second answer package nicely into a 30-second clip on the six o'clock news. The simplicity of coverage makes reporting an official's well-articulated view so much more attractive than reporting the messy beliefs of voters.

Besides that, the politicians are entertaining. So many of them have attractive personalities, they speak well; they already have an advocacy base in the audience, all of which makes for good television and catchy reading. The viewers and readers are familiar with the politicians (if only because the media have created the familiarity), so the audiences are primed. Covering the politicians is like telling an ongoing story, each day another installment in the soap opera of Western politics.

The media, therefore, simply by their choices of whom to cover, contribute significantly to the huge disparity in the power to communicate held by elected officials and the people. The politicians' lock on the media provide them with an insurmountable advantage over the voters who, at best, fight the odds at having their letters to the editor published or getting in a few comments on a radio talk show. The opportunities available for voters to communicate with elected officials and even with other voters are exceedingly limited. For all practical purposes, the voter has no real voice in the political dialogue.

Other Communication Forums

What about town meetings, phone calls and letters to the offices of elected officials? Here, voters speak their minds and send their views up line to the politicians. Don't these offer opportunities for voter communication? No, they do not for several reasons. First, look at town meetings.

More often than not, these are media events designed to show the pol rubbing shoulders with the people. The purpose is sizzle not steak. Town meetings are covered by local newspapers, radio and television crews, and do not be surprised to see film clips of these meetings in campaign advertisements. The truth is, elected officials cannot learn much from voters in such forums – the meetings are not even designed for that.

For one thing, they are too infrequent to provide an ongoing assessment of public views. For another, these forums hardly provide an opportunity for meaningful expressions of views. Speakers line up for their few minutes at the microphone, and for complex public issues, this just isn't enough. Time limitations force speakers to condense their views, often to the point of trivializing and distorting them. Even articulate speakers, when forced to run against the clock, have trouble expressing beliefs on complex issues. Imagine the difficulty for average citizens inexperienced at public speaking.

The people who show up at public forums are not a cross-section of the voting public and therefore do not represent the overall views of the community. Usually they are at the extreme ends of the spectrum on any given issue. Besides the zealots, town meetings attract people with extra time on their hands, curiosity seekers and poor souls in search of a free

buffet. Meanwhile, the silent majority – the less-driven 99 percent – stay at home. The point is that town meetings are more about the politicians than the people, they offer limited opportunity to communicate ideas on complex issues and they fail to represent the cross-section of views held by the voting public.

What about voter communication through phone calls and letters to the offices of elected officials? For one, these are narrow channels accessible only to the recipient and not to voters. There is nothing wrong with the elected official getting a message that is invisible to others, but such communications do little to enhance the public dialogue on public matters.

Beyond the limited audience, the problem with letters and calls is that elected officials rarely get them; their staffs get them, and what the staffs do with these messages is key. Usually these communications are reduced to tally marks on a score sheet: Letters for legislation tallied in one column, letters against it tallied in the other column. Discussions, explanations, personal anecdotes and the meaty reasons that constituents offer for their views are discarded as chaff, and that is a pity because they can help elected officials understand not only constituent thinking about specific votes but about matters more broadly of concern to people they are elected to represent.

Failed Promises of the New Communications

The latest channel of voter to official communication is e-mail, and while this has great potential to open the up-line flow of information, sadly that potential has not yet been realized. Make no mistake, e-mail now carries the lion's share of constituent communications, but it is not volume that matters so much as use and impact.¹

The number of e-mail messages has quickly outpaced the volume of letters to elected officials for several reasons. One is that it is easy, addictive and inexpensive. Lots of people concerned about matters of public significance lack sufficient motivation to sit down with a pen and pad to draft a letter so only the most driven voters register their views by post.

E-mail, by contrast, requires a few keystrokes, a short address and it is off to the recipient. Yes, it requires a computer, but those economic and technological thresholds of entry to Internet communication are lowering daily. Most U.S. citizens and increasing numbers of citizens in Western Europe now have regular access to Internet-ready computers.²

Another reason we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of e-mail messages to elected officials is the provocation of organized groups. Often these groups send e-mail messages filled with alarming information that cries for quick and massive response. The messages usually suggest

¹ Congress Online Project reports that the number of emails sent to Congress has more than doubled from 1991 to 2002, with senators receiving as many as 55,000 email messages each month. In 2000, a total of 80 million messages were received. Congress On-line Project, E-mail Overload in Congress Managing a Communications Crisis, <http://www.congressonlineproject.org/email.html>

² A) MSNBC reports (Feb 5, 2002) that 54% of the total U.S. Population is online. B) "The number of worldwide Internet users will surpass 665 million by the end of 2002, according to eTForecasts. The research company estimates that 111 million new Internet users have come online since year-end 2001. Currently, the US has over 160 million Internet users, making it the most online nation in the world. Japan follows with 64.8 million users, while China has 54.5 million. Rounding out the top five online nations in terms of users are Germany and the UK with 30.3 million and 27.1 million users respectively." (eTForecasts, Dec 5, 2002: <http://www.etforecasts.com/pr/pr1202.htm>)

text and offer addresses, which further lowers the participation threshold. To expand the reach of these campaigns, they ask recipients to relay the message to friends and relatives. This expands exponentially the reach and participation in such campaigns.

This is good, right? Well, yes, it increases public participation in public matters and thus expands the democratic base. And yes, people are getting involved. So, if you subscribe to the notion that any voter communication is good voter communication, then you would conclude that mass movements which yield voter e-mail responses are good.

But no, not if you dig a bit deeper. You will soon see that the mass e-mailings are pro forma, tailor-made for the casually involved. Many people forward messages without a genuine regard for the issue. All too often these messages chew like cotton candy – no substance for the receiver, no meaning for the sender. People forward messages to elected officials without real conviction for the cause and little understanding of the issue. So what does their message tell the elected official?

Not much because the sheer magnitude of electronic messages has led government staff to discount them, much to the loss of those who care. Elected officials increasingly put less stock in e-mail messages than they put in snail mail letters or phone calls. It does not take more than a handful of messages with pass-along text to alert the staff that a campaign is on and that senders are the lobbying tools of an interest group. Staff members will sometimes tally the number of messages to get a sense for which interest group has a larger mailing list, but the substance of these messages often slips by unnoticed.

The curse of political e-mail is this: organized campaigns cheapen all e-mail messages – even heartfelt communications from well-meaning constituents who carefully craft a note that they trust will receive serious attention. In our informal survey of congressional offices, we found that e-

mail is viewed as little more than an annoyance by overworked staffs who have little incentive or training to mine the messages for useful information.

That is a pity because e-mail will increasingly become the channel of choice for many voters. Office holders interested in understanding the views of their constituents should examine methods of culling the nuisance messages and making sense of the others. In time, content analysis software will help with this chore. True, the problem of representation will remain because only certain voters, not random samples of them, will send messages. But the ease of sending e-mail will invite greater participation and provide a range of views from a broader base, something now sorely missing from political communication.

At present, communication from voters is limited, and the disparity between the communication channels available to elected officials and to voters is grotesquely distorted. Officials hold all the cards; the mass media, direct mail, town meetings give officials a huge advantage over voters whose voices, by contrast, have become mere whispers in the public dialogue. The information flow is one-way, and consequently political communication has become communication from the top down.

Relevance of the Public Agenda

As the late Washington Post columnist, Meg Greenfield reminded us many years ago, governing is about agenda setting. The president and the Congress identify, and then rank order the national issues. How they arrive at those issues and how they arrange them on the national “to-do” list is central to setting the focus of the nation.

The American public today may hold little sway over the public agenda, but that is not necessarily new, nor is it uniquely an American phenomenon. Giovanni Sartori, an Italian political scientist, argued more than three decades ago that in no democracy have the people substantially impacted the public agenda. The public policy agenda, he says, is set by the leaders, who then bring the finished product to the people. He wrote:

Public opinion assures the success or failure of a policy. But it does not initiate it. The average voter does not act, he reacts. Political decisions are not arrived at by the sovereign people, they are submitted to them. The processes of forming opinion do not start from the people, they pass through them. (Sartori 1967, 77)

Sartori's analysis describes elected officials as persuaders, not listeners. If he is correct, and that remains an open matter, the question stands: how do elected officials ultimately arrive at the public policy agendas? Whom do they listen to? Who influences them? Who bends their ears? In the final analysis, political power derives from communication power. It is allocated to those who are admitted to the conversation. People with the opportunity to communicate with elected officials can alter public agendas, influence votes, affect the allocation of public resources.

The mechanisms of access, while always involving the influence of money and class, are dominated today by cash and lots of it. Much has been written recently about the influence of big business and big labor, so we will skirt the subject here except to note that as money amplifies the voices of the rich, it makes it ever more difficult for average voters to be heard. In the context of agenda setting, average voters are not a significant part of the process by which the agenda is assembled. They have little, if any, access, they have few options for communicating their views to their elected representatives, and consequently they have little influence on the day-to-day operations of democracy, or on its long-term policies. At best,

the power of the vote gives citizens a blunt instrument with which to nudge leaders in one direction or another, but the vote alone is inadequate to communicate specific public views, and therefore to affect much the public agenda and legislative action.³ At best, the vote validates or refutes existing policies.

Citizen Involvement in Democracy

Many people believe election day is ultimately judgment day on the representational style and substance of public officials. This thinking holds that representatives who fail to listen to their constituents or who drift too far from the values held by the voters increase the risk of losing their jobs.

That is a powerful argument, and entirely correct in theory but wrong in practice. It is true voters will throw out elected officials whom they believe no longer represent their best interests, but it is a lot less common than you might think.⁴ Incumbency enjoys a mighty advantage.

Why is this so? For many reasons, including the capacity of office holders to raise money and to use the party structure to their competitive

³ Anecdotes can help make the case that special interests often trump the interests of average citizens. Take the case of privacy rights in California. Opinion polls demonstrate overwhelming public support for a bill (SB773) that would limit the sharing of customer financial data among banks, insurance companies and brokerages, and the selling of data to telemarketers and other third parties. The bill would have required that these institutions notify the customers in clear language that they planned to share or sell this personal information, and then they would have had to obtain the customers express permission to do it. The people overwhelmingly favored the bill, that was evident from polls, e-mails and phone calls to sponsors. Despite such clear, public backing for the legislation, the state legislature, and its governor, Gray Davis, gave in to the financial institutions which were heavy campaign contributors and frequent visitors to state officials and to the governor. Here, elected officials simply thumb their noses at the public.

On the national level, consider the futility of publicly supported legislation on campaign finance reform, environmental restrictions, and medical research matters. The majority public view has been discarded in favor of special interests, usually moneyed interests, that buy their way into the offices of elected officials.

⁴ More than 90 percent of the Members of the U.S. Congress were returned to office in the 2002 election.

advantage. But one of the most significant reasons is the public visibility of office holders. A Member of Congress, MP, or Governor can easily attract media attention, get a minute on the evening news, grab a few headlines. Visibility keeps officials on the public radar, increases their familiarity, shapes their public image, and ultimately contributes to the perception that this official is active and hard at work on the people's business.

The power of incumbency streams from top down communication, but that is where we began this discussion: political communication has come to mean communication from the politicians to the people and not the other way around. Our stated concern was the failure of the people to communicate with elected officials and with other voters. This failure is all the more serious when it is recognized that most contemporary writing on politics ignores public-to-politicians communication and concentrates on the reverse – the contemporary practice and study of political communication which is the “talkdown” from government to the people.

Postscript: The Internet to the Rescue?

The twentieth century gave us radio, television, teletype, telephones, faxes and other personal and mass media. It was a period of extraordinary contributions to public communication, and that was even before the Internet came along in the final decade. The Internet, a Swiss army knife of public media, does what all the other media do with sound, text and pictures, but it has one feature unknown to all the others: interactivity. Two-way communication allows receivers at home to send information upstream, to send messages back to the sender. Two-way communication allows people to communicate directly with their elected officials and to

communicate among themselves to form groups and coalitions across great distances, something never before possible. The Net carries the voices of the voters and it enables a thousand Lilliputians to equal the mass of a giant. The Net is custom made for democracies under assault because it can restore balance to the scales that have tilted heavily in favor of the political class.

The sad truth is, the Internet has not achieved this potential, not yet. Campaigns run Websites, media post political stories, political watchdogs service small bands of aficionados on the Web and through e-mail, but widespread political usage among the voting public has failed to materialize. At first, analysts assumed it would take a critical mass with Internet access before we could expect the public to engage in the political discussion. Now, with more than half of the populations of many Western nations plugged in, that still has not happened. People shop, check the weather, peek at the peep shows and send greetings cards, but few engage in political dialogue with each other or meaningfully with their elected leaders. They have the way but not the will.

Maybe the spirit of democracy has been wrung from the body politic, which has resigned to its impotence in political matters. Maybe no issue has been big enough to focus public attention. But, that is hard to believe with the tainted presidential vote count in Florida, September 11th, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, environmental devastation and growing economic problems on a global scale. The potential of the Web is not being fulfilled and that is disappointing to many observers who welcomed the new medium as a vehicle of democracy.

It is also disappointing to see that so few representatives of the people are using the new medium to gather the views of their constituents. Earlier, we discussed the use of e-mail, or the lack of it. We were unable to find a single example of elected officials actively using the Net systematically to

mine the thoughts, needs and concerns of the voters. They could send inquiries, request feedback, ask voters' for their thoughts about upcoming votes on key issues. Elected officials can use the interactivity, the two-way flow, to improve the public input to public issues, how disappointing to see they are not doing that.

So, a new medium with great promise to recharge lifeless democracies is showing little promise of doing much at all. One can only hope that some inspiring event charges the public or some dormant instinct within voters activates us to use the powers of the Net to get the voice of the voters back into the political dialogue. When that happens, the Internet will play a prominent role because it alone allows two-way communication, and that will give voters their voices once again.

Literature

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