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Exploring Televised Political Debates: Strategies and Issues *

Abstract: This article will focus on applied communication research that provides knowledge about political processes that sometimes explicitly, yet more often implicitly, enhance the practices of a democracy. We concentrate on a critical review of the literature concerned with televised political debates as these are the most spectacular contemporary forms of politics mediatization. The major research findings of applied political communication regarding debates include: the effects of such encounters with specific attention to the limited research on lower level or nonpresidential debates, media coverage of debates, candidates' messages and viewer learning from debates, debate formats and content analyses of debates.

Keywords: applied communication research, political debates, content analysis

1. Introduction

The roots of political communication are traced in the earliest attempts of classical scholars (Aristotle, Plato, Quintilian, Cicero) to describe democratic functions related to rhetorical devices and uses of language and oratory that affected public life in the early days of Greek and Roman societies (Newall 2005). From that point political communication has evolved into a multidisciplinary field that joins communication, political science, psychology, sociology and marketing.

This article will focus on applied communication research that provides knowledge about political processes that sometimes explicitly, yet more often implicitly, enhances the communicative practices of a democracy. From the perspective of political communication scholars democracy is a *civic dialogue, an ongoing conversation between and among elected leaders or candidates and the citizens they lead or wish to lead* (Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco 2009). The media plays an important role in this civic dialogue because most of the time the interaction between those who govern and those who are governed largely is

* **Acknowledgements:** This work was supported by the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectorial Operational Program for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646]

conducted through mediated communication. There can be identified five areas of applied political communication research: political speaking, political campaign debates, political advertising, political news and political uses of new technologies. We concentrate on a critical review of the literature concerned with televised political debates from an applied communication perspective. Those debates became a compulsory exercise in electoral campaigns in many Western countries and seem to be at the same time a symptom and a cause of the undeniable importance of today's political communication. At the same time, televised political debates are one of the most spectacular contemporary mediatization of politics that are essentially communication operations. Thus, the debates seem to reduce political process to political communication. Given the complexity of this subject, after more than 50 years since televised debates occurred there are many theoretical and applicative approaches, all of them unfolding in a complex heterogeneous discipline which led to disparate and sometimes conflicting results. To sum up, studies of political debate can be framed into five general categories: analysis of effects, normative analysis, political analysis, format analysis and content analysis (Gauthier 1994).

The specific feature of political campaign debates is that candidates meet face-to-face in a formal debate exchange. Most of the times the debate stage or forum is the only campaign event where candidates appear side by side, allowing viewers of these frequently televised events to compare candidates and their messages. This encounter is typically structured by different rules of engagement and interaction with opponents, journalist or even a selected public and the main purposes of this form of campaign communication is to produce a more informed electorate and to convince the voters in matters related to politics. The scholars' interest towards political debates is justified by the most cited aspect regarding televised campaign debates, particularly presidential debates that they reach large audiences. As McKinney (2007) noticed since the inception of televised presidential debates in 1960, such debates have continued to generate the largest viewing audience of any single televised campaign event. Pfau (2003) also pointed out that debates may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of the "marginally attentive" citizen who may tune out other forms of campaign communication. As a consequence of the attention paid by the large public to political debates, the major research findings of applied political communication regarding debates include: the effects of such encounters with specific attention to the limited research on lower level or nonpresidential debates, media coverage of debates, candidates' messages and viewer learning from debates, debate formats and content analysis of debates.

2. Effects of political debates

The most common question regarding televised political debates that led to numerous studies concerns the effects of this type of political communication. Although the issue was raised from the first debate of its kind that faced

Kennedy and Nixon, it is clear to experts that the effects of debates cannot be determined with certainty, because they are neither obvious, nor automatic and cannot be isolated from other contextual factors. The main effect of the debate is said to be a reconfirmation of the preference which had already existed in the mind of a voter. The empirical evidence on this matter show that most citizens who watch debates do so to cheer on the candidate they already support. But even if the debates do not have a remarkable effect on the voting preferences of previously committed viewers, their influence on the undecided ones should not be neglected. Numerous empirical studies have found that debates help undecided, conflicted or weakly committed viewers to form or change their voting preference (Kaid 2004). Sometimes uncommitted citizens (even if they constitute a small segment of the debate-viewing audience) form exactly this slice of the electorate to which most general-election campaign messages are targeted and, in close contests, these voters ultimately may decide the election outcome. This statement is proved by McKinney & Carlin in their work by carrying out an analysis of debates at the presidential level. The authors mentioned above offer some postdebate Gallup polling data from the nine-presidential campaigns that featured general-election debates suggest that televised debates played a decisive role in the outcome of more than half of those elections, including the 1960, 1976, 1980, 2000 and 2004 elections (McKinney 2007; McKinney and Carlin 2004).

Besides the immediate influence of debates on citizens' voting preferences, the actual applied political communication research is trying to determine the influence of debates towards a rational choice, if political debates increase the interest and the political knowledge of citizens. Other objectives of the studies that focus on the effects of debates are related to the possible change in attitudes and towards political system or the impact of debates over the image of a politician. With respect to these, McKinney and Carlin's (2004) empirical research focuses on how debates facilitate citizens' acquisition of issue information and influence their perceptions of candidates' character or image traits. According to the authors conclusions, debate viewing also may activate a number of latent civic and democratic tendencies, including decreasing viewers' reported political cynicism; enhancing citizens' sense of political efficacy, interest on the ongoing campaign and likelihood of voting; and encouraging citizens to seek additional campaign information following debate viewing and greater participation in a campaign through activities such as talking to others about preferred candidates. All the previous aspects are detailed by McKinney and Chattopadhyay (2007).

Another perspective of applied communication research might be developed by analyzing the political debates and agenda-setting process with a special focus on the impact of the debates' topics on voters and civil society's stakeholders. A reference work on this topic is McCombs and Shaw's book *Emergence of American Political* built on Lippmann's concept of agenda-setting. In this study, McCombs, Shaw and David Weaver studied the 1976

presidential election, studying the attributes of the agenda, description of the candidates and the agenda attributes in voters' descriptions of the candidates. They found that there was a consistent relationship between the media and public agenda. Even if this approach which combines agenda-setting theory and electoral debates seems to have important implications there are less empirical studies on this subject.

3. Analyses of Debates' Media Coverage, Formats and Political Strategies

The debates are communication exercises, but are equally political events that cause specific analysis on tactics and strategies. What are the political considerations that lead politicians to exposure on television? Various studies have tried to establish some rules that seem to lead to a more appropriate and successful conduct during a debate. Trent and Freidenberg (1983, 91) propose a genuine model of the necessary conditions for a debate to take place; we quote the following questions that shape his model:

“Are there only two major candidates? Is this likely to be a close election? Are advantages likely accrue to me if I debate? Am I a good debater? Do I have control of all the important variables (dates, location, topics, format) in the debate situation? Is the field clear of incumbents?”

Martel (2005, 195) continued this research by identifying the main considerations that Martel will lead to the decision to participate in a debate:

*“If you're ahead in the polls, don't debate.
Debates cannot be won; they can only be lost.
If you're incumbent, don't debate.
Refusing to debate may generate damaging negative publicity.
Televised debates favor the candidate with the better image.”*

The analysis of political strategies used in electoral debates attracted scholars' interest to studying the fundamental role that media has within the evaluation process of the candidates in a political debate. A high level of media attention was revealed by Kaid, McKinney and Tedesco (2000) in their analysis of major network news broadcasts during the fall campaign, from Labor Day to Election Day. The authors empirically demonstrated that the debate-related news segments are among the most frequent campaign stories. Furthermore, there might be identified three important moments in media coverage that frame the debates: before the debate, during the debate and after the debate (or the debate about the debate, also called meta-debate).

Thus, some authors (McKinney and Lamoureux 1999) suggested that the debate news narrative is best viewed as an ongoing media drama performed in three acts. First, there is a stage of the narrative when the attention is focused

on how many debates will take place, what formats will be adopted and who will be allowed to participate, particularly when "legitimate" third-party or independent candidates are involved. At this point, the typical news story begins with the "debate over the debates", focusing on one candidate challenging his or her opponent to debate. The second phase of the drama, as McKinney and Lamoureux say, sets expectations for each candidate, with people learning from the media who is considered the stronger or more experienced debater, possible debate strategies that candidates will likely pursue and who is expected to attack whom and how. Some analyses point out that by manipulating the expectations of the public, some political consultants (together with their media endorsement) may construct a certain image for a candidate regarding his attendance of a political debate (Fairclough 1994). Finally, after the actual debate takes place, the news narratives highlight candidate attacks, stumbles or gaffes and reveal who won or lost or performed better than or not as well as expected (Kaid 2004).

Research conducted on the news media coverage of debates has examined both the content and effects of that reporting. In characterizing the content of debate coverage, although issue discussion constitutes the major element of debates, issues are not the main focus of debate reporting (Kaid et al. 2000); instead, media coverage focuses largely on candidates' performance and highlights the horse-race aspects of the campaign, with heavily reporting of the postdebate polls showing who won the debate and much speculative regarding the likely impact of the debate on the election outcome. The effects of exposure to postdebate media commentary were a challenging topic for many scholars. Lowry, Bridges and Barefield (1990) found that viewers exposed to postdebate analysis featuring an instant poll showing that a particular candidate had won the debate were significantly more likely to identify that candidate as the debate winner than were viewers not exposed to the postdebate commentary. Few experimental studies by McKinnon, Tedesco and Kaid (1993) and McKinnon and Tedesco (1999) also found media commentary effects, with exposure to postdebate "spin" significantly increasing respondents' evaluations of candidates. In analyzing the influence of postdebate media commentary, Chaffee and Dennis (1979, 85) concluded that "it may well be that the press's interpretation of the debate...is more important in determining the impact on the electorate than is the debate itself".

The debates remained almost unchanged at the presidential level until the 1990s, preferring to stick to the standard "joint press-conference" design and as a result there are few systematic analyses of debate formats until the 90's. However, a limited amount of empirical work has tested relationships between debate format and candidates' messages content findings that debate format matters in several important ways, especially in what concerns the type of message delivered by the participants. Perhaps the most systematic analysis regarding possible format effects in general-election presidential debates is the research program conducted by Diana Carlin and her colleagues. The authors study examines the influence of debate format on candidate clash (Carlin,

Howard, Stanfield and Reynolds 1991; Carlin, Morris and Smith 2001). The main findings of their analysis were that particular format features influence candidates to engage in such clashes, for instance, when candidates offer analysis of their issue positions versus opponents' positions, through direct attack of opponents' positions and direct comparison of issue positions. The above-mentioned study was preceded by another one, Carlin et al. (1991), where the authors found, throughout comparative content analysis of the presidential debates in 1960, 1976, 1980, 1984 and 1988, that candidate clash is limited when format design limits rebuttal times or when the same or similar questions are not posed to both candidates. According to a more recent applied study conducted by Carlin et al (2001), the type of questions asked influences candidate clash. There are some discursive interventions such as comparative questions (asking candidates to contrast their positions to those of their opponent) generate obviously more clash than do less comparative questions.

The most common formats of televised debates identified by scholars are: the more formal journalist-led podium debate, a more informal conversational debate with candidates seated at a table with a single journalist moderator and a citizen-led town-hall debate. If we compare the amount of clash that occurred across the three debate formats, the formal-podium debate demonstrated the greatest overall level of candidate clash and the more conversational chat debate featured the least amount of clash (Carlin et al. 2001).

An analysis of the two most common debate formats now used at the presidential level – the formal-podium debate with journalist questioners and the town-hall debate with citizen questioners, initiated by Kaid et al. (2000), found three significant content differences : formal-podium debate with journalist questioners 1) contain significantly more candidate attack; 2) lead candidates to develop significantly less issue (the candidates being focus on image, rather than issues) appeals; 3) feature significantly less candidate-positive (rather than opponent-negative) discourse. This study confirmed Benoit and Well's (1996, 59) findings that town-hall debates contain the least amount of candidate attack, leading to the conclusion that "the format of the debates – and in particular when audience members are able to clearly express their desires to the candidates – can affect the nature of persuasive attack produced by the rhetors". Besides the comparison between the debates' formats, Kaid et al. (2000) explored through an experimental study the degree to which issues discussed by candidates in a journalist-controlled podium debate versus citizen-controlled town-hall debate corresponded to issues that voters thought were most important. The findings of the research pointed out the debate-format effect relating to issue agendas and the gap between the debate issue-agenda and the public agenda. The public's predebate issue agenda was unrelated to the agenda of issues that respondents thought were discussed during the debate in the journalist-led podium debate, whereas in the town-hall debate, viewers predebate issue agenda was significantly correlated with the issues stressed in the debate itself.

Finally, McKinney, Dudash and Hodgkinson (2003) tested using an experimental method the viewer learning from exposure to debates, examining

both issue and image learning across the three debate formats mentioned in the previous paragraphs. The research results demonstrate that approximately two-thirds of all claims of learning were about candidate image and one-third was about issue learning from the three debates combined and this raises the question of the debates utility in shaping informed opinions about candidates and policies. However the authors cited pointed out some differences regarding the effects of the debate format towards the learning results that occurred, such that chat debates led viewers to focus less on candidates' performance and image considerations, and more on issue appeals. Conclusively, whereas chat debates resulted in an almost equal amount of issue and image learning, the podium and town-hall debates resulted in almost three times as many candidate-image observations than claims of issue learning. But after all, televised debates are television broadcasts involving many constituents that make them similar to tv-shows and this idea inspired various French researchers to have some cinematographic approaches over debates. Thus, Mouchon (1989), Tarnowski (1988), compared the European debate format and the North American one. Another interesting analysis is that of Nel (1990) which begins from Foucault's concept of television as a strategic device that involves a "contract of confidence" and a "contract of visibility" that articulate various formal aspects of the debate: staging the production design, the framing of the participants, the sequence of frames and so on (Gauthier 1994).

4. Content Analysis of Political Debates

Content analysis is perhaps the fastest-growing technique in quantitative research. Computer advances have made the organized study of messages quicker and easier, but not always better. This part of the article will start by exploring the current options in the analysis of the content of messages. Neuedorf (2002) tries to develop a typology of qualitative content analyses applied to media content as follows: *rhetorical analysis* concerned with the properties of the text such as messages' constructions, form, metaphors, argumentation structure; *narrative analysis* focused on characters as carriers of the narrative (e.g., hero, helper); *discourse analysis* interested in language and word use, consistency and connection of words to the theme analysis of content and the establishment of central terms; *semiotic analyses* examines the deeper meaning of messages aiming at latent messages and the signifying process through signs, codes or binary oppositions; *interpretive analysis* has its roots in social scientific inquiry and involves theoretical sampling, analytical categories, comparative analysis and the formulation of conceptual categories; *conversation analysis* is focused on naturally occurring conversation and being used in disciplines as psychology, communication and sociology; *critical analysis* is widely used for media messages.

Beyond Neuedorf's typology, the content analyses more often used in political communication were linguistic analysis, thematic analysis, rhetoric and argumentative analysis. The most common one is the language analysis, namely

the study of the words used in a certain text: the use of pronouns (you, we, I), the candidates' appeals towards viewers ;speeches length, richness and simplicity of vocabulary, length of phrases, the use of speech figures, identity references for opponents or themselves; tenses; keywords and so on. Through this kind of analysis one can reach conclusions regarding the communication behavior of the politicians, which candidates were willing to engage in a dialogue, which participants avoid direct confrontation. An interesting study based on this approach was conducted by Gerstlé who proposed an analysis of 1981 presidential debate between Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand. The aim of this reference work, that used a lexicographical approach, was to demonstrate that a debate is a "verbal fight" during which the candidates try to valorize themselves or to discredit the opponent. Conclusively, Gerstlé argues that Mitterrand's discourse was characterized by the attempt to challenge the opponent than to valorize his personality.

The main goals of debates are to clarify, to contrast and to compare different opinions and participants attitudes. In order to get to a better understanding of the ratio of a debate some authors use rhetorical and argumentative analyses aiming to find out the reasoning, the prevalent focus of participants within a debate - image or issues, style or substance, general issues or specific issues. The rhetoric of public debates is accompanied by a fundamental strategic dimension as participants choose a set of discursive procedures to promote their message. This perspective examines the presentation and delivery of messages, as the debate has a persuasive purpose determined by the form and style of oratorical exposure and the discursive performance of the participants. While rhetoric analysis regards attributes such as clarity or ambiguity of discourses, argumentative analysis takes into account argumentative strategies and sophisms, also the link between the thesis and its premises. Even if the study of argumentation has benefited of a lot of attention from scholars, there are few contributions that apply the argumentation methodology to the analyses of political debates (Martel 2008; Ammosy 2006; Relieu and Brock 1995) most of studies focusing on political discourses.

5. Trends and Perspectives

Campaign debates occur more frequently among candidates seeking local, state and other offices even if overwhelming attention has focused on the presidential debates. It is thought, based on the evidence available at this moment, that local televised debates differ in both content and viewer effects from their presidential counterparts. Future research should pay attention to local-level debates and their effects on civic engagement of citizens and viewers' vote choice.

Also, there are clear differences between male and female candidates' communication patterns. Edelsky and Adams (1990), quoted in *Routledge Handbook of Applied Communication Research*, studied six mixed-gender state and local debates finding that men got better treatment (safer turn places, more

follow-ups on their topics) and they took control of more resources (more time for their positions and engaged in more of the aggressive speaking). Following this line of research, richer perspectives can be gained from the examination of candidates' debate styles in mixed-gender races.

What is the impact of minor party or independent candidates in debates? The small party world-views and ideologies are ignored even if they might be interesting for certain segments of the electorate. In what way a debate dialogue will be framed taking into account these marginal views?

This article reviews the main approaches in content analysis, but of all evoked perspectives, critical discourse analysis offers a more complex understanding of public debates and this perspective should be deepened by applying Fairclough's view. He developed a three-dimensional framework for studying discourse, which could be extended to the analysis of debates. At the first level, scholars should consider the text's syntax, metaphoric structure and certain devices, the next step consists in studying the text's production and consumption, and, not at last, the analyst is concerned with inter-textual understanding, trying to capture the societal currents that are affecting the text being studied (Fairclough 2003). Speaking about content analysis, recently computer scientists offered some methods for automated content analysis that can be used in social sciences but most are designed to classify individual documents, whereas social scientists instead want generalizations about the population of documents, such as the proportion in a given category (e.g. public speeches on a certain topic). Unfortunately, as Hopkins and King note, *even a method with a high percent of individual documents correctly classified can be hugely biased when estimating category proportions*.

Even if there is still much to do in political debates analysis, the decades of research provided interesting and useful information for candidates preparing for debate participation, as well as meaningful information intended to assure a better understanding of the debating spectacle. This endeavor should continue because at the core of participatory democracy there is an informed and engaged citizenry and the best example that demonstrates this statement are the campaign debates in which those desiring to be leaders stand before the public and argue why they should be granted one of the greatest expressions of power that citizens have – their vote.

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