

Does McLuhan’s Idea Stand Up for Millennials? Testing Whether the Medium is the Message in Political Organization Public Relationships

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Abstract

Examining McLuhan’s (1964) classic adage that the “medium is the message,” this experimental design presented participants with the three versions of the same message content. Manipulating medium as an online press release, blog post, or online video, the research here found that medium does play a role in shaping the receiver’s perceived relationship with an organization. Conversely, medium does not impact one’s assessment of credibility. Set in a digital political public relations context, this study attempts to connect public relations’ most heuristic theory in the examination in the state of ever-evolving digital media.

Keywords: public relations, political public relations, organization-public relationship, OPR, POPR, credibility

Introduction

Political campaigns are continuously searching for the most effective ways to message a vast number of voters. To do so, political public relations turned digital. In an attempt to reach new voters, digital political public relations campaigns are now using digital media outlets to deliver messages during crucial times through the race for office. In doing so, digital political public relations campaigns must assess how outlets are best used. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan coined the term “the medium is the message,” meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message. Now more than half a century later, McLuhan’s message continues to be considered. The purpose of this study is to determine how McLuhan’s message is being used during the 2016 presidential election. By exposing first-time voters to one of three pieces of PR

tactical messaging (campaign press release, campaign blog post, campaign video) with the same content, this test experiment determine which way a message is best perceived by a new generation of voters.

Literature Review

Ever since Marshall McLuhan's (1964) groundbreaking work in medium theory, where he submitted that the *medium is the message*, the phrase has risen in popularity and resonated with professional communicators. By this, McLuhan simply meant that interpretations and perceptions of content can be influenced by the channel through which that content is communicated. Though not expressly or empirically analyzed in a great deal of public relations scholarship, the idea is at play daily in the actual practice of public relations. That is, public relations practitioners understand the importance for communicating messages through the right medium. As technology avails more communication channels for practitioners to employ, public relations professionals must become even more attuned to the subtleties each channel can potentially have on the publics' decoding and interpretation of a message.

Employing this approach that the medium is message, this study applies the concept to a political public relations context to determine whether the exact same message has a different impact based on the channel through which it is delivered. Driven by political public-organization relationship theory (POPR), this study provides empirical data on the true impact of the medium conveying the message.

Political Public Relations

An emerging area in public relations scholarship is that of political public relations (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Though defined in a number of different ways (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Nimmo & Combs, 1983), Sweetser, English, and Fernandes (2015) submit that the common thread is using strategic communication practices in a political context. Trammell (2006) posited that political public relations combines traditional political communication with public relations theories. Indeed, political campaigns employ press conferences, news releases, messaging, and other tactics common to general public relations practice. As such, many researchers argue that just like corporate communication and nonprofit industries have a specialized line of public relation, so too does the industry of politics and government (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011; Sweetser et al., 2015; Trammell, 2006).

Research in this area is split between the (1) political campaign (i.e., much like a corporate public relations campaign designed to build relationships or influence key stakeholders) and (2) government public affairs (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). While earlier research appeared to focus on public affairs in government communication contexts (e.g., city public affairs), an increasing number of studies today examine traditional public relations activities occurring in a political campaign context.

Based on the Strömbäck & Kioussis (2011) definition of political public relations, which emphasizes the importance of the relationship with the stakeholders, it follows that a large segment of political public relations research applies relationship theory.

OPR and Political OPR

Relationship theory, which focuses on the organization-public relationship (OPR), is among the most heuristic perspectives in public relations scholarship while still having a great

deal of practical utility for public relations practitioners (Ferguson, 1984; Sallot et al., 2003). The nomenclature for the theory has been noted to reflect the very definition of public relations itself in that the industry focuses its attention on building relationships with its publics. Relationship theory offers an established framework for examining and measuring that relationship (Ferguson, 1984; Sallot et al., 2003). Whether treated as a dependent variable where relationship is impacted by specific actions or as an independent variable that uses differing levels of relationship to create other changes in the public-organization ecosystem, relationship theory has the ability to provide empirical illumination for scholars and a predictable path of understand OPR.

As political public relations research grows, so too has the application of OPR in the political public relations context. Though Wise (2007) was the first formal study of relationship theory in political public relations, Seltzer and Zhang (2011) were the first to coin the term political organization-public relations (POPR). This move signaled the importance of both the scholarly context of political public relations and also the applicability of one of the field's most heuristic theories.

Early POPR work focused on a qualitative approach to understanding relationship. Wise (2007) examined lobbying, a key political public relations function, though Wise (2007) noted it had all been previously ignored by scholars. Wise (2007) found that lobbyists cited relationship as one of the most important aspects of their jobs, and submitted that political science scholarship put too much of an issue-emphasis on the lobbyists' work. Levenshus (2010) then examined those within the campaign to understand how campaigns reached voters through the Internet. As the first to quantitatively examine POPR, Seltzer and Zhang (2011) surveyed voters to understand antecedents to relationships formed with political parties. Related to that work, Sweetser (2015) surveyed first-time voters and measured POPR as a potential outcome of personality. Moving closer in on the political party and now focusing on the candidate him or herself, Sweetser and Tedesco (2013) were the first to empirically test the impact of message and candidate exposure on voters' relationship with a particular candidate. This transition from the introspective work looking at public relations practitioners themselves in Wise's (2007) focus on lobbyists and Levenshus' (2010) work on campaign staffers to the more application-based work focused on the party and the candidate shows the progression POPR. Scholars are now tackling questions that help practitioners working in political public relations, in an effort to understand their field through empirical data.

Credibility in Political Public Relations

Credibility is commonly examined in political public relations studies and channel selection research alike, considered a key element of the constituents' or viewers' assessment of a source (see Johnson & Kaye, 2009; Kioussis, 2001; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982; Yaun, 2011). Scholarship historically shows a positive relationship between reliance on a particular media source and users' assessment of credibility (Johnson & Kaye, 2010; Quanbeck & White, 2009). Even so, Kioussis (2001) and Lin (1993) find evidence that questions such a direct, positive correlation.

A recent study focusing on first-time voters found Millennials assessed both traditional news media and political infotainment sources as lukewarm with regard to credibility (Browning & Sweetser, 2014). Looking at online sources, that study noted this group making up the youth vote did not find online sources such as blogs, YouTube, or other social network sharing sites as being credible at all (Browning & Sweetser, 2014).

Moving beyond medium credibility, source credibility in general political studies remains a rich heuristic area, though much less studied in a political public relations context. Sweetser (2017) found that first-time voters, regardless of party affiliation, held nearly equal and moderate views of credibility toward their chosen political parties. While expected that one would view the opposing party with less credibility, the gulf between the credibility of one's own party and the opposing party was not sizeable (Sweetser, 2017). That study also found credibility to be a predictor of POPR with one's political party (Sweetser, 2017).

The current study seeks to provide empirical data on the impact of channel on a viewer's assigned level of credibility toward a specific source. By holding the source and the message constant in this study, the data here will provide an understanding of how the medium can impact credibility.

Digital Campaigning in Political Public Relations

Digital campaigning in political public relations was introduced with the Clinton-Gore campaign in 1992, as the first presidential campaign to host a website (Tedesco, 2004). Since its introduction, each election cycle has brought new tools keeping in line with the trends in how people communicate (Sweetser, 2011). The characteristics that attract public relations to digital communication are many, and researchers cite benefits such as bypassing the gatekeeping process going direct to their publics (White & Raman, 1999) as well as relationship-building (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Sweetser et al., 2015).

Just as the use of digital tools has become ubiquitous, it follows that more voters are using digital tools to follow and connect with campaigns. According to Pew Research, leading up to the 2008 election 46% Americans used the web, email, or text messaging for news about the presidential campaign, to contribute to the debate, or to mobilize others (Rainie & Smith, 2008). At that same time, some 35% of Americans said they'd watched online political videos—three times as many as during the 2004 presidential election (Rainie & Smith, 2008). According to their data, roughly 10% said they'd logged on to social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace to engage in the election (Rainie & Smith, 2008). A more recent Pew report on social media and political engagement found that 39% of all American adults (and more than a majority of those who are using social media tools) have engaged in civic or political activities through social media (Rainie et al., 2012). Given that each Pew report historically charts an increase in digital use, it was expected the 2016 election would have an even greater adoption of digital tools for information seeking and engagement purposes and greater integration into the fabric of the political process.

Candidates in general have done well to keep up with technology preferences of their constituents. Though early indications were that campaigns were only going through the motions rather than truly engaging their publics with two-way communication (Stromer-Galley, 2000), some research has shown that the tide has turned.

Choosing the Channel

Given the diverse communication landscape available today, campaigns have more information subsidy and media-type options. While relying on the mass media and the gatekeeping process has not been eliminated, campaigns can also mass communicate directly with constituents now. As such, many campaigns post their traditional public relations products

-- such as press releases -- on their websites with an intended audience being the voter more than the media.

Knowing this, it is time to ask whether in this age of interactive and engaging digital media if the medium is the message.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed above, the following hypotheses about the interaction of POPR and credibility based on channel are posited and research question posed:

H1: Communication channel will impact the political organization-public relationship.

H2: Political organization-public relationship and perceived credibility of the candidate are positively related.

RQ1: Is perceived credibility of the candidate impacted by channel through which the candidate communicates?

Method

This study employed a posttest-only experimental design with control group ($N = 202$) to test whether there was a difference in political organization-public relationship based on the channel through which the candidate communicated. The experiment was conducted in early spring 2016, during the primary season running up to the 2016 Election.

Primary Season for the 2016 Election

As modern presidential campaigns have become longer with candidates announcing their bid earlier each cycle (Sweetser et al., 2015) the 2016 presidential campaign proved no different. With no incumbent eligible for the 2016 election, 18 months before the election there were at least 14 campaigns who had announced their official candidacy, with even more seeming to test the waters (Keneally, 2015). The Republican party, who would be challenging the party currently sitting in the White House, had the most number of candidates, 10 to four, by June, 16, 2015. The Democrats, while presently holding the office, were also looking for a new candidate to follow Obama as a two-term president.

The front-runner for the Democratic party appeared to be Hillary Clinton, given the media attention (Bradner, 2015) and the consistently strong polling results (Healy & Russonello, 2015). Indeed, Clinton had experience in the primary having unsuccessfully competing against Barack Obama in the 2008 primaries.

Given this history and additions to her political resume since 2008, few were surprised when Clinton announced her presidential bid on April 12, 2015 (Chozick, 2015). Interesting, Clinton's announcement skirted tradition, however, when she officially stated her intention to run for president during a 2:15 video featured on her YouTube channel (Calamur, 2015). After 90 seconds of stories from Americans who are starting a new chapter in their lives, Clinton states that she, too, is going to take on something new and that she is getting ready to run for president. While the video was posted only to her social media channel, it went viral with more than 5 million views due to publishing from outlets including ABC, The New York Times and C-SPAN (Yuhas, 2015).

Though many in the Democratic party expressed that being the party's candidate was not a given, some wondered whether the media believed that when comparing the amount of media

coverage she received compared to other Democratic contenders and the amount of time she spoke during the primary debates (Sprunt & Mutnick, 2015).

Due to familiarity with Clinton as a candidate and political persona and the large attention paid to her in the media, this experiment chose Clinton content to test whether the medium was the message and how that might have impacted POPR with prospective constituents.

Measures and Data Analysis

POPR was measured using the abbreviated communicated strategies for relationship maintenance scale developed by Sweetser and Kelleher (2016), a reliable battery based on a well-established OPR maintenance scale (used in Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010, 2015; Sweetser et al., 2015; Sweetser & Metzger 2007; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014, among others). As commonly done with this scale, the 11 items submitted to principal axis factoring with varimax rotation. While the standard factoring had previously yielded two factors, three reliable factors naturally emerged from this data explaining 70.32% of the variance. The factors were consistent with the previous testing of the OPR scale. Factor 1 contained 6 variables and is best described as *Communicated Relational Commitment* (Cronbach's alpha = .88), Factor 2 as a 3-item factor called *Responsiveness* (Cronbach's alpha = .779), and Factor 3 as a new 2-item factor called *Conversational Voice* (Cronbach's alpha = .749). In previous uses of this scale Factors 2 and 3 were a single, combined factor; however, this analysis employed the natural grouping of these data, which resulted in 3 separate factors. The standardized factor scores were used in the analysis. See Table 1 for factor loading scores.

Table 1. Communicative Strategies for Relationship Factor Loadings

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1: <i>Communicated Relational Commitment</i>			
Communicates desire to build relationship	.80		
Demonstrates relationship has future/long term commitment	.77		
Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a relationship	.74		
Uses a positive/optimistic tone	.65		
Expresses cheer & optimism about the future	.59		
Makes communication enjoyable	.51		
Factor 2: <i>Responsiveness</i>			
Positively addresses complaints or queries		.77	
Provides prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism		.69	
Would admit mistakes		.56	
Factor 3: <i>Conversational Voice</i>			
Uses a sense of humor in communication			.93
Provides connections to competitors			.56
Variance Explained	48.47%	12.05%	9.77%

Note: *Communicated Relational Commitment* (Cronbach's alpha = .88), *Responsiveness* (Cronbach's alpha = .779), *Conversational Voice* (Cronbach's alpha = .749).

Credibility was measured through the Johnson and Kaye scale (2009, 2010), a 4-item series that asks participants the degree to which they found the candidate believable, accurate, fair, and in-depth. As typically done with these credibility items, they were summed into a single index (alpha = .87), which was used for analysis.

Participants

This study focused on first-time voters, with participants being an average of 21 years old ($M = 21.83$ years, $SD = 5.03$ years). This group was most active in Internet use, self-reporting an average of 6.27 hours per day on the Internet ($SD = 4.48$ hours). The second-most used mass media tool was television ($M = 1.94$ hours, $SD = 2.54$ hours), followed by listening to the radio ($M = 1.50$ hours, $SD = 2.18$ hours), reading newspapers ($M = .38$ hours, $SD = .95$ hours), and reading magazines ($M = .26$ hours, $SD = .64$ hours).

More than half of the participants indicated that they were registered to vote ($n = 111$), and nearly a quarter indicated that they were eligible but not yet registered ($n = 45$). For the remaining participants that indicated their voting registration status, some were simply not registered ($n = 27$) and others not eligible ($n = 13$). Of those who indicated their party affiliation, participants in this study were primarily Democrats ($n = 105$), followed by Independent ($n = 40$), "other" ($n = 28$), and Republican ($n = 23$).

The majority of the participants were female ($n = 146$), with a quarter being male ($n = 48$) and one self-identifying as transgender. Only 7 participants did not indicate gender.

Stimulus

This study manipulated the medium through which the candidate communicated. The experimental cells included a YouTube video ($n = 48$), a campaign blog post ($n = 50$), a campaign press release ($n = 52$), or control group ($n = 52$). In order to maximize external validity, an organic (e.g., real) campaign ad used in the primaries for the 2016 presidential election was first selected. The ad focused on the issue of college affordability, given that it was relevant to first-time voters. A transcript was then created from the ad and turned into a blog post and a press release. The text for both the blog post and press release were the exact same with the only difference being the layout. The blog post cell presented the stimulus text in the look and feel of the candidate's blog, appearing as a screenshot within the online experiment. The press release was similarly presented, again using the format employed by the campaign for their online press releases. The control group did not view any content, and just advanced to the posttest.

A manipulation check examined whether participants could accurately recall the experimental cell they were assigned. A chi square showed that the manipulation worked in that participants noticed and understood the medium stimulus used in the study $\chi^2(12) = 446.89, p \leq .001$, as expected.

Results

This experimental posttest with control group ($N = 202$) sought to determine if medium theory is at play in political public relations and impacts political public-organization relationship and credibility.

Channel Impact on Relationship

Constituent relationship with the candidate, overall across all cells, was neutral though moving toward positive. Even the highest scoring relationship item, the candidate *uses positive or optimistic tone*, was technically still neutral at 3.73 ($SD = .94$) on a 5-point scale. The lowest scoring relationship item, the candidate *would admit mistakes*, was 2.82 ($SD = 1.00$) on a 5-point scale.

To test whether there was an impact on POPR based on channel, the 3 relationship maintenance strategies factor scores were compared across all the experimental cells using analysis of variance. The ANOVAS for both *Communicated Relational Commitment* and *Responsiveness* showed no main effects.

The *Conversational Voice* factor did result in main effects, $F(3, 194) = 7.21, p \leq .001$. A Tukey post-hoc test revealed two between-group differences for the control group, which received no campaign message and completed the posttest based on their baseline perceptions of the candidate. The control group reported statistically significantly higher *Conversational Voice* factor scores than those who saw the blog post ($M_{diff} = .60, p \leq .01$) and those who saw the press release ($M_{diff} = .79, p \leq .001$). Taken together, this indicates that the text-based channels result in lower POPR for *Conversational Voice*.

Given these findings, H1 was partially supported for the *Conversational Voice* factor only.

Channel Impact on Credibility

Credibility, across all the experimental cells, was predominantly neutral toward the candidate ($M = 3.36, SD = .91$). Even the highest individual score for the candidate, which was reported for *fairness*, was only 3.36 ($SD = .91$) out on a 5-point scale.

To test whether there was an impact on credibility of candidate based on channel, the three relationship maintenance strategies factor scores were compared across all the experimental cells using analysis of variance. The ANOVA for credibility showed no main effects. As such post-hoc tests were not conducted. As such, RQ1 is answered in that credibility is not impacted by the channel through which the candidate communicates.

Relationship and Credibility Associations

To test whether POPR and perceived credibility are associated, a Pearson's correlation test was run. Results indicate statistically significant associations for all 3 relationship factors *Communicated Relational Commitment* ($r = .54, p \leq .05$) and *Responsiveness* ($r = .42, p \leq .001$) and *Conversational Voice* ($r = .23, p \leq .001$) with credibility. As such, H2 is supported for all 3 POPR factors.

POPR Posthoc Tests

In an effort to further examine differences in relationship based on other variables in the study, a series of non-hypothesized associations. Looking at gender, independent samples t tests showed that women had statistically significantly higher POPR factor scores than men for *Communicated Relational Commitment* ($M_{diff} = .25, t(188) = 4.62, p \leq .01$) and *Conversational Voice* ($M_{diff} = .32, t(188) = 2.59, p \leq .005$).

Discussion

The study here sought to understand whether the adage “the medium is the message” remains relevant in the modern world digital political public relations. Taking the same exact message and presenting in three different media formats (blog, online press release, and online video), this study used medium as the independent variable and POPR as the independent variable.

These results indicate in some ways it indeed is the medium that message, but interestingly it appears it the traditional PR-type media that decrease POPR in most cases. For H1, the manifestation of traditional public relations tactics (e.g., blog post, press release online) reduced that relationship perception of the organization having a *Conversational Voice*. To put it another way, these two text presentations of the message lowered the sense that the organization was speaking in a genuine and human manner.

Medium is not always the primary consideration though. In the case of candidate credibility, the data show there were no differences in candidate credibility due to experimental cell. As such, in the case of credibility, the message appears to continue to shape a constituent’s assessment of candidate. Given the importance of a variable such as credibility when considering what is at stake in a political campaign, these findings promote the idea that voters are not distracted or manipulated by the medium, and still able to come to a common assessment of credibility regardless of experimental cell.

From a public relations perspective, these findings can be both good and bad. The findings are troublesome in that when participants were presented with cells that contained very traditional iterations of public relations type content (e.g., blog post, online press release) the value of a key relationship construct declined significantly. If voters are put off by traditional public relations products, public relations practitioners working in politics should be aware of this and alter their media choices. Conversely, public relations practitioners should be pleased that important candidate assessment, such as credibility, is not impacted by medium.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, this study focuses on the first-time voter, who may be different from older cohorts generationally or may evolve as their experiences in the political system accumulate. Second, the study focused on a single, well-known candidate. As such, familiarity with the candidate, candidate message, and candidate promotional materials may have served as confounding variables. Third, the participant pool was predominantly female, which may have resulted in skewed reaction to the candidate or candidate message.

Future Research

This research provides an exploratory look into the validity of McLuhan’s work in a fully digital age. As indicated here some variables are influenced by medium (i.e., POPR) while others were not (i.e., credibility). More research into the finer aspects of relationship should be examined. Questions such as whether the medium at issue was text versus video, or traditional public relations type message versus traditional broadcast should be further investigated. A nagging question is whether Sallot’s question as to whether public relations still has a public relations problem persists in cases such as these. Additionally, this research focused on the first-time voter and future studies would do well to include a wider range of voters to compare age cohorts in reviewing for effects.

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