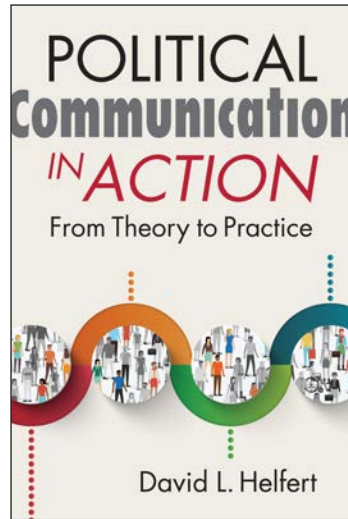


EXCERPTED FROM

Political Communication  
in Action:  
From Theory to Practice

David L. Helfert

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ISBNs: 978-1-62637-680-9 hc  
978-1-62637-681-6 pb



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314  
Boulder, CO 80301 USA  
telephone 303.444.6684  
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This excerpt was downloaded from the  
Lynne Rienner Publishers website  
[www.rienner.com](http://www.rienner.com)

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# 1

## Political Communication in Action

This is not a conventional textbook. It isn't written in scholarly language or style and doesn't rely solely on academic research and scholarly works to authenticate its conclusions. It does assuredly contain citations and references to academic research to help explain certain important considerations in political and public affairs communication. But it also relies on observations and conclusions, along with citations and references, from communication professionals and journalists who cover, analyze, and write about the process.

I believe this more comprehensive approach is appropriate because political communication is an active, dynamic professional field in addition to being an area of academic inquiry. By exploring both perspectives, we can better understand how each step of the political communication process actually works, how it's done, and what it looks like. And we can better investigate and understand why the steps in the process work and what makes them effective.

### **The Origins of Political Communication**

Political communication in its broadest form did not suddenly appear in 1952 in a black and white TV spot with a musical chorus

of “I Like Ike.” As long as people have lived together in societies and created structures—governments—to establish and maintain some semblance of order, there has been communication from, to, and about those governments; about rules, roles, and responsibilities for citizens; and eventually about new and theoretical concepts of societal structures called democracies.

Over the millennia, as societies evolved and the rudiments of democracy began to be imagined and discussed, elemental political communication emerged. People attempted to influence the thoughts and actions of others, to propose and discuss principles for societies, and to motivate people to take certain actions.

Less than sixty years after the death of Socrates came one of the first recorded examples of the effective practice of political communication. In 342 B.C.E., Athenian statesman and general Demosthenes, considered one of the greatest orators of all time, used his rhetorical skills to rouse fellow Athenians to stand up to Phillip II of Macedon, whose army was moving aggressively into the Ionian Peninsula. It worked. After Demosthenes’ stirring speech, people cried out, “To arms! To arms!” and rushed off to defend their city from the invading Macedonians. That was indeed effective messaging.

The world was a stage for Roman political communication for centuries. One of the best-known examples of political communication occurred in 33 C.E. in Roman-occupied Judea. Biblical scripture tells us that the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate, was pushed by the influential Sanhedrin to imprison Jesus of Nazareth. Pilate made a highly political decision and gave the assembled crowd the choice of freeing either Jesus or Barabbas, a notorious criminal. “Give us Barabbas,” chanted the crowd. Acceding to “public opinion,” Barabbas was released and Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion. Then, Pilate publicly and ceremonially washed his hands, sending the absolutely political message, “This isn’t on me.”

Despite these examples of early messaging, the written word has been the primary medium for political communication. It has evolved and developed over the centuries, sometimes enriching and aspirational, and sometimes proffering a much darker view of society.

## **Contemporary Political Communication**

The reach and impact of political discussions in literary form have been transformed in today's world. Books still have great power, but with near-instantaneous and omnipresent media presence in our lives, the nature and practice of political communication have also been transformed. Today, we're all consumers, whether from a candidate for public office, from a politician or other government official talking about a public policy, or from an outside interest group trying to win the public's agreement with them on a particular issue. Political communication is nearly impossible to escape. We see, hear, and read it every day. Much has been written about how it works and how it affects people, and more scholarly research is being conducted, analyzed, and interpreted all the time.

## **Putting the Pieces Together**

Most of the academic literature on political communication is based on scholarly research. And because conducting accurate and meaningful research on a broad topic is practically impossible, it is nearly always tightly focused. Consequently, very little research explores or describes the broader process of political communication. And much of the literature is focused or theoretical and does not readily connect with the general public. Additionally, very little of this knowledge appears in a form or forum easily accessible to the public.

That realization was the seed for this book. I wanted to take a different approach, exploring the use of the broad communication process rather than focusing on one distinct element. I wanted to use real world cases to illustrate what many of the conceptual and theoretical aspects of political communication look like in actual practice. And I wanted to write in everyday language that was aimed more at political communication students than at their professors, perhaps even making it interesting to a broader audience of people who follow our political processes.

We all very much need to be interested in how political communication is designed and used. That politicians and political



consultants try to play us like a Stradivarius is not exactly news, nor should it set off any alarms as long as people are fully aware and understand the process. If we're better informed about the art and science of political communication, we can be a more critical and sophisticated audience, even a bit skeptical. And we'll be better prepared to make informed decisions about what and who to believe.

This book's approach has its foundation in nearly forty years of working every day in local, state, and national political and governmental communication. Layers of content and context have been added by constant and continuing interest in academic and public opinion research into communication processes. And—I hope—my insights have been sharpened by more than a dozen years of teaching upper division and graduate classes to amazingly bright and motivated students, many already working in government and politics.

Most of the classes I teach in political and governmental communication last about three hours, but preparing to teach them took me many years because very few of the operative principles behind the skills I teach can be found in textbooks. They weren't taught in any of the journalism or communication classes I took as an undergraduate. Even in graduate school, the theories and concepts behind the skills were only addressed tangentially.

My education in political communication began with learning to translate the language of everyday government into everyday English as a news reporter covering Austin city hall and the Texas capitol. After four years as public information director helping members of the state legislature communicate with their constituents, I moved full-time into the business of political campaign media and governmental consulting. I worked on issues in city, county, and state government for over seventeen years. I wrote and produced media and communications in more than 120 election campaigns, from local, county, legislative, and statewide offices to US congressional and senatorial campaigns across Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Upon joining the Bill Clinton administration in 1994, I had a front row seat for Newt Gingrich's Republican Revolution and the message wars with the Clinton White House. I became an avid student of Washington political messaging and paid rapt attention

to every word and phrase, every attempt to frame a hot political issue and get the American public to see it a certain way.

My interest grew. By then, I'd been a practitioner in political-governmental communication for nearly twenty-five years, but I wanted to learn more about the art and science behind it. What made some political messages more powerful than others? Why did some messages move people to take a stand on particular issues or policies? What motivated them to act: to sign petitions, rally, express their feelings to elected officials, to vote? What made some political messages memorable while others were total duds?

While I was working full-time in Congress, I went to graduate school, where I eventually conducted my thesis research on the selling of the Iraq War, which was unfurling before my eyes. What words and phrases did the George W. Bush administration use to move a skeptical American public from opposition to support for a preemptive war against a sovereign nation that had neither attacked nor threatened to attack the United States?

Working as a communication director in Congress at the same time provided amazing opportunities to watch and learn. I was first a participant and over time became a mentor and trainer in the daily world of competing political messages.

I ultimately wanted to pass along what I'd learned about the political communication process, so I jumped at the chance to teach. But I don't even pretend to have all the answers. I've never stopped watching and listening and asking questions and arguing and reading about political communication. I don't intend to.

What I've attempted to do here is integrate what I've learned as a student, teacher, and practitioner in political campaign media, governmental affairs, and advocacy communication with scholarly explanations—the research and conceptual theories about how and why contemporary styles of political communication work. I've tried to describe in plain English what a lot of that theory actually looks like when applied.

Putting the pieces together about effective government and political communication took me a while because I had to learn most of it by doing. And I continue talking with political experts and communication scholars to try to understand not only what works, but how and why.

The fundamental truth in my professional experience and my teaching is that political communication is a process, not an event. As a process, it's composed of a set of logical steps that lead us through it, and there is a principle that clarifies the need for each step. In this book, I've attempted to use those principles to mark a logical path through the process, to explain each one, to expand and put them into context, and, as much as possible, to do so in the sequence that the steps are used by practitioners.

## Outline of the Book

Chapter 2, "Defining Political Communication," addresses the first principle:

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**Principle 1.** The term *political communication* describes all public outreach from political campaigns, messages to the public about issues and policy matters from government, and messages aimed at government by individuals and organizations trying to influence decisions.

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This chapter explains political communication, not just by describing its use, but by showing how it's used and how that use changes in the different venues for political communication. I include numerous case studies—many from my own experience—to illustrate what it looks like done well and what it looks like done poorly. I also explore the current political environment in Washington, DC, its origins and development, and the essential role that partisan messaging plays in communication at the highest levels of our government.

Chapter 3, "The Tools of Political Persuasion," focuses on the second principle:

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**Principle 2.** Political communication has one overriding purpose—to persuade people to agree with the communicator in order to win an election or to win support for a position on a public policy issue.

---

This chapter describes and explains many of the techniques and devices used to make political communication persuasive, from the most basic—repetition and focus—to media effects, such as agenda setting, priming, and, particularly, issue framing. These methods can increase the likelihood that a political message is couched in the right words and phrases to have precisely the desired effect on exactly the intended audience or audiences. I have included numerous case studies to demonstrate their use by opposing parties and outside interest groups to define the issues in our national political dialogue.

In Chapter 4, “Making Political Communication Effective,” I address the third principle:

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**Principle 3.** To be effective, political communication has to be conveyed in words, phrases, signs, and symbols the audience understands, can relate to, and will accept.

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I rely a great deal on scholarly and scientific research to further examine the idea that effective political messages have to connect to the intended audience to be effective. Communicators have learned that persuasion can only occur when the message touches or relates to things people care about, such as their family, their career, their financial security, their future, their community, their country, or their values. The chapter describes the importance of using simple, direct language, choosing words that will have maximum effect, and the impact of couching political messages in a narrative style. I also discuss the pitfalls of using numbers, statistics, and dollar amounts to try to make compelling arguments, all too common in policy communication.

The second part of Chapter 4 provides background and context on what researchers tell us occurs when people receive particular kinds of messages, how those messages are processed by the recipients’ brains, and how that processing can lead to particular kinds of actions.

Chapter 5, “Political Issues,” deals with political issues and the fourth principle:

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**Principle 4.** Issues are vital tools in politics—to define yourself, divide the public, and provide ammunition against your opponent.

---

This chapter examines the essential role issues continue to play in effective political communication. I offer an in-depth look at the development of issues, again with numerous case studies, to demonstrate how issues often evolve along with their support or opposition by competing political interests and how they are used. I include numerous hot-button issues in today’s news coverage and explores the ways in which opposing sides attempt to define an issue and lay out the best course of action.

Chapter 6, “Political Research and Communication Planning,” addresses the fifth principle:

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**Principle 5.** Without the most comprehensive and accurate information possible, the aim and content of a communicator’s most costly and time-intensive activities would be based on complete guesswork. But even with the best information, effective political communication rarely occurs without careful planning.

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The first part of Chapter 6 focuses on the essential nature of political research and communication planning. I walk through case studies that illustrate the need for sound audience research to guide a communicator in developing the most persuasive words and phrases, and I identify who the target audience is and what communication channels will be most effective in reaching them. There are detailed descriptions of different tools of quantitative and qualitative research, how each type of research is conducted, and how each is used.

The second part of Chapter 6 focuses on how political communicators use that research to develop a comprehensive media plan that lays out what message will be targeted to which audience, through what medium, when the communication needs to occur to have the most impact, and what that communication will cost.

Chapter 7, “Political Speeches,” addresses one of the oldest and most basic tools in political communication, public speeches:

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**Principle 6.** The spoken word has always been a primary channel for political communication. It still is.

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This chapter explores the purposes and practice of political speaking, offers examples of American political oratory at its best and worst, and includes an analysis of the skills and techniques that made former president Bill Clinton such an effective public speaker. I then go behind the scenes and address the art of political speechwriting, detailing many of the rhetorical devices used to put words in politicians’ mouths and discussing the role and responsibilities of professional speechwriters.

Chapter 8, “Political Advertising and Television,” explores the world of political advertising, addressing the seventh principle:

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**Principle 7.** Despite the digital media revolution and profound changes in media and media audiences, paid advertising by election campaigns and interest groups will continue to be an essential tool to reach target audiences with political messages.

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The chapter discusses the overall consequence of advertising, different kinds of advertising in different media, and includes arguments about the continuing importance of radio and even television in election campaigns in our increasingly online world. I get into the effective use of emotional content in political ads, with case studies, and then analyze the debate over the question of the purpose and impact of negative ads in campaigns.

Chapter 9, “Political Communication in the Internet Age,” takes us into one of the fastest developing areas of today’s political communication—online communication—as we discuss the eighth principle:

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**Principle 8.** The Internet and digital revolution have changed a lot of things, but not quite everything.

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I recount the brief history of online communication in campaigns, and how it has quickly gone from a fairly static tool for communicating messages to a highly interactive and targeted medium that has become an essential part of fundraising, voter identification, and outreach. The chapter also discusses the growth and impact of data mining, with case studies from the 2004 and 2012 presidential campaigns.

I then get into the exploding use of social media in every aspect of political communication, from the campaign headquarters to the government press office to the interest groups' headquarters. The chapter includes a discussion and case study from the 2016 presidential campaign.

Chapter 10, "Communicating Through the News Media," looks at the continuing role of the news media:

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**Principle 9.** One of the most effective ways to reach a lot of people with the same message at the same time is still through the news media.

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This chapter explores the fact that, even in a time when political communicators have the ability to disseminate messages very quickly and target them almost individually, news media coverage of an issue or policy is often the most practical way to reach the broad public or even a more targeted audience. For many smaller local political campaigns not awash in money for extensive advertising or direct contact programs, the news media can be the only way to get a message or information out to voters. This chapter also explores the power relationship between political figures and the news media and illustrates the importance of having the media help convey messages to the broader public. I discuss the role and route to seeking editorial endorsement for a candidate or an issue and how important that can be in influencing public opinion.

Within this chapter is an extensive discussion of the news media's evolving role in political communication, some changes brought about by an evolution in media reporting in an online world, and other changes created by the media's response to transformations in the public's readership habits and the financial pressures that have resulted. This includes a lengthy analysis of media coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign and how the media's apparent fascination, particularly among television networks, with Donald Trump from the day he announced his candidacy exerted a profound impact on the Republican primary election campaign that continued into the general election.

Chapter 11, "Communication in an Age of Partisanship," addresses the challenges and realities of communicating political or policy messages in today's highly charged and highly competitive environment. The principle itself is cautionary:

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**Principle 10.** Being a political communicator in today's highly partisan environment is like working near the mouth of a volcano. The challenge is doing your job well without falling in.

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The chapter offers a case study of the limitations posed by the current partisan division in Congress and explores the broader effects on our society as this division has trickled down to every level of government and, ultimately, to the public.

Chapter 12, "Crisis Communication," deals with the near-inevitability for public organizations that some sort of embarrassing, possibly ruinous occurrence will threaten the future effectiveness of the organization:

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**Principle 11.** In politics and government, something bad is bound to happen. The smart thing is to be as ready as possible when a crisis hits.

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I suggest that crises are inevitable—that at some point, every public or private organization will need to respond to an internal



crisis or external bad news that threatens the reputation, stability, success, or in extreme instances, the actual survival of the organization. And I point out that for political communicators and their organizations, the key to weathering a crisis lies in preparation. This chapter begins with several case studies describing crises in which communicators failed to rise to the occasion and then offers some guidelines for preparing to handle a crisis effectively. I lay out a crisis communication planning process and the steps in an effective plan. There is also a section on crisis communication in our digital world and how the profound changes in communication can make rapid and comprehensive response a matter of life and death for an organization and/or its leaders.

The final chapter, “The Ethical Line in Political Communication,” discusses and describes the ethical lines in the practice of political communication, and it argues that crossing those lines is a decision that must be faced and made by the political communicator. I attempt to define ethical political and policy communication and provide definitions and a list of spin and propaganda techniques. The overriding principle is pretty simple and very direct:

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**Principle 12.** Ultimately, whether political communicators are ethical or not is completely up to them.

---

I encourage political communicators to try to imagine a situation in which they may have to make a difficult choice before it actually occurs and decide how they will act and react if and when it does.

The steps and principles I’ve outlined here and explored in depth in the following chapters are a logical path through the process of creating effective political communication. Whether it is communication in an election campaign that is trying to persuade voters to back one candidate or another, from an elected or other government official trying to win backing or create opposition for a particular government policy, or by an outside interest group or advocacy organization trying to marshal public support to influence a decision by government, it’s all political communi-

cation, and it plays an increasingly important part in our society. The more we know about how it works and why, and the more informed we are about the process, its uses and misuses, and its practitioners, the more prepared we will be to make informed and reasoned decisions about our own futures.