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Spaces of the (un-) political: Re-thinking content analysis for political communication research.

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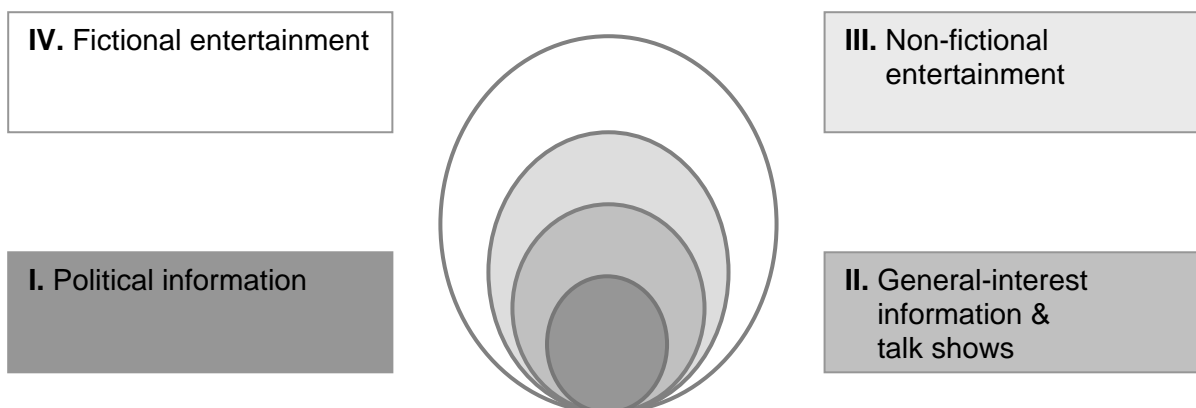
Spaces of the (un-) political: re-thinking content analysis for political communication research.

Since the 1980s, the processes of mass communication have undergone fundamental changes (Imhof et al., 2004). These shifts account for contemporary forms of mediated political communication, with television being the leading medium of this era: the appearance of politics disseminated by the media is not restricted to the genuine realm of political journalism any more (such as news and political TV magazines), but encompasses genres traditionally categorized as entertainment. For this diagnosis, manifold evidence is to be found: (1) news programs have been battling a loss of audiences for years; (2) political actors use appearances in non-political programs for election campaigning, (3) present themselves in late-night shows or play guest roles in daily soaps; (4) tabloid magazines pick up on the private realm of political elites; (5) and the movie industry increasingly refers to the political realm within their productions. At the same time, an increasing body of empirical research indicates that a growing number of recipients categorized as “marginally attentive citizens” (i.e. who show little or no interest at all in politics and belong to the increasing group of swing voters) (Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2000: 135), assemble their knowledge on political issues, actors and institutions by using primarily media content classified as non-political entertainment (cf. Brosius & Schwer, 2007).

Both the changes in mediated political communication and the knowledge assembled by effects research hold serious implications for our understanding of the role mass media play during election periods. Given these findings, our rationale is both theoretical and methodological: we argue that political communication research on elections

- a) should broaden its understanding of the mediated spaces of the political, and embrace entertaining media offerings (content-related theoretical argument);
- b) and consider both the various loci of the political *and* the different forms of attention audiences might pay to media content when conducting content analyses (reception-related methodological argument).

a) We propose a sphere model of mediated political communication on TV, which allows classifying the various shapes political messages during election periods can take on:



The appearance of the political within these spheres can be categorised according to the decreasing reference to explicit political content, to the extent to which the program serves information respectively entertainment needs, and the declining factuality from the inner sphere to the periphery. The genres subsumed under the four spheres differ not only in terms of content, but also in the way political reference comes to the attention of the audience.

Within the inner sphere (I. political information), we subsume genres classified as the output of political journalism, e.g. news and political magazines. This sphere is the primary locus of traditional political communication research. The surrounding sphere (II. General-interest information and talk shows) is categorised by a lesser degree of explicit political reference, which contains information programs such as tabloid and general-interest magazines. Political issues are presented not so much as the output of the political system (top-down), but from the electorate's point of view (bottom-up perspective). Sphere III persists of genres classified as non-fictional entertainment: reality TV, late-night-, comedy and game shows. This sphere addresses the private realm of the political: political actors may appear as celebrities outside their professional role, issues of political relevance are only referred to indirectly and in a rather subtle manner. For the peripheral sphere (IV. fictional entertainment), the fictional character is to be highlighted: daily soaps and movies may take up political scandals (e.g. Wag the Dog), or use certain politicians or international relations as basis for their narratives (e.g. JFK, James Bond). This is the realm where values, model identities and norms are salient features of the political.

b) If the political is not only to be found in the purely informative genres as described in sphere I, but may also take the shape of media offerings categorised as entertainment; and if the political is not a fixed and manifest entity of media content, but an outcome of cognitive processes with the recipient, this holds two serious implications for future content analyses:

- researchers ought not to restrict content analysis to the political journalism, but should include non-fictional and fictional entertainment genres in their analyses;
- if inferences from content analyses to possible political effects on voters are not to be given up entirely, we are to be more careful about multiple interpretations of messages on the audience's side. Graber (2004: 57) highlights the difficulties evolving out of such a research perspective. However, we argue, the complexity of tailoring content analyses according to possible interpretations by the audience can be handled, if the design is grounded theoretically beforehand, as we propose with the sphere model.

These theoretical and methodological considerations have consequences for future designs of election studies.

First, it is no longer sufficient to restrict our analyses to the "political" content of television programs only. As our model suggests, the outer spheres should be included, because they might be even more influential in shaping the formation of political opinions in general, and voting intentions in particular.

Second, content analyses have to take into account the different processing strategies for informational and entertainment programs. That is, well-known reception theories, such as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), ought to be incorporated into the design of content analyses.

Third, public relations campaigns of politicians have to be analysed by using input-output designs. We need to know how successful the political system can penetrate the outer spheres of our model.

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