What’s Good and Bad in Political Communication Research?
Normative Standards for Evaluating Media and Citizen Performance

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ABSTRACT

Political communication research often claims that empirical findings are important or relevant for democratic politics without identifying the value judgments that support these assertions. Because these value judgments often lurk in the background as unstated premises, empirical scholars frequently advance normative claims about the importance or relevance of their findings without being aware that they are doing so. This chapter introduces normative assessment as a way to advance the horizons of political communication research by bringing these usually hidden claims to light. Doing so clarifies the normative standards that empirical scholarship implicitly uses to evaluate media and citizen performance. Drawing attention to these normative standards makes it possible to spot theoretical inconsistencies in empirical research while simultaneously broadening the theoretical foundation of this research to better appreciate varied ways that democratic communication can occur within complex information systems. The purpose of normative assessment is not to contend that one state of the world is somehow ‘better’ than another in an absolute sense, but rather to evaluate when and why a pattern of findings might be more important for some social problems than others, or might align more readily with some theoretical concerns than others. This chapter details how normative assessments relevant for political communication research can be made and defended.

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Normative concerns about what is good or bad in news coverage have been a common feature of political communication scholarship since the discipline’s roots. They remain a familiar part of contemporary research. For example, one of the reasons for studying the characteristics of news coverage about public affairs is that we want to know whether this news coverage is fulfilling or failing the informational needs of democratic systems. But when normative concerns show up in political communication research, they often take the form of assertions rather than assessments. Normative assertions are evaluative claims that fail to mention the evaluative standards used to reach conclusions. Normative assertions about media performance often appear as throwaway lines in an empirical study’s concluding discussion or as preparatory throat-clearing before an empirical study is introduced.

It is no wonder that the typical scholarly response to such offhanded claims is a shrug of the shoulders. Assertions about what is good or bad in news coverage can be seen as harmless diversions that authors may indulge so long as they remain superfluous to the main points. Like the semicolon or the human appendix, one suspects that the typical normative assertion in political communication research is probably useless, and can therefore be tolerated so long as it does no harm.

This chapter is about something different and more helpful for advancing the horizons of political communication research: normative assessment. Whereas a normative assertion advances a particular evaluative claim about an empirical finding without clarifying the basis of evaluation, a normative assessment aims to identify multiple evaluative claims that could be
made about an empirical finding while also identifying the standards underlying those value judgments. This chapter details how normative assessments relevant for political communication research can be made and defended. But because normative assessments are less commonly seen in the political communication literature than normative assertions, the value of appraising the normative implications of our research may be less than obvious. A brief discussion on this point is therefore in order before describing the types of normative assessment that can be applied to empirical research findings and illustrating some benefits that closer attention to normative standards can bring to empirical research.

**Normative Assessment in Empirical Research**

Normative claims are prescriptive rather than descriptive. They address how things ought to be rather than how things are. By moving beyond description to question whether ‘how things are’ is good news or bad news for the practice of democratic politics, normative analysis can offend the sensibilities of empirical political communication scholars. Social-scientific research aims to understand what is, and until the ‘is’ gets figured out, speculation about what ought to be can seem at best premature, and at worst potentially damaging to the aim of conducting value-neutral empirical research. However, these important concerns come into play only when normative claims are used to advance arguments about what ‘ought’ to be. This is just one application of normative analysis, and probably the least useful for enriching empirical research. In contrast, this chapter concerns a different application of normative analysis.
Normative assessment aims to identify and acknowledge theoretical assumptions taking the form of value judgments that provide a rationale for empirical research or that provide a contextual foundation for empirical analysis. These value judgments are ever-present in empirical research. As Diana Mutz (2008: 523) notes, ‘empirical research findings are interesting and/or important precisely because they tell us something about some consequence that is positively or negatively valued.’ That is, claims about the importance or relevance of empirical findings to matters of public concern necessarily rest on normative value judgments. The problem is that these value judgments usually remain hidden in empirical research, and may even go unrecognized by the scholars who implicitly make them.

Normative assessment can be useful for empirical research by clarifying which value judgments are supporting claims about the importance or theoretical relevance of empirical findings. The point is not to contend that one state of the world is somehow ‘better’ than another in an absolute sense, but rather to evaluate when and why a pattern of findings might be more important for some social problems than others, or might align more readily with some theoretical concerns than others. Normative assessment makes no claim about how the empirical world ought to be. It focuses instead on clarifying how empirical findings may hold implications for different schools of thought that themselves make claims about how the world ought to be.

Making normative assessments more explicit in empirical research is important because empirical research is never entirely value-neutral. The relevance of empirical findings can be determined only when the researcher clarifies why those findings are important, and judgments of importance are almost always predicated on some type of normative claim. Bringing these
usually hidden claims to light is a particularly useful reason for making normative assessment a more routine component of empirical research: it clarifies the standards being used to make judgments about why a finding is important and what its broader theoretical implications might be.

The importance of normative assessment for political communication research has long been understood within the field. Among the leading figures in early political communication research, Paul Lazarsfeld (1957) famously advocated for the relevance of political philosophy to empirical research on mass politics. His argument advanced three main benefits of joining normative to empirical analysis: that the analytical precision of modern empirical research could lead to new appreciation of how philosophical arguments might be relevant to mass politics, that new hypotheses and conceptual refinements valuable for empirical analysis could emerge from a fresh look at ‘classic’ normative arguments, and that the joining of normative and empirical analysis could advance theoretical insights within political philosophy.

These benefits remain as important today as they were in Lazarsfeld’s era, and political communication scholarship stands to realize some particular gains from making normative assessments of empirical findings. Explicit attention to the criteria for drawing normative judgments could clarify a broader range of communication phenomena relevant for empirical study, beyond the typical focus on the content of mainstream news and the attentiveness of audiences to that mainstream news flow. Clarifying the normative dimensions of empirical findings would also define a wider horizon of normative starting points for making sense of research findings. For example, while much attention has been given to the ‘problem’ of
increasing market segmentation that leads to declining audiences for traditional news products (e.g., Katz 1996; Prior 2007), the same tendency can be seen as a ‘solution’ for democratic communication from a different normative vantage point (this point will be taken up at length later in this chapter). In addition, explicitly identifying the normative first principles undergirding an evaluative judgment helps to anchor empirical findings more clearly in larger conversations about the nature of democratic communication that are taking place beyond the ranks of political communication scholars (see Althaus 2006). Clarifying the relevance of empirical research to the concerns of political philosophy can help orient nonspecialists to the reasons why our empirical findings might be important to a broader range of scholars. Most important, normative assessment can help empirical political communication researchers avoid unrealistic expectations for media and citizen performance that arise from lack of reflective engagement with normative theories of democratic politics.

Normative assessment is therefore more like appraisal than argument. It clarifies the relevance of empirical findings for core debates in political philosophy rather than engaging directly in any kind of philosophical debate. Normative assessment detours around arguments about how to improve the quality of political communication. It sidesteps claims that one model of democracy or of the news is somehow better than another. Normative assessment aims merely to identify the core assumptions underlying statements of value that scholars use to assess the relevance or importance of their empirical findings. Such statements of value become judgments rather than assertions only when they are properly located and understood within larger theoretical frameworks. Normative assessment aims to do this by clarifying the implications that empirical findings have for normative theories about the ends and means of democratic politics.
Hidden Value Judgments in Empirical Research

Although normative assessments are routinely conducted in empirical political communication scholarship, they are rarely noticed because they are usually hidden in arguments that take the form of enthymemes rather than syllogisms. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* observes that most arguments made in everyday language borrow from the logical structure of formal syllogisms—if Premise X, and also Premise Y, then Conclusion Z—except that one of the premises is left unstated. A syllogism with a missing premise is called an enthymeme, and an enthymeme can be persuasive only when the unstated premise is supplied by the audience.

Most arguments in everyday life and even in formal scholarship take the form of enthymemes. Enthymematic arguments most commonly appear as a conclusion supported by a reason. If the conclusion seems sensibly drawn from the reason, it is because we are supplying an additional premise to complete the formal syllogism. In many cases, this unstated premise is a value judgment that explains why the stated reason is valid for drawing the conclusion. And because this form of argumentation is so familiar, we often fail to notice that the value judgment is even part of the argument.

A good example of this sort of enthymematic reasoning comes from Thomas Patterson’s (1993) *Out of Order*, which contrasts the different types of information supplied by campaign news coverage when elections are framed as a game between two players rather than as two competing visions for governing the country. Patterson’s argument about the historical importance of
shifting from policy-oriented news to strategy-oriented news in American election coverage is clear and concise:

The voters . . . bring a governing schema to the campaign. Their chief concerns are what government has done before the election, what it will do after the election, and how this will affect them. The game schema, however, asks them to concentrate on who is winning, and why. The result is a breakdown in the type of communication that should occur during the course of the election (88).

In this passage, Patterson argues that because game-framed news coverage has increasingly supplanted policy-framed news coverage, the electoral communication system in the United States is no longer serving the needs of citizens. The conclusion (‘the American electoral communication system is broken’) is smartly drawn from the stated reason (‘because game-framed election coverage has driven out policy-framed coverage’). But this argument also rests on an unstated premise, that voting decisions are supposed to be made from policy considerations. Only if this unstated premise also holds does it follow that the communication system is broken because game-framed election news has become the norm. But where does this unstated value judgment come from, and what normative argument can justify its application to this case? We don’t know, for it is left as an unexamined part of the theoretical framework undergirding Patterson’s argument.

There is nothing odd about this kind of omission. To the contrary, political communication studies make routine use of enthymematic reasoning, and with good effect. But this kind of
argument only persuades when the unstated value judgment already resonates with its audience. Such an argument can therefore only convince those who need no persuading. More importantly, enthymematic reasoning closes off lines of scholarly inquiry by directing attention away from unstated value judgments that are themselves contested and worthy of study. And because these unstated value judgments are therefore implicitly asserted rather than explicitly defined, the normative underpinnings of empirical research findings often go unnoticed and therefore unrecognized. Making them an explicit part of the scholarly conversation would do much to clarify what is really at stake in our research, because often disagreements about the importance or relevance of empirical findings are, at a deeper level, disagreements over the normative standards implicitly used to frame those empirical findings.

Normative assessment is therefore not some kind of new or unusual type of scholarly initiative. It has long been a standard part of empirical research, but conventional use of enthymematic reasoning has relegated it to an unstated backdrop of shared value judgments that implicitly justify the importance or relevance of empirical findings. A more valuable type of normative assessment would be more explicit, clarifying when and how value judgments are being applied to empirical findings, and would run deeper, clarifying the standards against which value judgments are drawn rather than merely asserting the relevance of a value.

**Four Levels of Normative Assessment**

In reflecting on the different contributions that normative assessment can make to empirical research, it is useful to think of these contributions as representing different levels of clarity and rigor in the process of articulating or justifying the normative relevance of empirical findings.
Four such levels of normative assessment are summarized in Table 1, with each row representing a progressively deeper level of clarity and rigor in orienting a study’s empirical findings to normative benchmarks.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

First-Level Normative Assessment

The first level of normative assessment occurs whenever enthymematic reasoning produces an implicit assertion of a finding’s relevance or importance to a normative question. It is probably the most common type of normative assessment in empirical political communication research, and shows up as an argument that a particular finding is good or bad (or welcome, or troubling) for this or that reason. In this first level of normative assessment, the relationship of a conclusion to a reason is moderated by a value judgment that is itself merely asserted without clarifying either its origin or its validity for the argument being made. First-level normative assessment often to assert the finding’s importance or relevance to a current controversy or set of longstanding concerns. This level of normative assessment is the least satisfying of the four because it tells us only what the evaluative claim is. Missing is any mention of the criteria on which the claim of relevance or importance is based, or any reason why the claim is a valid one. Nonetheless, even this level of normative assessment is valuable for empirical research because it expresses the author’s evaluative stance: by revealing an author’s claim about the potential importance of an empirical
finding, this first level of normative assessment invites further consideration of the criteria used to evaluate the finding’s potential relevance to normative questions.

Second-Level Normative Assessment

The second level of normative assessment goes beyond implicit assertion to identify values that can serve as criteria for drawing normative judgments about empirical findings. These ‘criterion values’ can take many forms. They are sometimes presented as desirable activities or outcomes such as including non-official viewpoints when constructing the news (e.g., Sigal 1973) or presenting news stories in a broader context to give them a larger meaning (e.g., Bennett 2008). Sometimes they take the form of abstract values—such as freedom, liberty, or order—whose realization is posited as the ultimate goal or purpose for democratic communication (e.g., McQuail 1992). Sometimes criterion values are defined explicitly (e.g., Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Blasi 1977; Mutz 2006; van Cuilenburg and McQuail 2003), but often they are the unstated premises implied by enthymematic reasoning. Occasionally one finds elaborate theoretical frameworks developed to support normative ideals for media performance developed from a single core value (e.g., Commission on the Freedom of the Press 1947; Meiklejohn 1960) or multiple core values that are all posited to be normatively equivalent in status (e.g., the importance of freedom, equality and order in McQuail 1992). But such efforts to provide explicit theoretical foundations for value identification remain exceptional.

Normative assessment at this second level is more commonly seen in implicit forms that define criterion values indirectly through positional critiques or idealized contrasts. Positional critiques
describe a finding as having too much or too little of a particular characteristic. News coverage is said to be too accepting of the government’s preferred framing of a foreign policy crisis, or overly critical during the campaign season, or insufficiently issue-oriented when reporting on the parties and candidates. Yet such positional claims invoke a criterion value without usually providing clear standards for how the value should be applied when drawing a normative judgment. The news is said to be too critical, or too passive, or too soft, without ever spelling out what ‘good’ news coverage is supposed to look like. Because evaluations are made without supplying a clear metric of judgment, positional critiques offer limited traction on the slippery slope of evaluating media and citizen performance.

Idealized contrasts have similar strengths and limitations as positional critiques. Idealized contrasts identify criterion values by comparing an empirical finding against an ideal state of the world. Unlike positional critiques, which apply a judgment to what is, this second approach emphasizes what ought to be. But like positional critiques, such claims about media performance tend to be asserted in passing and without considering rival perspectives. Idealized contrasts might begin as an offhanded remark like ‘classical democratic theory requires an informed citizenry’ (as claimed, among others, by Lippmann 1922), and proceed to draw an unfavorable inference about the media’s ability to deliver the information that these ideal citizens are posited to require. This claim about the importance of informed citizens in classical democratic theory happens to be false (e.g., Althaus 2003, 2006; Pateman 1970). But if false claims are widely seen as valid within a community of scholars, as in this case, they stand little chance of being rooted out.
In whatever form, normative assessment at this second level goes beyond that from the first level by identifying a criterion value to support the normative claim being advanced. The result is a nominal judgment, where an empirical finding is said to either lack or possess the criterion value being invoked. The normative rationale for the author’s evaluative stance is made clear by highlighting a criterion value, and for this reason the second level of normative assessment represents a significant theoretical step forward from the first level, which merely asserted a normative claim. But the second level of normative assessment involves assertion of a different sort, for it assumes the appropriateness of an evaluative criterion without developing a clear metric for determining how the criterion value should be applied or interpreted. If the news is insufficiently critical of government perspectives, how critical is critical enough? Without clear standards for applying a criterion value to an empirical finding, it will be difficult for other scholars to extend an author’s evaluative stance to other cases.

*Third-Level Normative Assessment*

The third level of normative assessment defines standards for applying criterion values to empirical findings. By defining such standards, normative assessment at the third level aims to draw judgments about the degree to which an empirical finding possesses a criterion value. As with the second level of normative assessment, criterion values at the third level can appear as positional critiques, idealized contrasts, or as explicit definitions. But instead of the nominal judgment supplied by the second level of normative assessment, the third level offers an ordinal or interval measure of the amount of a criterion value that is revealed in an empirical finding. The level of conceptual clarity required to produce such a measure yields two benefits for
empirical research. By translating abstract criterion values into operational forms, normative assessment at the third level clarifies the empirical relevance of these criterion values, which otherwise might appear so hopelessly abstract as to have little practical worth for empirical research. The other important benefit is that operational measures of criterion values, once defined, can be applied to other cases by different researchers. This puts normative assessment within the range of a larger community of scholars and allows for further empirical refinement of normative concepts.

Despite these several improvements over second-level appraisals, normative assessment at the third level is more commonly seen in media economics and communication policy than in political communication research. One reason is that political communication research rarely evaluates media compliance with licensing criteria or other regulatory frameworks, which are often derived from criterion values. Such analysis is more common outside political communication, where the need to develop clear standards for assessing such things as degree of market diversity and concentration of media ownership requires operationalizing abstract criterion values into measurable forms. Regulatory compliance is sometimes studied within political communication, and third-level normative assessment often accompanies such efforts. A good example is Westerståhl’s (1983) effort to define measurable criteria for the journalistic norm of objectivity that could be used to assess compliance with Swedish broadcast regulations. Another is McQuail’s (2003) nuanced theoretical framework for defining media responsibilities and evaluating media accountability from various normative perspectives.
Third-level normative assessment occasionally occurs as an unintended byproduct of rigorous hypothesis testing. One example comes from efforts by American scholars to measure the degree of political bias in news coverage, where bias is understood comparatively as any substantial difference between media outlets in numbers of positive and negative stories, or in the overall amount of coverage devoted to one candidate over another, or in the evaluative tone of news coverage given to a particular topic (e.g., Hofstetter 1976; D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Gilens and Hertzman 2000). These studies often define bias in negative terms as the absence of even-handedness rather than in positive terms as the presence of particular content characteristics. In this way, the criterion values in these studies sometimes take the form of arbitrary benchmarks (e.g., relative parity in measured content characteristics) that have the primary virtue of being easy to test rather than being deeply resonant in normative theory. But as this example illustrates, normative assessment at even the third level can proceed without explicit normative theorizing or even clearly-defined criterion values.

Defining clear standards for applying criterion values to empirical findings provides a deeper form of normative anchoring than merely identifying abstract criterion values. But normative assessment at the third level shares an important shortcoming with first- and second-level normative analysis that limits its usefulness for empirical research. The various criterion values that are implicitly assumed in first-level assessment, identified in second-level assessment, and operationalized in third-level assessment can seem perfectly reasonable and appealing as standards for media or citizen performance when studied in isolation from other criterion values. But when taken together, it quickly becomes clear that satisfying one criterion value must often come at the expense of satisfying another (e.g., Gurevitch and Blumler 1990). For example,
increasing the amount of ‘serious’ news coverage of public affairs could, after a point, start driving some audience segments away from the news altogether. The value of providing a broad and sober perspective on events of the day would then be conflicting with the value of sustaining a broad audience for public affairs programming (cf. Mutz 2006). Conflicts of this sort among criterion values can only be resolved by somehow prioritizing their respective claims on media or citizen performance. This in turn requires broader normative frameworks to supply compelling rationales for ordering criterion values in particular ways, clarifying their functions and forms with respect to other criterion values, and determining which institutions or actors are responsible for carrying out various roles that might be associated with different criterion values.

Fourth-Level Normative Assessment

The fourth level of normative assessment draws upon larger theoretical frameworks to clarify not only which criterion values are relevant for evaluating particular empirical relationships but also how different criterion values are related to one another and how conflicts between criterion values can be resolved. To achieve this degree of conceptual clarity, theoretical anchoring points suitable for fourth-level normative assessment will often fall into two groups: comparative frameworks and system theories. Comparative frameworks develop evaluative criteria from empirical analysis that can be used to resolve tensions between competing criterion values. Some comparative frameworks derive this insight by contrasting the forms and functions of media or political institutions as they currently exist in different political units (e.g., Ferree et al. 2002; Kleinsteuber 2004; Wirth and Kolb 2004; Pfetsch 2004). Other comparative frameworks order the priority of different evaluative standards by analyzing the historical evolution of media
institutions (e.g., Åsard and Bennett 1997; Schudson 1998b; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Cook 2005; Høyer and Pöttker 2005), or political institutions (e.g., Bimber 2003; Dewey 1927; Habermas 1989; Manin 1997) to assess how—and how well—those institutions function in the present relative to the past. It is probably unusual for historical or comparative studies to actually engage in fourth-level normative assessment (notable exceptions include Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Schudson 1998a). But by drawing points of comparison between the past and the present or among similar entities at a single point in time, historical and comparative research furnishes important points of contrast that could be used to anchor normative assessments of media or citizen performance.

In contrast to the empirical comparisons afforded by comparative frameworks from past to present or across equivalent units, system theories posit abstract theoretical models of what ‘good’ democratic decision-making, participation, or communication looks like (e.g., Christians et al. 2009; Teorell 2006). For example, Benjamin Barber’s (1984) concept of ‘strong democracy’ provides a clear system of criterion values that can be used to evaluate the quality of democratic deliberation and citizen involvement in democratic politics. In contrast, Robert Dahl’s concept of polyarchy (1956, 1989) represents a rival system theory that provides a different ordering of criterion values from that supplied by Barber. The competing perspectives advanced by Barber and Dahl provide contrasting claims that can be usefully applied toward assess the meaning and relevance of empirical findings about political communication processes. Many system theories are specific enough to define a division of political labor among various actors or institutions. These actors or institutions may be tasked with special roles or functions
within a holistic framework that prescribes particular ends and means for democratic politics (e.g., Christiano 1996; Habermas 1996a, 2006; more generally, see Held 2006; Teorell 2006; Price and Neijens 1997). Because clarifying the tasks or roles that a particular actor or institution is responsible for completing often suggests a clear basis for evaluating how well those tasks or roles are being accomplished (Kuklinski and Quirk 2001; Lupia 2006), system theories that supply this level of detail are particularly valuable for fourth-level normative assessment.

System theories hold at least three practical advantages over comparative frameworks for fourth-level normative assessment. First, because system theories present abstract normative arguments rather than specific empirical comparisons, they can be more flexible and adaptive than comparative frameworks for fourth-level normative assessment. Because comparative frameworks are ideally used for evaluating apples against apples, applying this approach for normative assessment usually requires empirical findings that have fallen from apple trees. In contrast, system theories often can be used to assess pomegranates as easily as apples because the basis of comparison derives from reason rather than observation. The normative standards required for making value judgments are therefore more easily derived from systems theories than from comparative frameworks. Second, proper interpretation of historical precedents or comparable cases often requires immersion in a large and constantly updating body of contextual knowledge. System theories, in contrast, can often be applied to assess empirical findings at such a high level of generality that the opportunity costs of keeping current with relevant literatures remains fairly low after an initial investment to gain familiarity with salient and longstanding debates in normative democratic theory. Third, system theories tend to provide broader evaluative horizons than comparative frameworks. Rather than comparing the present to the past
or to other cases in the present, system theories can be used to compare the present to the future, and the future can be anything. This flexibility entails an obvious risk: the set of possible things that might someday be is infinitely larger than the set of actual things that have once been, and the practical value of speculative assessment probably goes down as the ceiling for speculative thinking goes up. But this risk of increasing irrelevance should be weighed against the countervailing risk of neglecting Hume’s guillotine.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume argued against deriving normative theory from empirical observation. Hume’s argument highlighted what became known as the ‘is-ought’ problem: the risk of deriving illegitimate normative arguments about what ‘ought to be’ from empirical observations about what ‘is.’ The is-ought problem finds a solution in Hume’s guillotine: if normative theory ought to originate in reason alone, then normative claims should be cleanly separated from any genesis in empirical observation. Although the importance of the is-ought problem to normative theory is contested, the practical wisdom of Hume’s guillotine can be seen in what may be the most well-known attempt in political communication research to derive normative theory from empirical observation: Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm’s classic (1956) *Four Theories of the Press*. Their effort seemed useful for a while, but its descriptive typology of press systems proved incomplete and increasingly time-bound as the years wore on (Nerone 1995; Christians et al. 2009). The main problem seems to be that the effort to synthesize a small number of normative typologies out of existing press systems sprung forward without a deeper grounding in normative democratic theory and without a sufficient appreciation of how its normative claims were reifying the empirical contours of a particular historical moment. As a result, the theoretical typology introduced by *Four Theories* is no longer widely used by political
communication scholars, nor is it clearly applicable to the differentiated media system of the 21st century. This is the practical risk of neglecting Hume’s guillotine: the most likely consequence of deriving normative standards from empirical observation is a shallow theoretical framework with a short shelf-life. Avoiding this outcome requires the use of comparative frameworks that are informed by larger normative debates in democratic theory (e.g., Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2000).

Normative assessment at the fourth level provides a powerful tool for clarifying the relevance of empirical findings for larger concerns in democratic politics, particularly when assessment proceeds from system theories. System theories allow the analyst to identify and operationalize criterion values for evaluating empirical findings by locating those criterion values within larger theoretical frameworks that define an entire system of roles and expectations for different actors and institutions along with the first principles that can order relevant criterion values when they conflict with one another. In this way, fourth-level normative assessment can identify evaluative criteria for normative judgments that are usually hidden in first-level assessment while avoiding many of the limitations common to second- and third-level assessment. And when well-known system theories are used in fourth-level normative assessment, the importance of empirical findings to different normative perspectives can be efficiently conveyed with a minimum of explanation.

Several notable examples of fourth-level normative assessment can now be found in the political communication literature (e.g., Baker 2002; Norris 2000; Ettema 2007; Delli Carpini et al. 2004; Mendelberg 2002; Dahlgren 2009; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Sunstein 2001), but this type of
normative assessment is still rarely seen in empirical studies. To illustrate the ease with which fourth-level normative assessment can be conducted, as well as the value to empirical scholarship for doing so, the rest of this chapter presents a fourth-level assessment of two current normative concerns in the political communication literature: the decline of social responsibility journalism and the increasing levels of audience segmentation across media properties.

Fourth-Level Normative Assessment in Practice

Different theories of democracy envision different roles for citizens to play, with some limiting citizen involvement to participating in occasional elections and others expecting citizens to deliberate actively and frequently about important matters of public policy (Habermas 1996b; Held 2006; Baker 2002). Contrary to popular myth, few theories of democracy require anything like a highly-informed citizenry as a precondition for popular rule (e.g., Althaus 2006, 2003; Pateman 1970). But the efficiency and quality of representation is likely to be enhanced under all theories of democracy as citizens become better informed about the actions of their elected representatives and the important public issues of the day (Althaus 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Against this backdrop, two important concerns have begun to occupy the attention of political communication researchers in recent years: the threats to the future of social responsibility journalism brought about by increased economic competition accompanying new nontraditional forms of public affairs content like ‘soft news’ outlets, blogs and social media (e.g., Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Gurevitch et al. 2009; Downie and Schudson 2009), and the increasing segmentation of news audiences into smaller groups of likeminded persons, caused in part by the
increasing availability of non-news entertainment programming (e.g., Katz 1996; Webster 2005; Prior 2007). Both developments appear to threaten traditional scholarly expectations of what ‘good’ democratic communication should look like. Yet the normative basis on which such a conclusion might be sustained remains unclear. Under what conditions does decreasing social responsibility journalism and increasing audience segmentation become a problem for democratic communication? Are there other normative perspectives that suggest different conclusions about the potential importance of these trends?

Assessing the normative relevance of these trends from the standpoint of three alternative models of political accountability—those posited by the democratic theories of republicanism, pluralism, and elitism—provides a useful context for clarifying the conditions under which these trends can be seen as a hindrance or a help to ‘good’ democratic communication. The discussion that follows draws heavily from Part II of Edwin Baker’s (2002) *Media, Markets, and Democracy*, as Baker has so ably contrasted the communication requirements of republican, pluralist, and elite models of democracy, as well as the forms of ‘complex democracy’ envisioned by theorists like Jürgen Habermas (1996a) and Thomas Christiano (1996). ‘Complex democracy’ is a hybrid of republicanism and pluralism and so is ignored in the present discussion for the sake of clarifying major lines of difference among the three traditional alternatives. The typology offered by Baker, whose main lines of argument are summarized in Table 2, is a stylized rendering of multiple strands of democratic theory representing broad traditions within political philosophy (see, for instance, the use of similar typologies in Habermas 1996b; Teorell 2006; Held 2006).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE
Republicanism can be thought of as rule by deliberated consensus, a system designed to help citizens discover their common interests by communicating with one another across lines of difference. Different models of republicanism place different responsibilities on citizens, but all tend to lean heavily on citizens to articulate, defend, and advance their interests in search of the best solution for the whole. In extreme forms of republicanism, such as those advanced by Rousseau and carried forward in the communitarian tradition, citizens might be expected to legislate for themselves, political representation by elected officials might be minimal or absent, and collective choices might be decided primarily by the force of the better argument.

Pluralism is rule by competing groups, where likeminded citizens join together to advance their particular interests by bringing collective pressure to bear on governing institutions. Institutions serve to regulate the processes by which political decisions are reached, so that no group is unfairly advantaged in the competition for scarce resources. Although pluralism is sometimes equated with liberalism, pluralism is one form of liberalism and is of more recent vintage than liberal theory, which traces back to 18th century thinkers like Madison and Locke and forward through John Stuart Mill to contemporaries like Dahl (1989) and Rawls (1971). Within liberal theories, ensuring a fair political procedure for collective decision-making becomes the most proximate way of producing good collective decisions. Instead of judging the quality of the outcome, pluralism therefore emphasizes the quality of the process. This typically implies that the strongest pressure operating under fair rules should prevail.
Elitism is a minimalist model of democracy with the fewest expectations for ordinary citizens. A premise often shared by elite models is that the world has become so complicated and politics so obtuse that ordinary citizens have lost the capacity to identify their political interests and solve their political problems. Although it may sound distasteful, this premise is shared not only by elitism but also by a wide range of contemporary theories of democracy, as demonstrated in the exchange between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey from the 1920s (Dewey 1927; Lippmann 1922, 1925). Both Lippmann (embracing an elite form of liberalism) and Dewey (advancing classic republican ideals within a liberal institutional framework) shared the premise that the complex structure of modern society made it difficult for ordinary citizens to judge their political interests. Their exchange hinged on whether this problem was potentially remediable. Within elite theories such as those advanced by Schumpeter (1976 [1942]) and Weber (Ciepley 1999; Held 2006 chapter 5), competition among teams of experts or charismatic leaders produces political decisions. As this competition ensues, citizens play the critical role of umpire by removing from office those leaders or teams of experts judged least desirable or competent.

Limited levels of citizen vigilance threaten democratic accountability most directly when democracy is conceived along republican lines, less so when it is conceived along pluralist lines, and least in elite models of democracy. Baker offers an important theoretical contribution for political communication research by outlining the ideal media systems implied by each of these models of democracy (2002: 148-153). He notes that republicanism works best when it is served by information media that promote civic virtue in citizens, expose lapses in virtue among political leaders, and create a common forum for objective, informed, and inclusive debate. This republican ideal for political accountability, exemplified in the trustee or social responsibility
model of political journalism (Commission on the Freedom of the Press 1947; Siebert et al. 1956), is precisely what many political communication scholars seem to expect of the contemporary media environment.

However, the ideal media systems for pluralism and elitism would have quite different characteristics. Pluralism’s ideal media system, according to Baker, would be tasked with providing the necessary conditions for sustaining a multiplicity of groups and helping those groups promote their particular interests. News media would serve pluralism best by telling groups when their interests were at stake, mobilizing groups to promote those interests, and making officials aware of what groups want. This view of journalism’s role harkens back to Tocqueville’s (1969 [1835]: Part II, chps. 6 and 7) vision of the newspaper as a former and sustainer of group-based civic engagement. A group-based version of democracy risks being poorly served by a news system that delivers an objective, factual account of public affairs designed to appeal to the widest possible audience. Instead, the ideal news system for pluralist democracy would be narrowly targeted to specific groups. The goal is not that each group would have its views represented within every channel of communication, but that each group would have its own channels of communication to keep it abreast of developments affecting its welfare, help it form persuasive arguments in support of its interests, and allow it to convey those interests to political leaders. This idea is similar to the subaltern counterpublic system envisioned by political theorist Nancy Fraser (1992), in which a large number of group-specific public spheres provide communicative resources for groups to debate effectively in the main public sphere. In other words, the ideal media system for pluralism would be founded on advocacy
journalism so that groups could be served with rhetorical ammunition along with factual information (e.g., Lasch 1990).

Baker suggests that the ideal media system for elite democracy would enable yet a third version of political accountability. According to Baker, elite democracy works best when the news media do mainly two things: promote the legitimacy of the expert-driven political system, and expose instances of corruption or incompetence among political leaders. Promoting the legitimacy of the system helps to insulate expert leaders from the destabilizing attacks of demagogues, who might threaten to mobilize a normally quiescent mass public against that public’s own interests (which, in this view, are understood best by experts). Exposing corruption or incompetence helps to maximize the efficiency of an elite-driven political system by providing a market mechanism for exposing rent-seeking behavior, punishing inept officials and holding leaders responsible for bad choices. It is notable that elitism requires nothing like a socially responsible news media to do this job: a market-driven, info-taining, Chicken Little news system built around fulminating party hacks and scandal-mongering slime-slingers could probably meet all the requirements for political accountability in an elite democracy so long as it offered no fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the political order. Social responsibility journalism might provide a useful service for elitism, but elite democracies probably could function without it. An advocacy-based news system, on the other hand, could be downright threatening: it would tend to serve as a destabilizing presence by mobilizing groups of citizens around their perceived interests in ways that could undermine the smooth operation of an expert-driven democratic order.
These three theories of democracy outlined by Baker differ not only in terms of ideal media systems for maintaining political accountability, but also in how those models of accountability are undermined or enhanced by the growing levels of market segmentation in news systems around the world. Market segmentation is the division of one large potential audience into several smaller actual audiences, each exposed to different media. Increased levels of market segmentation tend to produce more specialized and customized content, all the better to satisfy varied consumer preferences for information delivery and form. Higher levels of segmentation also tend to produce specialized information flows to different audiences, which could reduce the chances that a population would hear about major issues of public concern at roughly the same time or in the same way. At the extreme, high levels of audience segmentation could insulate audiences from news of politics altogether, polarize attitudes about public problems, and shield incumbent politicians from being held accountable through the electoral process (e.g., Sunstein 2001; Prior 2007; Katz 1996).

Baker points out that higher levels of audience segmentation are anathema to the deliberative and broadly inclusive form of political accountability envisioned by republicanism. A gradually-fragmenting media system, growing audience segmentation, and lack of sustained popular attention to public affairs bode poorly for the republican ideal of an ever-engaged citizenry served by a small number of socially responsible news organizations. But the same developments have little consequence for the more limited forms of political accountability required for elite democracy. Quite the contrary, market-driven news that caters to popular preferences rather than challenging them nicely serves the needs of elite democracy. Baker suggests that the increasing segmentation of the news audience may matter little to the forms of accountability that hold elite
democracy in check. Elitism has no important role prescribed for collective deliberation by the citizenry, requiring only that citizens exercise an occasional form of popular sovereignty limited to the ballot box.

There is an interesting twist when it comes to accountability mechanisms for pluralist democracy. The same developments that spell bad news for republican forms of democracy and indifferent news for elitism make for potentially good news when it comes to pluralism and its distinctive version of group-based political accountability. Baker argues that higher levels of audience segmentation serve the needs of pluralist democracy by increasing market incentives for news outlets to diversify into specialty products catering to the needs of distinctive groups. The growing prominence of partisan news outlets on cable television and the World Wide Web is a welcome development for the accountability mechanisms supporting pluralist conceptions of democracy. Historically, advocacy journalism has been the norm in democratic societies rather than the exception. And although the growth of sensationalizing and partisan news outlets is taken in some corners as a sign of how far news standards have fallen (e.g., Patterson 1993; Schudson 1998b), even in the United States the standard medium for public affairs news from colonial times until well after World War I was either a partisan newspaper or a sensationalistic outlet catering to ‘lowbrow’ tastes, tracing its lineage from the penny press of the 1830s through the yellow press of the early 20th century (e.g., Hamilton 2004; Schudson 1978, 1998a; Schudson and Tifft 2005). From the standpoint of pluralist theories of democracy, the slow demise of social responsibility journalism in the United States over the past 30 years can be seen not as a cause for alarm but rather a return to a more vibrant and typical accountability system that had served the needs of democracy long before the rise of objective journalism in the early 20th
century. That noted, any erosion of the overall audience for news may be a cause for concern even for pluralism.

In short, Baker argues that different theories of democracy propose different models of accountability and are served best by different kinds of media systems. His analysis reminds us that the meaning of changes in the forms of political journalism and the segmentation of news audiences depends on one’s theoretical vantage point. Recent developments may be cause for concern when our preferred model of democracy traces back to republicanism, or its newer hybrids proposed by Habermas and others. But those developments could potentially better suit the needs of pluralist democracy than the ‘common carrier’ news system that had been in place in many countries for the latter half of the 20th century. These same developments have an uncertain relevance for elite theories of democracy.

Baker’s argument makes clear that common concerns articulated in political communication research about increasing market segmentation and declining standards for ‘quality’ journalism appear to be premised on a republican conception of democracy. Curiously, this narrow theoretical orientation to republicanism also happens to guide much empirical research on public opinion (Althaus 2006). Yet few scholars articulating such concerns would probably endorse the theoretical assumptions and institutional structures that republican models of democracy entail. Republican theories, particularly those in the deliberative tradition, are controversial among political philosophers for having extremely high—many would say unrealistic—expectations for citizen involvement in politics. Many republican theories, following the lead of Rousseau, reject the idea of political representation and posit that self-government necessarily entails direct
government by the people without political intermediaries like elected officials. Few political communication scholars would probably find much wisdom in such a system. Moreover, although political communication research often contrasts ‘good’ policy-oriented news coverage against ‘bad’ news coverage emphasizing the personality and character of individual politicians (e.g., Capella and Jamieson 1997; Mughan 2000; Sabato et al. 2000), republican theories of democracy are deeply concerned about the moral virtue of politicians, since the aims and outcomes of citizen deliberation could easily be misused by self-serving leaders (e.g., Held 2006; Thucydides 1960). During periods in which republican ideals for democracy reigned supreme in the United States, news coverage of character issues and personal failings was the norm while news coverage of policy was the exception (Schudson 1998a). This suggests that character coverage addressing the private lives of public officials is at least as important as policy coverage of political issues within republican theories of democracy, despite expectations to the contrary among political communication scholars.

By revealing the theoretical origins of common expectations about what makes for ‘good’ political communication, normative assessment at the fourth level identifies the conditions required to claim that an empirical finding is important or relevant to a larger set of concerns. This helps to confirm that the claim is being made accurately, and that other implications entailed by the claim are taken into account. By drawing attention to theoretical ‘blind spots’ within empirical research, normative assessment at the fourth level also highlights unfamiliar normative perspectives that might warrant further consideration. Viewing the erosion of social responsibility journalism and the growing segmentation of news audiences from the perspective of Baker’s (2002) normative assessment raises questions rarely asked in political communication
research about the merits of advocacy journalism, pluralist models of democracy, and today’s highly segmented media systems relative to social responsibility journalism, republican models, and of the less-segmented media systems of the past. Some might even find these perspectives to offer more compelling and nuanced frameworks for democratic communication than those grounded in the conventional esteem for social responsibility journalism and, by extension, republican theories of democracy.

In short, normative assessment at the fourth level not only leads scholars to check whether their empirical findings hold different implications when viewed from different normative perspectives, but also helps to temper unrealistic expectations for media and citizen performance that are sometimes advanced within empirical scholarship. Criterion values for news coverage or citizen involvement are sometimes invoked or admired without recognizing that they conflict with other desirable criterion values. Democracy is, among other things, a process for legitimizing the difficult tradeoffs that must be made among all of the worthy goals that might be put before the people. Yet because such tradeoffs are often neglected by empirical researchers, the normative expectations in which empirical findings are couched often entail hidden consequences. Rephrasing a second-level claim like ‘The news is insufficiently critical’ into a third-level question like ‘How critical is critical enough’ invites greater empirical specificity, but only by addressing fourth-level concerns like ‘What is the purpose of critical news’ does it become clear where the important tradeoffs lie. And only at that level does it become clear that the real contention is often not over how adversarial the news should be, but rather which model of democracy should the news be organized around. From Baker’s analysis, we can infer that the news should probably be most critical of government claims in an advocacy press system, since
pluralism places greater emphasis on mobilizing the likeminded around their narrow interests than on enlightening the citizenry as a whole regarding its common interests. If proponents of a ‘less-passive’ news system have something in mind other than advocacy journalism in the service of pluralistic mobilization, fourth-level normative assessment can clarify the end goal that critical news is supposed to be serving as well as the larger theoretical framework in which that goal is posited as an important aim.

Conclusion

Political communication research often asserts that empirical findings are important or relevant for democratic politics without identifying the value judgments that support these assertions. One consequence is that although empirical studies often make normative claims, empirical scholars may fail to recognize those claims as normative because the value judgments are lurking in the background as unstated premises. Empirical scholars therefore routinely advance normative arguments about the importance or relevance of their findings to the larger world without being aware that they are doing so. Because these normative arguments are often disconnected from their theoretical origins, inconsistencies among normative claims become hard to spot and the demands of competing claims become difficult to resolve.

The goal of normative assessment is to address these problems by locating, disclosing, and refining the normative assumptions already being used by empirical researchers to explain the importance of their findings for the practice of democratic politics. Instead of leaving matters by concluding that the news is somehow too critical—or not critical enough—normative assessment
invites us to consider what the news is supposed to do or be from different theoretical perspectives. The purpose of normative assessment within empirical research is never to assert one’s preferred version of reality. It is rather to clarify the chain of assumptions that lead from first principles to claims about media and citizen performance. Normative assessment aims to supply the missing ‘backstory’ that is required to evaluate a claim that the media ought to be something other than what it is, or seems to be.

Inattention to the normative origins of value judgments in political communication research can give rise to peculiar types of theoretical dissociation. On the one hand, some criterion values drawn from republican theory are often emphasized and celebrated in the literature (e.g., the importance of including multiple perspectives in public deliberation, an emphasis on ‘serious’ analysis of public affairs) while other important criterion values (e.g., scrutinizing the moral health of politicians) are misrecognized and incorrectly assumed to interfere with ‘good’ democratic communication even though republican theory considers them essential. On the other hand, it often goes unrecognized that common concerns in empirical political communication research about apparent problems like increasing market segmentation and the decline of social responsibility journalism are mainly ‘problems’ for a particular school of thought within normative democratic theory. Only after other schools of thought are recognized and brought into the conversation does it become apparent that the bad news for republicanism might be good news for pluralism and a matter of indifference for elitism.

Making the value judgments that underlie empirical analysis a more explicit part of the scholarly conversation would provide several benefits for empirical research in political communication.
Besides clarifying how claims of relevance or importance are based on value judgments that are themselves context-dependent, making normative assessment a more common part of empirical analysis would strengthen areas of theoretical weakness in empirical scholarship. Broadening the theoretical perspectives common to political communication scholarship is also likely to open up new areas of empirical research, as new hypotheses and research questions arise from a broader consideration of what democratic theorists have to say about democratic communication.

The need to draw from broader currents of normative thinking about ‘good’ communication is especially apparent today. Many prevailing assumptions about what’s good and bad in political communication seem closely tied to a top-down, mass-audience, mainstream news system that no longer exists. The rapid emergence of the complex and extremely porous information exchange system now in place throughout the world demands new ways of thinking about what communication is supposed to do for democracies, how that communication is supposed to take place, and who is supposed to be communicating. This systemic transition now underway in the structure of democratic communication raises theoretical problems that parallel those confronting political communication researchers in the early days of the field. Around the time of World War Two, the new modes of empirical inquiry being applied to mass communication scholarship were giving rise to theoretical drift that threatened to consign much scholarship to idle speculation. The warning served by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (1948: 109) regarding the need to properly ground normative claims about media and citizen performance within larger theoretical frameworks remains as apt today as it was more than a half century ago:
Unless we locate these patterns in historical and sociological terms, we may find ourselves confusedly engaged in condemning without understanding, in criticism which is sound but largely irrelevant.
Appendix: Recommended Readings that Review System Theories Useful for Fourth-Level Normative Assessment


References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Normative Assessment</th>
<th>Type of Normative Claim</th>
<th>Form of Normative Claim</th>
<th>Value for Empirical Research</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attaching a normative label to a finding</td>
<td>Assertion about the relevance or importance of a finding</td>
<td>‘Finding A is troubling because of Reason X’</td>
<td>Expresses the author’s evaluative stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying criterion values</td>
<td>Judgment about whether a finding lacks or possesses a criterion value</td>
<td>'Finding A is troubling because it lacks Quality X'</td>
<td>Provides a rationale for the author’s evaluative stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining standards for applying or interpreting criterion values</td>
<td>Judgment about the level of a criterion value that a finding lacks or possesses</td>
<td>'Finding A is troubling because it has less than Y amount of Quality X'</td>
<td>Clarifies how the rationale for the author’s evaluative stance could be applied to other cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordering competing values and standards within system theories or comparative frameworks</td>
<td>Judgment about which criterion values are appropriate for evaluating a finding</td>
<td>'Finding A is troubling from the standpoint of Theory Z, because Theory Z requires Y amount of Quality X'</td>
<td>Positions the author’s evaluative stance within larger theoretical debates</td>
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</table>
### Table 2: Three Theories of Democracy, Three Models of Political Accountability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of Democracy</th>
<th>Role of Citizens Beyond Voting</th>
<th>Assumes that Citizens</th>
<th>What Should Ultimately Prevail</th>
<th>Primary Role of the News Media</th>
<th>'Best Fit' Media System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Republicanism:</strong></td>
<td>Follow public affairs and deliberate collectively</td>
<td>Discover their common interests</td>
<td>The best argument</td>
<td>• Promote civic virtue in citizens &lt;br&gt; • Expose corruption/lapses in virtue &lt;br&gt; • Create a common forum for informed, objective, and inclusive debate</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Journalism; Low Audience Segmentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rule by deliberated consensus</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pluralism:</strong></td>
<td>Form groups and bargain collectively</td>
<td>Advance their particular interests</td>
<td>The strongest pressure (under fair rules)</td>
<td>• Tell groups when their interests are at stake &lt;br&gt; • Mobilize groups to promote their interests &lt;br&gt; • Make officials aware of what groups want</td>
<td>Advocacy Journalism; High Audience Segmentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rule by interest groups</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Elitism:</strong></td>
<td>Remain loyal to the political system</td>
<td>Cannot identify their interests</td>
<td>The least corrupt and least inept leaders</td>
<td>• Expose public corruption and incompetence &lt;br&gt; • Promote the legitimacy of the system</td>
<td>Either Market-Driven or Social Responsibility Journalism; Degree of Audience Segmentation May Be Irrelevant</td>
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<tr>
<td>rule by experts</td>
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Key Terms for Indexing

accountability mechanisms
advocacy journalism
audience segmentation
citizen performance
classical democratic theory
comparative frameworks
complex democracy
criterion values
deliberative democracy
democratic theory
elitism
empirical findings
enthymemes
Hume’s guillotine
ideal media systems
idealized contrasts
is-ought problem
liberalism
market segmentation
market-driven journalism
media institutions
media performance
models of democracy
news audiences
news media
normative assertion
normative assessment
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positional critiques
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social responsibility journalism
soft news
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syllogisms
system theories
theories of democracy
trustee journalism
value judgments