In Memory of David Swanson

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In Memory of David Swanson

This issue of Political Communication is dedicated to David Swanson, who died unexpectedly on November 1. It is fitting that we remember him with an issue devoted to research on the media and international affairs. The subject was of great interest to David, and he published it in the journal during his editorship. It is fitting, too, that my brief remarks are followed by heartfelt tributes to David from Doris Graber, his predecessor as editor; by Susan Herbst, who chaired the journal’s Publications Committee during his editorship; by his coauthor Paolo Mancini; and by an evocative obituary from his colleague Scott Althaus.

David edited this journal from 1999 until 2002. Before taking over, I asked him which of an excruciatingly long list of responsibilities and duties were required of the editor. His e-mail response was characteristically pithy and precise: “the short answer is everything.”

When David succeeded Doris Graber as editor, he wrote the following in the journal: “The model she established for the journal was based on the highest standards of scholarship, hospitality to all scholarly disciplines and research approaches that can make important contributions to understanding our subject, desire to welcome all of our best scholars—from the most senior researchers to novices just entering our field—to the pages of Political Communication, and determined to ensure that all prospective authors’ encounters with the journal were productive and collegial.”

These words eloquently describe David’s own editorship of the journal. He published articles by a diversity of scholars including Scott Althaus, William Benoit, William Eveland, Regina Lawrence, Tali Mendelberg, Markus Prior, David Ryfe, Mary Douglas Vavrus, and Gadi Wolfsfeld. Subjects included key concepts such as framing, deliberation, and the spiral of silence; emerging topics such as public journalism and the Internet; and controversial issues such as Clinton-Flowers, abortion, and animal experimentation.

I celebrate David’s accomplishments, mourn his death, and miss his counsel and collegiality.

David L. Paletz
Editor, Political Communication
Professor, Department of Political Science
Duke University

One of the human brain’s most wondrous capabilities is the power to relive memories to the fullest. We can see and hear what we have seen and heard before in its splendid richness of colors, shapes, sounds, and rhythms. We can feel what we felt before almost as vividly as earlier, and we can recapture our past thoughts.

That’s why I can still see and hear and enjoy my last encounter with David Swanson at a professional meeting, even though he has left us for greener pastures. I can still hear him talk compassionately about his ailing cat one minute, switch quickly to discussing the serious business of university finances, and, seamlessly, continue on with a thumbnail sketch of his comparative studies of media systems in various parts of the world.
David Swanson was a multidimensional man, and his memory will stay vividly alive for all who knew him.

My special tie to David springs from our shared interest in *Political Communication*, which was launched as a joint journal by members of the Political Communication Section of APSA and the Political Communication Division of ICA. David was the second editor, I was the first. I can still see David’s pleasant, slightly quizzical smile as he walked into my office on the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois to discuss an orderly transition. I thought it would take us all day to settle the nitty-gritty details and possibly argue about policy issues. It was nothing like that. We spent very little time on detail because David seemed to know instinctively what needed to be done, and our conversations about policy were fun—thoughtful, visionary to a degree, and extremely cordial, in line with David’s nonconfrontational style of operations.

David’s election as editor was a stroke of extremely good luck. In the first issue under his editorship, he outlined a policy of openness to the wide range of topics, methods, and approaches that characterize the political communication field, and he pledged that he would strive to attract an ever larger number of studies by scholars beyond the borders of the U.S. Thanks to his vast network of connections to colleagues abroad—and to his great skills in twisting arms gently—he was able to accomplish what he promised. Few other U.S. scholars could have matched that record.

It would take a lengthy essay to discuss David’s many contributions to the journal and its readers in the 1999–2001 years. Let me merely mention a few highlights here and leave the larger task to others. During his first year as editor, David published a seminal symposium on the “Third Age of Political Communication” that examined emerging trends in politics, media organizations, and media practices from a worldwide perspective. The symposium was based on a meeting of leaders of the political communication field assembled in London under the sponsorship of the journal and its publisher. Arranging such a meeting and seeing it through was a first in the journal’s history.

The second year saw an equally seminal issue devoted to Communication and Civic Engagement in Comparative Perspective. It is an impressive collection of essays whose authors examine the interface between media and citizenship in the 21st-century communication environment. David Swanson’s concluding essay is a gem of clarity and breadth—it distills the essence of the 100 page debate into a mere five pithy pages.

In the final year of his editorship, 2001, it fell to David to publish several essays that focused on the work of Steven Chaffee. It is eerie to compare the press release in which Chaffee’s university announced his unexpected and premature death in that year with David Swanson’s premature death a scant three years later. The press release speaks about “a distinguished professor of communication” who was “an internationally recognized authority on mass communication and its effects on society” and died suddenly from a heart condition. It mentions that the deceased was “among the most influential scholars in his field” whose research “focused on a wide range of issues dealing with the effects of media.” But more than that, this “giant with few peers” was characterized as a generous, sensitive, insightful, and inspirational friend and colleague, a portrait that perfectly describes his peer, David Swanson.

Our specialty has suffered another body blow with David’s passing. But the memories live on, and we are grateful for that.

Doris Graber
Professor of Political Science
Adjunct Professor of Communication
University of Illinois at Chicago
I worked closely with David on *Political Communication* during his time as editor, back when I was chair of the joint Publications Board for our APSA/ICA Political Communication divisions.

It was a tremendous pleasure and honor. David was, without question, one of the most sensible and sharpest people in our subfield. He was an ideal editor for our journal, especially in the early days when it needed a particularly strong hand and close attention. In his low-key way and with a wonderful sense of humor, David was a compelling leader, dedicated to building lasting infrastructure for all of us. I’ll miss him tremendously, as will so many other colleagues around the nation. Let us celebrate and pay tribute to David’s life by continuing to make *Political Communication* a high-quality journal, one that pushes scholars to recognize the centrality of media and communication in politics; I am certain that would make him extraordinarily proud.

Susan Herbst
Dean of the College of Liberal Arts
Professor of Political Science
Temple University

To pick olives. That was David’s plan for October 2004. He was supposed to come to Perugia to help me at my country house. But I had to go to Moscow to discuss my latest book, and so his trip with his wife Sharon to Perugia was cancelled. David loved to be involved in some sort of thing that was strange or different from his daily routine. In spite of his exterior figure, which appeared serious and formal, he was the kind of person who was open to novelty and even to adventure. This was his strange contradiction: external formality but an interior attitude that was nonconformist. It is not by chance that David was one of the very few smoking U.S. scholars I have ever known.

In David’s character there was something linked to his formal, exterior appearance: his systematic nature, and this is what David taught me the most. I remember that when I initially wrote the first draft of the introduction to our “Politics, Media and Modern Democracy,” he destroyed what I wrote not because it was wrong but because my writing was not following the right order. We discussed it for an entire morning in his university office and, in the end, I had to admit that he was right, and probably the success of the book depended also on this, the continuous tendency to find the right order and the right, logical flow of events, statements, and discourse developments.

I may admit, but I didn’t experience it personally, that this part of his character was probably what some people didn’t like. He appeared too “rigid” to many, if this is the proper English word. Probably this was the reason he didn’t succeed in being elected ICA president when he decided to run for that position. Being outside of the U.S. framework of personal relations and power structures that govern the ICA organization, his defeat still appears incomprehensible to me. I don’t remember if he told me anything about his defeat, but I am sure he suffered a lot for this.

Appearance and substance. He looked very American to me and, I imagine, to many, but at the same time he was so curious about the world outside the U.S. We first met in Dublin in 1990 at the ICA conference. I had the precise feeling that he was very curious to meet “this strange Italian guy who wants to work with me.” So we started working together almost always trying to look beyond the U.S. reality, at least as regards comparing, U.S. media and politics with those of other countries. Our last research project
was still founded on the curiosity that I shared with him in seeing how European countries viewed the U.S. presidential campaign of 2000. We organized a panel on this in Washington in 2001, but then the project collapsed. I was too busy with other projects, and he had just moved to his new administration position at the University of Illinois. We talked a lot about this but, still, I am not sure whether or not he liked his new position. In New Orleans, where we last met, we discussed this issue again. It seems to me that, yes, he approved of his decision to move to a more powerful duty, but, at the same time, he was missing opportunities, essentially the opportunities to satisfy the curiosity that academic research could offer to him.

Ciao David.

Paolo Mancini
Professor
Dipartimento Istituzioni e Società, Università di Perugia

David Swanson, the second editor of this journal and a prominent figure in the field of political communication research, died unexpectedly on November 1. David’s research on the cross-national analysis of news systems and the social impact of mass communication was first-rate and trend-setting. He was coauthor of one book; editor or co-editor of four others; author or coauthor of 24 refereed articles, many in the top communication journals; and author of another 34 scholarly publications. He also directed the dissertations of 14 doctoral students, several of whom went on to become leaders in their fields.

David was quite modest about all of this, as he much preferred the backstage to the limelight. When pressed to describe his research interests, his standard response was “I study the political communication practices of countries that have interesting vacation spots.”

Indeed, David was known to have held that life was incomplete without a free trip to Europe every year. Yet, long after it is historians of the discipline rather than graduate students in the discipline who are reading his scholarly writings, his behind-the-scenes impact on the field of political communication will continue to influence generations of scholars.

A bit of history. In 1972, when David first came as a newly minted PhD to the Department of Speech at the University of Illinois, there was no officially recognized subfield of political communication. Indeed, at that time the primary outlet for research on media and politics in the communication discipline was the Quarterly Journal of Speech. David’s interest in building a scholarly community devoted to the study of media and politics led him to assist in establishing the International Communication Association’s Political Communication Division in 1973, and the American Political Science Association’s political communication division in 1990. It was also in 1990 that David and Dan Nimmo published their path-breaking New Directions in Political Communication, which, in its ambitious effort to reimagine the scope and methods of political communication scholarship, quickly took its place as one of the most influential books in the history of the field.

It is in the context of the New Directions agenda that David’s lasting contribution to our field of study is best appreciated. In the 1970s and 1980s, the newly minted field of political communication focused primarily on what was commonly called the “voter
persuasion paradigm”: how communication worked in the campaign context to influence the attitudes and behaviors of voters, primarily in the context of American politics, and mainly in the realm of presidential campaigns. David’s legacy to the field is found less in the number of his many influential publications, but rather in the lasting institutions he helped create and in his behind-the-scenes influence on the community of political communication scholarship. Among his primary contributions to the field:

- Internationalizing the field by cultivating relationships with researchers around the globe, particularly those from Asia, Europe, and Israel, and bringing them together to share the findings of their work.
- Making the field more cross national by modeling how research could profitably compare political communication practices in different national settings.
- Bridging the divides among disparate research traditions within the field, particularly the division between qualitative/humanistic and quantitative/social science scholarship.
- Making the field of political communication truly interdisciplinary by serving in numerous elected and appointed offices within the three major disciplinary organizations (ICA, APSA, and NCA) and serving on the editorial boards of nearly all of the major journals in the field.
- Setting research agendas for the field by focusing on the big picture and on the interrelationships between different elements of political communication that had tended to be studied in isolation from one another.

David served as the second editor of this journal, taking over from Doris Graber in 1999. He inherited a publication that had been established, under Doris’s guiding hand, as the premier journal in our subfield. When he handed the editorial reins over to David Paletz in 2002, Swanson’s impact on the journal was already clear: He had taken a specialty publication and substantially broadened its reach and impact beyond the ranks of political communication scholars. In 1999, during David’s first year as editor, articles from Political Communication had been cited 140 times in other journals. In 2003, the year following his final issue, Political Communication articles had been cited 269 times in other journals. Moreover, between 1999 and 2003, the journal’s impact ranking rose from 21st to 15th among the 43 communication journals and from 37th to 25th among the 78 political science journals.

After 2002, David gave more of his attention to administrative duties. He had been head of the Speech Communication Department at the University of Illinois since 1994, and in 2001 he was promoted to Associate Provost at the University of Illinois. But he remained engaged with scholarship in political communication and regularly contributed chapters to edited volumes in the field despite his heavy load of administrative responsibilities.

There are many things that David’s colleagues will hold in fond remembrance. His dry wit, for one. Following his 1971 job interview for an assistant professor slot at the University of Illinois, he wrote a brief note to then-head Roger Nebergall: “I am enclosing my airline ticket stub to send in with the travel voucher on my trip. The price of the ticket was $74. I am not billing you for dinner because Ozark Airlines thoughtfully arranged a schedule which prevented me from eating anything. I consoled myself with spirits but did not think it politic to charge you for that balm.” Risky perhaps for someone who had not yet been offered a job, but quite in keeping with David’s always-ready wit.
David’s wry humor will be missed, but among the many e-mails that I received from his scholarly colleagues in the days following David’s death, two stand out for capturing what many of us see as the enduring legacy of David Swanson. Gianpietro Mazzoleni wrote of David: “He had the ambition and pursued a policy of making our scholarly community world-wide. . . . Our community loses one of its most prestigious and internationally-renowned members.” Lance Bennett offered this tribute:

David Swanson has been the single most important person in bridging the many divides in political communication. He was among the first to draw political scientists and sociologists into the field of communication and to lead communication scholars into other disciplines. He also established an international network of scholars across Europe and North America that continues to thrive today because of his welcoming efforts to gather us together to discuss trends in our then rather uneven field.

David’s lasting impact on his field of study is nothing less than broadening the paradigm of political communication research around the globe, raising it from a gathering of mostly American campaign scholars to a vital and cosmopolitan assembly of international researchers who see institutions as vital influences on communication practices; who see cross-national comparisons of political communication as critical for distinguishing the universal from the particular in human communication practices; and who have a more refined understanding of the big picture of political communication, in which we can make sense of its individual parts.

All this from a scholar of interesting vacation spots.

Scott L. Althaus
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