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Public communication for the common good?
On the is-ought distinction in the media and communications field

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1   Introduction

The quality of our news diet, the polarizing effects of political communication, or the way digital, social and mobile media are transforming public communications have long been matters of concern. Studies in media and communications have concluding, among other things, that public communication is in crisis (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995), that the public sphere is becoming trivial, ineffective, or afflicted by fragmentation (Keane 1995). Social erosion theories linked news coverage to cynicism, alienation and declining trust in political institutions (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; R. Putnam 2000), while evidence suggests that partisan media can polarize audiences (Levendusky 2013). More recently the mainstreaming of digital, social and mobile media fueled hopes for a participatory democratic renewal. But the same technologies can also augment inequalities in political knowledge, while the amount of biased and misinformation appears to be on the rise in increasingly fragmented and polarized online information spheres (Papacharissi 2002; Aelst et al. 2017). Some argue that making public communication more deliberative can counteract pernicious trends. As with most social sciences, media and communication research has always straddled the intersection between normative and empirical inquiry.

The study of media and communications is often suffused with ideals, pervaded with appraisals of what is good and bad with media and communication, and assertions about the normative relevance of its findings. Yet the normative commitments that motivate research, and the premises from which research questions take their cue, often go unstated, let alone enjoying detailed justifications (Althaus 2011). Values, and the normative standards they inform, often lurk in the background, implied and under specified (Bucy and D'Angelo 2004). When social research aims to be value- free, seeking 'the truth' irrespective of its normative implications, it usually still has normative implications. Furthermore, concepts such as public sphere, political knowledge, deliberation and participation, are often applied without sufficient clarity about whether the analytical task is evaluation or explanation, thus confounding is with ought (Gerhards and Neidhardt 1993). Often it remains unclear what justifies different norms of public communication that motivate research and serve as standards of appraisal, or how these norms relate to one another. In part this is the result of a persistent gap between those engaged in normative enquiry and those engaged in empirical social research, which is often so wide that fruitful opportunities for mutual engagement are overlooked (Thompson 2008).

Though Rawls excluded media and communications from his demands for public reason, this increasingly looks like an omission for anyone concerned with the contemporary exercise of public reason (Fox 2013). Work on deliberative democracy aside, relatively little serious critical attention has been focused on the wider norms of media and public communication, the justification of these norms, and how norms may need to adapt in response to new communication technological, or wider social and political changes. While political theory

provides a wellspring of systematic engagement with the norms that inform the study of politics, the media and communications field has not developed an equivalently substantive engagement with its normative underpinnings (Hänska 2019).

This invites a broader and more structured discussion about how we *should* communicate, and what role media *should* play. At the same time we must avoid the kind of gymnastics in moral space that never hit the ground. We do not need to agree a comprehensive account of what perfect public communication should look like before we can proceed to study and evaluate media and communications. But we do need to be clear about the justifications that undergird different norms and aims of public communication, how different norms and aims compete with each other, what the trade-offs between them are, and how they relate to empirical research, how facts and norms inform one another.

This paper aims to move towards a more productive, critical framework for relating normative ideals of public communication to empirical research. It delineates a non- dichotomous distinction between the facts and norms of public communication by showing where efforts to avoid substantive normative commitments fail, how empirical results can inform normative enquiry, and how empirical research can gain greater clarity and coherence about its normative underpinnings. It does not advance a particular normative view on public communication. Instead it offers an exposition of how thinking about the relationship between facts and norms can be productive. While we should avoid the dichotomous view that one can speak either about what is, or about what ought to be, there is much to be gained from greater clarity on when concepts are used empirically, and when normatively.

The first section argues that pluralism poses the central normative problem to which public communication proposes a partial, empirical-procedural, solution. Conceptualizing public communication as processes of choice formation also helps to sharpen our thinking about how norms apply to communication contents, processes, its effects, and the causal relationship between them. Section two delineates the normative-empirical distinction through a non-exhaustive illustratively review of relevant empirical and normative literature. To make the distinction analytically tangible, section three distinguishes normative and empirical claims in methodological and epistemic terms, highlighting their non-rival nature. It ends by outlining key intersections between normative and empirical enquiry, around which mutually productive engagement can most easily emerge.

2   Public Communication as Processes of Collective Choice Formation

Public, political communication mediates political processes, by conveying information between centers of political power and 'the people,' by publicizing the functioning of the political system, and thematizing troubles or issues afflicting people, by giving voice, hosting and facilitating debate. Political communication research focuses on these processes by which information flows between the political system and the citizenry, how that information represents different issues (its content), and what effects that information can have on political behavior and the political system. Others adopt a more citizen-centered focus, examining the role of media in civic participation and engagement, or how it facilitates (deliberative) discourse.

But public communication is not merely an intervening factor in social or political processes, but central to them, and important for explaining their consequences. Public

communication is key to understanding how collective choices come about, how popular assent, dissent, or reluctant acquiescence of political power emerges. Of course, the key mechanisms of collective choice are legally established procedures leading to specific decisions over choice sets, for instance in an election, referendum, town hall meeting, or parliamentary vote. Public communication designates the attendant (and usually diffuse) communicative processes which, while not mechanistic in producing a definite choice (like a vote), are crucial for furnishing collective choice situations with information, relevant arguments and judgements, and a set of values, interests or attitudes. These furnishings are consequential both in defining the choice set (disposable options) and in shaping, what are sometime referred to as, meta-agreements (a shared representational framework for conceptualizing and deciding an issue (List 2002)). They constitute the political information environments on which citizens depend for political knowledge. Debate, deliberation, opinion polls, private conversations, and news reporting can inform how choices are framed, and define disposable options. But misinformation, propaganda, trolling and harassment, denial of voice, and exclusion from public debate, echo chambers, or spirals of silence can play a similarly consequential role in cajoling acquiesce. Falsifications, ad hominems, spin, false-equivalences, mis- and dis- information can produce assent to the exercise of power where it would otherwise be withheld. Such diffuse communicative processes do not actually 'decide' but are crucial in shaping the context within which collective choices arise, making some decisions seem more justified, appropriate, feasible, or expedient.

It is the role of public communication in shaping collective choices from which its normative significance derives, because while it creates new risks, it also affords an opportunity to bridle power in the service of the common good.[1] By emphasizing communication's role in advocacy and the critique of power, scholars underscore the value of giving voice to the powerless. When research emphasizes its role in facilitating debate and deliberation, it points to the value of formulating rational and inclusive collective choices, to the importance of informed consent for a program of government. Scholarship that stresses the importance of journalism in providing reliable, accurate information and creating transparency, elevates the value of information quality, truth and accountability. Theories of the public sphere often emphasize the importance of the demos partaking in a common discourse, the same informational environment (something that echo chambers and partisan media are seen to put at risk). The underlying assertion is that it is good and desirable to organize *processes* of public communication according to these democratic norms. Normative theories of public communication guide, stipulate, oblige and command how we ought to communicate. But what exactly are norms of public communication supposed to be good for? The implied answer is that they are not only good for you, or me, but that when media and communication are structured in accordance with these norms, they will be conducive to our shared, collective good, and that we therefore all have reasons to value them.

Empirical Answers to Normative Questions

However, most societies are pluralistic, characterized by a variety of interests, ways of life, and points of view. Thus, if public communication is to be conducive to the common good—

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[1] Habermas (1992) outlined the socio-historical transformation through which 'the public', its will ostensibly expressed through public discourse, came to be viewed as the primary source of political authority. Thereafter favourable public opinion became essential to the exercise of political power

the meaning of which will always be contested under conditions of pluralism—its norms need to take account of, indeed be able to accommodate social pluralism.[2] Rawls captured this challenge of pluralism when he asked how it was "possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?" (Rawls 1993, 4) What, if anything, constitutes the common good in pluralistic societies? This question surfaces in discussions about the proper norms of public communication. Particularly as partisan polarization appears to be on the rise, accommodating pluralism remains a (if not the) central normative problem bedeviling democracy, and a key task norms of public communication need to address.

The ostensible value of well-structured public communication, and the democratic choice processes it is supposed to support, is that its provisions for the common good are procedural (information, debate, voice), rather than substantive, making it easier for different groups to accept its basic requirements. The normative problem of accommodating the various views, interests and preferences of pluralistic society gains an empirical solution, in the answer to the question 'what kind of political arrangements would member of a pluralistic society freely choose.' Essentially the task of defining the common good's substantive content is remitted to a collective choice, and all that is left for proceduralism is to specify how a collective choice should be approximated. It avoids the usually problematic metaphysical foundations on which substantive conceptions of the common good rely, as they are replaced with *empirical*-procedural foundations in the form of collective choices (Vincent 2004). This is what Habermas has in mind when he speaks of critical public opinion—an extension of the Kantian idea that conflicts should be carried out through discourse. Communication provides an opportunity for living with pluralism: At a minimum it allows for conflicts to be ameliorated and power held in check through the articulation of competing interests (a view more closely aligned with liberal democrats who emphasize no-domination). At most political authority gains deep moral authority from collective choices that successfully accommodate social differences (a view more closely aligned with radical democrats who emphasize the self-determination of the demos). Of course well-structured public communication does not guarantee good and just social arrangements, but under conditions of pluralism it is essential to their pursuit (Dryzek 2013).

Slippage towards Normativity

The value of a procedural definition of the common good, that specifies how communication should support collective choice formation, is an empirical answer to a normative question. As I hope will become clear, a procedural approach to public communication also has the meta-conceptual benefits of shedding light on the relationship between facts and norms of communication. What, then, does such a procedural definition require? It must specify constraints, procedural guidelines, and/or aims for public communication. In the first instance, it must specify constraints to define the proper domain (democracy's domain), and scope of public communication, while avoiding substantive normative commitments that would make it difficult to accommodate the value pluralism of heterogeneous societies—it must remain recognizably just from a plurality of points of view. Yet, as I will show, purely

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[2] By common good I have in mind questions about the rightness of political arrangements, the moral order of society. How would society be organised to be as it morally ought to be (Michelman 1997).

procedural definitions fail, because procedural norms cannot be sustained without some understanding of their substantive aims, that is, without some understanding of the common good they are supposed to help us obtain. Procedural conceptions of public communication necessarily involve some slippage towards substantive normative commitments.

Let us consider two illustrations of this problem. First, we face democracy's boundary problem, the compositional question of specifying democracy's *domain*. We need to determine who are members of the demos; without such a compositional criterion that tells us who bears democratic rights, the common good could not take shape. A purely empirical, thus strictly descriptive account of the public sphere may tell us that those with access to power, or those who command online bot armies, can make themselves heard above everyone else. However, in order for public communication to justify the exercise of power in terms of the common good, we need to determine who *ought* to have a voice. We require, in the first instance, an independent (i.e. antecedent) definition of who composes the public—a pollster, for instance, requires a sampling frame.

Consider another illustration. Imagine a town hall meeting with two subgroups, S1 and S2, each arriving at two concomitant but incommensurable choices C1 (agreeable to all in S1) and C2 (agreeable to all in S2). Empirically the choice may be settled if either S1 or S2 has the power to impose its will on the other. However, the only way of justifying a choice between C1 and C2 in terms of the common good, is to do so independently of the beliefs, values and preferences of S1 and S2 that support C1 and C2. Members of S1 and S2 must already share in common some principles to help resolve the impasse and accommodate conflicting points of view—an antecedent understanding of what it means for a choice to be good. Such a principle may, for instance, specify the *scope* of collective choice (i.e. what is a public and what a private issue, what the demos deems itself fit to decide), or distinguish *relevant* from irrelevant contributions (e.g. reasoned argument and truthful information from rhetoric, misinformation and ad hominems). Such a principle can help to resolve such an impasse by determining how different arguments, preferences, beliefs or values are to be ranked or prioritized—for example, a pollster needs to decide which questions to ask and how to aggregate responses. A journalist needs to decide what information has greater news value, and greater credence, and Facebook must decide how to avoid becoming a conduit for falsehoods. The debate between agonistic and deliberative approaches turns on such questions about the *scope* of democratic choice, and choice- *relevant* considerations.

The idea of a purely procedural, norm-free, definition of the common good is at least partially self-defeating. For public communication to be conducive to the common good under conditions of pluralism, some guiding norms, established independently from public communication, are a requirement. Norms which tell us how media *should* be structured, and how communication *ought* to function, by specifying who may participate, what falls within democracy's purview, and which considerations are choice-relevant (see Figure 1). These amount to an understanding of public communication's substantive aims. Logic demands that if such norms are to guide public communication, they must necessarily be antecedent. And if they are to serve as standards to evaluate the health of public communication, they must be independent. This makes the stipulation of such principles a normative task.

By demonstrating the need for process independent norms to be in place prior to any act of communication, a procedural conception brings the relationship between the facts and norms of public communication into focus. It demonstrates how ideals and practices of

public communication are interrelated, allowing us to conceptualize the fact-value relationship as one of slippage rather than duality. After all, there is no deep dichotomy between what is and what ought to be—norms are ultimately concerned with guiding practices, and practices are always permeated with values (H. Putnam 2002). Normative slippage refers to this difficulty proceduralism faces in its aim of remitting substantive questions about the common good to communicatively facilitated collective choices free of antecedent moral commitments. It denotes the observation that a purely empirical definition of the common good fails, because some substantive aims are desiderata of any normative conception of public communication. To take this slippage on board requires media and communication research to self-consciously adopt a double, normative-empirical, focus.

3   The Is and Ought of Public Communication

Conceptualizing public communication as a process allows us to make analytical distinctions between its sequenced steps. This sharpens our thinking about the relationship between the is and ought of public communication, and helps clarify where and why normative slippage occurs (see Figure 1). A procedural framework also provides a useful way of categorizing and interpreting relevant phenomena. Normative provisions about input, process and outcome map quite neatly onto media and communication research's familiar foci of production/communicative practice, text/technology, and reception (e.g. data points about participation, content, framing, and effects). Viewing social phenomena though a processual optic also bring questions about the dynamics of choice formation—the (causal) relationship between input-process-outcome—into focus (e.g. does deliberative public communication produce better collective choices, or partisan media polarize public opinion). Focusing on different stages of choice processes, this section delineates the normative-empirical distinction through a non-exhaustive illustrative review of relevant research—note the numbers in the review correspond to numbers in the figure and table. While Figure 1 illustrates public communication conceived as choice process, Table 1 sets out the relationships between procedural norms and substantive aims.
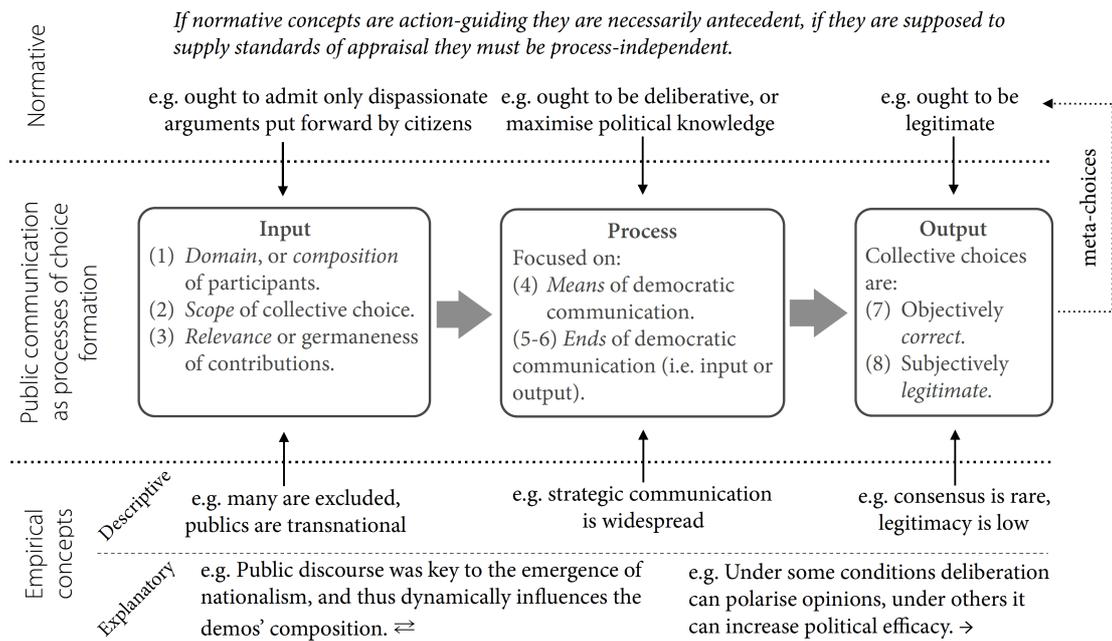
Figure 1: Normative and empirical approaches to public communication as processes of collective choice formation. Horizontal arrows (⇄) indicate causal powers.

Inputs *Input-side constraints to be satisfied.*	Process *Procedural guidelines to be followed.*	Outcomes *Aims to be achieved.*
(1) Domain: Boundary issues defining the composition of participants (i.e. who does or ought to have a voice). **(2) Scope:** Definitions of issues subject to collective choice (i.e. what does a public deem itself fit to decide). **(3) Relevance:** Which considerations are germane to collective choice (e.g. rational argument, rhetoric, emotion).	**(4) Process-centered:** Public communication as a substantive good (an end) in itself. Features of public communication, such as full participation, equality of voice, or deliberativeness, should be advanced as independently desirable goods, irrespective of eventual outcomes. Public communication as instrumental (i.e. means to an end) to achieving some other good. ← **(5) Input-oriented:** Should aim to improve inputs (e.g. political knowledge, stable preferences, rationality of arguments). **(6) Output-oriented.** Should aim to improve outputs (e.g. their correctness or legitimacy). →	**(7) Correct outcomes:** The epistemic quality of collective choices (e.g. intersubjective acceptability). **(8) Legitimate outcomes:** The subjective (or relative) legitimacy of collective choices (requires definition of (1)).

Table 1: Normative constraints, guidelines, and aims of public communication, and their possible relationships.

Input

The *input* side of public communication raises a range of empirical questions, and the normative need for constraints that communication should satisfy. First, who participates and gains voice in shaping collective choices, and who ought to participate (compositional questions about democracy's domain). Second, which issues does the demos see itself fit to

decide, and what ought to count as a public issue (the scope of collective choice). And, third, which contents carry the day (e.g. spin, falsifications, ad hominems) and which contributions ought to be cognitively germane to collective choice (e.g. reasons, preferences, attitudes, emotions).

1) Democracy's domain refers to the composition of the demos. Which views and interests receive a hearing, and are the *right* people being heard. After all, the normative force of public communication rests on the assumption that all those who should be heard, have gained voice. Empirically it concerns the ways and means through which people or groups gain voice, shape public discourse, or even assert dominance to position themselves as the 'true' voice of the people (drowning out others). Here we confront democracy's boundary question about the composition of the demos, about participation and inclusion in, and exclusion from public discourse (Downing 2000). Studies on diversity and bias in the media paint a compelling picture of whose voices are heard and represented—for instance on the widespread under- representation of women in news and public discourse (Macharia et al. 2015). Survey research helps understand how and why people come to participate in civic life (Verba et al. 1995), and how participation is being reshaped by digital, social and mobile communication technologies (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012). Transnational migration, diasporic communities, and transnational media challenge assumptions of nationally bounded public spheres, on which much media and communication research rests (Chalaby 2005). While mass media was mostly co-extensive with nation-states, online and social media are more unbounded in their geographic scope (do all those social media accounts sharing campaign material belong to citizens?). Indeed globalization, cross-border policy externalities and the mobilization of opinions across borders challenge the assumption of neatly compartmentalized democratic domains (Fraser 2007; Castells 2008).

Furthermore, ritual approaches to communication offer a useful empirical framework for understanding the role of public communication in producing (and reproducing) the mutual identification and fellowship that lend the demos its internal cohesion—so that public communication may be crucial to generating the demos it claims to represent (Carey 2008). Anderson (1991) famously observed that the (literary) public sphere and new processes of societal communication it involved, was crucial to the emergence of large-scale identity forming discourses that gave rise to nationalism. We may assume demoi as given, and stipulate them as the cause of public communication; after all, it is Americans that furiously debate their election. However, sociologically we must recognize that input-process-outcome are non- linear, as questions about who composes the demos are often contested in, and settled through public discourse. Indeed, resurgent nativism often turns on the issue of exclusion, and re-drawing the demos' boundary. Consider how Trump demarcates 'the real people' from others, or how Putin redefines Crimean identity. But by the same token the kind of transnational communications discussed in the previous paragraph may well be giving rise to new collectivities (Hänska, 2018).

Notwithstanding such sociological observations, democracy's boundary problem also raises important normative questions about how to constrain membership, who should participate in shaping collective choices, and who should be excluded. As Miller (2009) outlines, one view on the composition of the demos which, like this essay, assumes pluralism, sees non-domination as democracy's central aim. Democracy is valued for its outcome, which is defined by the relationship between those making a decision, and those it affects (its impact group). To ensure democracy does not result in domination the demos should include those

affected by its choices. Pluralism is celebrated, because it guards against the dominance by any one group. Here public communication demands that those affected by a choice should have a voice in its making, that "all possibly affected persons" be included (Habermas 1996, 107). Democracy's normative force derives from its requirement for "a 'symmetrical' and 'congruent' relationship between political decision-makers and the recipients of political decisions" (Held 2006, 209). This view prioritizes inclusion in the demos, over its internal coherence.

Alternatively, we can prioritizes coherence of the demos over inclusiveness (Miller 2009). Here democracy is valued intrinsically because it enables collective self determination, and not primarily because its outcome avoids domination. But collective self-determination, in a thick sense, where one can speak of the demos as sharing a common mind, require a degree of internal cohesion, sympathetic mutual identification, mutual trust, and shared ethical outlook amongst its members. Members must identify sufficiently with the group in order to want to accommodate each other's interests. Questions of impact and inclusion are secondary to the stability and internal cohesion of the demos. Consequently, this view emphasizes the necessity of exclusion to guards against expansion of the demos through ever wider inclusion, and avoid excessive internal pluralism which would erode the cohesion which is required for a group to function like a demos.

2) Scope refers to the range of issues a demos see itself fit to debate, pronounce upon, and decide. Which issues fall within public communication's purview? Agenda setting and framing are two key models of media effects that help understand how public communication shapes democracy's *de facto* scope. The way an issue is framed can both curtail and expand public discussion of it, and thus set the public policy agenda (Reese et al. 2001). Violence against women and reproductive rights, for instance, are issues elevated into public debate (or kept off the agenda) through skilled framing (Joachim 2003). Or consider how GDP came to dominate talk about public welfare, while questions of subjective wellbeing or happiness are not deemed pertinent (Johal et al. 2014). The distinction between hard and soft news is perhaps the most familiar discursive delineation of public communication's scope: Hard news is usually presented as being of broad socio-political relevance and is typically reported in an dispassionate, depersonalized style, while soft news is usually presented as pertaining to private matters, lacking wider socio-political relevance, and is often reported through more personalized, emotional stories (Reinemann et al. 2012). Public communication can shape both what the demos considers an issue it should discuss and decide, and what lies beyond its remit.

Delineating public communication's *scope* (or remit) inevitably also involves the question which issues we have good reasons to decide collectively, entailing the normative task of stipulating constraints that distinguish public interests from private matters. Yet, as feminist and other critical scholars have persuasively argued, there is no morally neutral boundary between public and private (Young 1985). The ability to define this boundary and set the scope of public interest, what we should collectively know about, talk about, and decide is an important source of power, and a key mechanisms through which prevailing power relations are reproduced by excluding alterity.

3) Relevance: Closely related questions arise about which considerations, arguments, or views ought to be germane to collective choice, and should consequently be maximized in public communication, and which ones turn out to be actually decisive (ad hominems or evidence based argumentation)? Normative views hold, for instance, that preferences,

interests or reasons that are in some kind of deliberative equilibrium (e.g. which are reflective, rational, and stable in the sense that re-framing the issue will not change them) are more worthy of consideration than non-deliberative ones. The same is often implicitly asserted about views that are well informed; consider the expert interview, or scientific facts, for example (Jønch-Clausen and Kappel 2016). The aim of public communication should then be to increase political knowledge, or ensure that our preferences are fully considered. Such views often discount emotion, for instance, as a valid contribution to public communication, but also raise questions about the extent to which political ignorance can be remediated (Kaye 2015).

Such normative constraints should be viewed alongside empirical findings, on the increasing centrality of emotions in journalism and wider public communication (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013), or the importance of private conversations to political discourse (Livingstone and Lunt 1993). Consider the 'protest paradigm', which anticipates that civic protests tend to be frame negatively in the news, discounting their value as expressions of public interest (Chan and Lee 1984). Furthermore, assumptions that individual *preferences* are stable and rational, allowing research to treat them as settled and exogenous, are contradicted by findings on a whole range of biases (e.g. framing effects) that make individual preferences 'predictably irrational' (Ariely 2008; Achen and Bartels 2016). Given such results, what is, and what should be relevant to collective choice (see 5, below)?

Process

Processes of public communication, and their effects, are at the heart of what we are concerned with here. Practices of communication, their technologies and facilitating institutions raise questions about how communication is structured, and to what end (e.g. to persuade, inform, or entertain). Also, do these processes and practices of communication have the causal power to produce certain (desirable) effects? Attendant normative questions arise about whether we value well-structured public communication as an end in itself, and if so what it should look like (e.g. fair, affording equal opportunity to speak, facilitating inclusive debate). Or whether communication is valued merely as a means to an end, and if so, which ends it should help realize (e.g. increased political knowledge, or consensus), and thus which procedural guidelines public communication ought to follow.

4) Process-centered approaches treat communicative processes and practice as interesting objects of enquiry in their own right, rather than mere transmission or causal mechanisms mediating between objects of actual interest. Consider evaluative research, which appraises the quality of public communications in a range of choice situations, and the media systems that support them. For example many studies have evaluated the deliberative quality of communications in online discussion forums, town hall meetings or parliaments (Mansbridge 1976; Dahlberg 2004; Steiner et al. 2005). Similarly, comparative studies on the design of media systems offer an appraisal of their quality (Norris 2004).

The political economy tradition of media and communication research is also relevant, as it can shed light on the way communication power is exercised processualy and structurally (Mansell 2004). Consider social media platforms, whose business depends on growing and maintaining the attention of their user base, and therefore optimize for user engagement, not for quality of discourse. Consequently platforms' structural affordances will favor the lurid and funny over the weighty and important, compelling the latter to mimic the former

if it is to receive a wider hearing. Or consider research on the socio-cultural factors influencing citizen participation in the public sphere, which offers clues on how to structure more inclusive public communicaiton (Dahlgren 2006). Mutz (2006) famously observed that increased participation may be inversley related to cross-cutting engagement. Furthermore, burgeoining scholarship helps us understand how online and mobile media are (re-) shaping participatory public communication. For instance, it appears that seeking political information via social media sites is a good predictor of peoples' social capital, civic and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012), or that internet access was a good predictor of early participation in protests on Egypt's Tahrir square during the Arab Spring (Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

Normatively an interesting set of questions arise about whether public communication has intrinsic value (whether it is itself constitutive of the common good), and not merely instrumental to achieving a good collective choice (see 5 and 6 below). In this view, procedural fairness and inclusiveness are non-derivative goods, in the sense that they are valued for their own sake and not because they help produce an eventual just outcome. Participationists, for instance, believe that there are strong independent (non-derivative) reasons to value participation, because a just society is one in which citizens can regularly and actively participate in shaping public policy (cf. some view participation as a means to achieving correct choices, rather than a good in itself, as will be clarified in 5 and 6). Thus, public communication should maximize inclusion, participation and equality (or minimize exclusion), because giving people fair and equal opportunities to participate and be heard are independent moral goods (Sen 2009; Couldry 2010). Consider also agonistic approaches, which argue that deliberative democracy puts participation in the service of reaching a consensus (see 6), effectively sanitizing politics by suppressing conflict and excluding those views that do not fit narrow consensus-oriented constraints (Mouffe 1999). For agonists the goal is not an endpoint (e.g. consensus), but the *process* of transforming antagonistic conflict into agonistic pluralism, a process that minimizes exclusion.

5) Input-oriented: An alternative normative view on processes of public communication values them as a means to improving the quality of *inputs* (political knowledge or preferences). In this view collective choices are aggregations of individual preferences, and public communication is a means for improving these preferences (cf. collective choice as discursively achieved consensus or 'common mind.' See 6). To ensure citizens are well informed news media ought to provide high quality, diverse political information (Nielsen 2017), empowering them to hold authority to account (Schudson 1995). Aiming to improve inputs, some deliberative theories, challenging the assumption that individual preferences are exogenously given, argue that deliberation improves individual preferences, making them more rational, considered and robust (Gutmann and Thompson 2009). As noted (see 3), preferences or views that are in 'deliberative equilibrium' are sometimes considered more germane to collective choices. Here public communication is supposed to support the political system by elevating political knowledge, and supporting individual preferences formation.

The implied causal power ascribed to public communication in realizing particular input-side benefits lends itself to empirical investigation. For instance, media effects research has explored the ability of news media to improve citizen's political knowledge. Experimental studies have asked whether deliberation can improve participants' understanding of an issue (Min, 2007), or make their preferences more stable by mitigating framing effects

(the tendency to change ones preference depending on how an issue is framed) (Druckman 2004). Important empirical questions have also been raised about the effects of news on political knowledge, on voter preferences, or whether online news increases or diminishes selective exposure to news sources (Iyengar and Simon 1993; de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006).

6) Outcome-oriented: Related research focuses on the effects of public communication on outcomes. For instance, whether deliberation narrows disagreement (Wojcieszak 2011), or improves participants' subjective political efficacy (Min 2007). News media, on the other hand, can also increase partisan polarization (Levendusky 2013), making consensus less likely. Similarly dysfunctional public communication can produce 'spirals of silence', as one opinion becomes dominant while those who perceiver themselves to hold a minority view remain silent to avoid isolation (Noelle-Neumann 1974)—sometimes referred to as pluralistic ignorance. The prevalence of strategic uses of communication (propaganda, advertising or PR) to influence or control public communication should not be overlooked either (Holtzhausen 2008).

Much of this research rests on the belief that well-structured public communications has the causal power to help obtain better, or worse, choices. The underlying normative views are *teleological,* considering public communication a *means* to achieving desired aims, for producing better collective choices (what exactly a better choice may consist in will be discussed in 7 and 8). Here the value of the process derives from its ability to reach some ideal endpoint. Specific ends-oriented procedural guidelines may draw inspiration from Rawls' (Rawls 1971) 'original position' and the reflective equilibrium or Habermas' (Habermas 1999) ideal speech situation and his notion of discourse ethics (though neither are intended to be fully realized in practice, rather serving as regulative ideals). Here the value of public communication derives from its ability to obtain better choices (e.g. true, just or legitimate ones).

Outcome

Directly or implicitly, media and communication research is concerned with communications' impact on political *outcomes*. How it affects public opinions or elections, for instance. And attendant normative question about the ends public communication ought to serve: should it help us achieve collective choices that are more *correct* or *legitimate*, for example? Here we are also confronted with communication's causal power to produce particular (desired) outcomes (e.g. narrowing disagreement, see 6). Broadly speaking there are two normative views on the aims of public communication.

7) Correct outcomes: One important view argues that public communication should help us make choices that are better from some objective point of view. For example, some epistemic democrats holds that deliberation is good because it tends to produce the right or *correct* choice (Bohman 2007; Estlund 2008). Here public communication is viewed instrumentally, in the sense that its value is not intrinsic, but derived from its ability to help obtain correct or just outcomes. Two challenges in particular confront epistemic approaches. Firstly, they require a process-independent definition of correctness by which the quality of a choice can be appraised (Estlund 1997; Michelman 1997). Such definitions necessarily involve slippage towards substantive conceptions of the common good, because the formal aim of achieving 'correct' or 'just' outcomes remains unworkable absent some notion

of the substantive shape that a correct or just outcome would take—a problem proceduralism is supposed to avoid. Secondly, because in this view public communication's value is derivative, procedural features such as participation and inclusion, that are usually considered vital, can in principle be jettisoned for more effective means of achieving correct outcomes—wise and benevolent technocrats, or a franchise restricted to politically knowledgeable citizens, may more reliably reach the right decision, after all (Brennan 2016). So why not an epistocracy?

8) Legitimate outcomes: A contrasting normative view emphasizes the *legitimacy* of outcomes (endogenously or relatively defined) as aim and end of public communication. Legitimacy of outcomes may be defined as consensus or subjective ex post (facto) acceptance by participants. Public communication, in this view, ought to produce *agreement*, or at least *narrow disagreement* (Dryzek 2005). By defining the desired outcome endogenously (or relatively) such approaches cleverly sidestep the need for process-independent standards, thus avoiding more pronounced normative slippage faced by epistemic approaches (see 7).

Input, process and output of collective choice processes are of course linked, but the distinction has analytical value. It brings the relationships between different aspects of communicative processes into focus. The distinction also helps to understand trade-offs and incommensurabilities between different norms of public communication (see Table 1). For example, the contrast between process- (means) and outcome- (ends) oriented approaches is potentially problematic (Estlund 1997), because it raises the fundamental question whether a choice is good because it was arrived at through the right procedure or because it is correct by some process- independent standard. Means-oriented approach that emphasize inclusiveness can be seen to endorse a kind procedural ethics (something is good because it was achieved through the right process). In contrast, end-oriented approaches that emphasize legitimacy can be seen to endorse a kind of autonomy of ethics (something is good because people agree on it), while those who emphasize correct outcomes can be seen to endorse a kind of ethical naturalism (something is good independently of what parties to the choice think about it, or how it was arrived at). We can value online communication because it allows everyone to participate in the production and diffusion of public discourse, or loath it because this same discourse has become unmoored from traditional information intermediaries responsible for quality control. We can value public communication as a means, as an end, or maybe a bit of both.

Prima facie different approaches to public communication may appear to be similar, yet closer inspection reveals important trade-offs and incommensurabilities between different normative constraints, procedural stipulations, and aims. There are good reasons to value inclusiveness and participation, but neither is necessary for obtaining correct outcomes. There are also good reasons to value some objective standard of correctness, but the objectively best choice may not suffice to achieve subjective legitimacy. If we aim to increase political knowledge on an issue such as climate change, for instance, then expounding statistical evidence may not be the best strategy; even if it satisfies some important constraint or guideline on rationality and veracity. It is valuable for empirical communication research be clear about the kind of normative ideal it endorses, and whether this ideal pertains to some constraint, procedural feature, or aim of public communication, because different constraints, guidelines and aims make competing, and possibly incommensurable demands.

Methodological and Epistemic Pluralism

Media and communication research is not a methodologically integrated field with a shared meta-conceptual outlook. It is permeated by values related to, but distinct from empirical arguments. For the distinction between normative and the empirical conceptions of public communication to become analytically fecund, it cannot be grasped in terms of content alone, it must be understood in methodological and epistemic terms.

What is Normativity?

'An informed citizenry, inclusive processes of public communication, and correct or legitimate outcomes' are answers to the question 'what do we have reasons to value', and what do we thus have reasons to do. In this sense normative conceptions of public communication do not represent accounts of how the (mind-independent) world is believed to be, as empirical accounts do. Rather they represent beliefs about how the world *ought* to be, how public communication ought to be structured and conducted. Sometimes normative representations are referred to as having a 'world-to-fit-mind' direction of fit, to borrow a notion from the philosophy of mind (Humberstone 1992). They are intentional attitudes that give expression to a desire about how the world should be. They guide, recommend, motivate and oblige our communicative behavior with the aim of changing the world to fit normative ideals—and thus must be antecedent to communication (hence the problem of slippage is also temporal).

Normative approaches to communication ask how it ought to function in order to be conducive to the common good—in order to function as it should. This involves stipulating public communication's constraints, procedural guidelines, and/or aims, and attendant conditions of adequacy that inputs, processes, and/or outputs, should satisfy. These stipulations are said to be worthy of endorsement either because they are constitutive of goodness (e.g. participation as an end in itself), because they are conducive to goodness (e.g. deliberation as a means to correctness), or in terms of avoiding 'other-than-good-things' (e.g. minimize exclusion, irrationality or harm). In this sense ideals of public communication are not concerned with substantive ethical questions about the common good (e.g. should we build more schools) but with meta- ethical question (e.g. what does it means for something to be constitutive of, or conducive to the common good).

Normative *methods* are the steps taken to answer such counterfactual questions. Because public communication is supposed to provide an empirical procedural answer to normatively substantive questions about the common good under conditions of pluralism, sophisticated normative theories must try to avoid slippage towards substantive norms. The most prominent method of doing so is probably Rawls's 'reflective equilibrium' (1971). An idealized thought experiment, the reflective equilibrium refers to the end point of a deliberative process (a deliberative equilibrium) in which reasoners work back and forth through a set of consideration and moral intuitions. To avoid slippage the reflective equilibrium needs to be 'free standing' (in Rawls's terms), independent of any antecedent moral commitments. The justification for using this method to stipulate standards of adequacy for public communication must thus "itself derive from the reflective equilibrium that it helps us achieve" (Daniels 2014 Winter 2013 Edition: , section 2.2., para. 3). The normative force of public communication depends on its ability to be self-supporting.

Habermasian principles of deliberative communication derive from his conception of an ideal speech situation (where everyone is equally able to speak, social differences are

bracketed, and the force of the better argument has supremacy). These principles gain foundations through his method of rational reconstruction (Habermas 1987). He argues that validity claims (i.e. truth, appropriateness, sincerity) and an orientation towards 'understanding' as the ends of speech are part of the invariant structures of human communication (i.e. validity claims are pre-theoretical, universally implicit in all language use): "[I]f the aim of a speech act is to be understood and really communicate, then, it follows, for Habermas, that validity claims are presupposed implicitly" (Vincent 2004, 286). The ideal speech situation, he argues, provides the conditions for realizing this *telos* of human communication. Unlike Rawls, the conditions of ideal speech are not entirely ideal, but can and should inform deliberative communication. In short, normative methods present attempts to provide normative principles with self-supporting foundations, that avoid drawing support from substantive normative commitments and metaphysical arguments.

In contrast empirical accounts of public communication aim to represent the world, or more specifically the role of communication in shaping collective choices, as it is believed to *be*. Empirical concepts have a mind-to-fit-world direction of fit—they aim to get representations (e.g. concepts and theories) to describe or explain actual processes of public communication. They answer questions about the functioning of choice processes by describing *de facto* choices, underlying individual attitudes, and seeking to understand the various causal mechanisms that shape collective choices. The *methods* of empirical enquiry provide the tools that make phenomena observable, and are more widely thematized and systematically developed than those of normative enquiry. From content analysis to appraise quality of contents, panel studies that can shed light on choice processes as causal systems, ethnographic work on communicative practices, or experimental designs that isolate specific phenomena to test hypothesize, I assume empirical methods are familiar to the reader.

4   Normative-Empirical Intersections?

Normative and empirical accounts offer epistemically and methodologically distinct, but non-rival, representations of the world (if de facto choices are largely not deliberative, this does not in itself defeat deliberative theories). The former appraises the quality of public communication, the latter observes, measures and explains it. A purely empirical account of public communication would be descriptive or explanatory. It may tell us that powerful media proprietors shape public opinion or "manufacture consent" (Herman and Chomsky 1994), or that algorithmic filter bubbles feed us information congenial to our attitudes and prejudices. We may believe that there is something wrong with referring a choice about the common good to a media monopoly or letting it be informed by our prejudices, yet any such evaluation requires a clear standards of adequacy—without clear norms and values informing media and communication research it will lack critical force. Conversely, a purely normative conception that holds, for instance, that collective choices should reflect a deliberatively reached rational consensus, will do little to improve the quality of collective choices without an empirical account of the social agents involved, the social context within which choices are shaped and the specification of some 'principles of enactment' (Held 2006).

This methodological and epistemic pluralism ensues from public communication's normative slippage. But it also illustrates that there is no fundamental dichotomy between empirical (factual) and normative (evaluative/action-guiding) approaches to public communication. Asking 'how is public communication conducted, and what influence does it have on

collective choices' and 'do we have reasons to value these choices, and the way public communication is conducted' are questions about the same world, in the sense that asking one of these questions without the other omits something important. Evaluation requires description plus standards of appraisal. It seems clear that any comprehensive account of public communication must contain both a clear set of guiding norms and values, and an empirical understanding of the relationship between communication and collective choice.

To further advance such comprehensive understandings, the analytical distinction between normative and empirical conceptions needs to be fecund. Answering empirical questions about public communication will not solve normative problems, but it can help us along the way. Reflection on normative questions will not answer, but may help us ask better empirical questions. A more systematic approach to the normative implications of empirical findings, and the empirical questions raised by normative ideals, is called for (Mutz 2006; Peters 2008; Thompson 2008; Neblo et al. 2010). The notion of direction of fit, introduced earlier, offers a productive way of reflecting on the is-ought relationship. In what follows I outline two key intersections where normative and empirical questions cut-across one another: How do we stipulate norms-appropriate-to-the-world. And, how do we think about getting the world to fit stipulated ideals (world-to-fit-mind). These intersections offer conceptually rigorous opportunities for aligning normative enquiry and empirical social research so that they speak to each other more consistently.

Getting norms-appropriate-to-the-world

There are several ways in which norms can be appropriate to the world; how a revised empirical account of public communication may entail a revision in normative ideals. For a norm to be appropriate it should be *logically possible* (or coherent) and *empirically possible* to act in accordance with it, at least in principle.[3] To do so normative conceptions of public communication need to ensure that the empirical premises which they contain—for instance about institutions, communication technologies, the nature of human agency and our reasoning capacity—are not systematically contradicted by empirical evidence. We should be asking not only where empirical research tells us that public communication falls short of an ideal, but also what it reveals about the obtainability of these ideals. Absent logical and empirical possibility one cannot plausibly argue that ideals of public communication are appropriate.

Logical possibility, or getting coherent norms

Are norms of public communication coherent? For instance, is it coherent to stipulate the procedural guideline of maximally inclusive participation, as well as the aim of a correct outcome? Though, as noted above, it seems these principles are on collision course (Estlund 1997; Lippert-Rasmussen 2012). We can turn to social choice theory to begin a rigorous assessment of lurking contradictions between different sets of normative conditions. If inputs (individual preferences or judgements), for instance, are perfectly rational, is this sufficient for collective choices to be rational? Condorcet's paradox demonstrates that even if

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[3] There is a lively debate around the question whether *ought* implies *can*. I do not take a lack of feasibility (due to lack of motivation, ability or institutional constraint) as sufficient to defeat a normative ideal, though it should in principle be possible to realise a stipulated set of aims (Estlund 2011; Southwood 2016; Chahboun 2017).

individual preferences are rational, majority preferences can be irrational; that is, non-transitive (Maclean and Hewitt 1994). The relevance of such results to media and communication research should be carefully considered, particularly as it has been argued that deliberative communication can help overcome weaknesses of preference aggregation (i.e. the inherent instability of aggregated majority preferences) (Dryzek and List 2003). Indeed, any realistic collective choice will involve formal procedures, such as elections, alongside less structured processes of public communication (e.g. news, deliberation, private conversation, or protest). However, though logical possibility may be necessary, it does not in itself yield empirical possibility.

Empirical possibility

Whether the empirical premises contained in normative ideals of public communication are accurate, is an important question. For instance, the idea that a diverse news diet is desirable, because it increases political knowledge can be investigated—things other than a diverse news diet may be more effective to maximize political knowledge. Indeed, political knowledge should not be fetishized as a solution to democratic problems (Kaye 2015). Similarly, a deliberative democrat may put forward the normative proposition that choice processes function as they ought to if they maximize participation (means), maximize correctness or narrow disagreement (ends). This is the normative aim, which contains the empirical proposition that certain kinds of communication (e.g. deliberation) are conducive to these goals. The latter lends itself to empirical investigation. There is, for example, evidence that particular kinds of deliberation increase the probability of transforming preferences (Landwehr and Holzinger 2010) and that deliberation online and offline can increase participants' understanding (input) of an issue and their political efficacy (output) (Min 2007).

Such insights are of particular value because they shed light on the circumstances under which normative propositions are empirically obtainable. If empirical results show only weak links (effects) between certain kinds of public communication and the stipulated aims, this may provide reason for revising normative ideals. In short, it makes sense to ask empirical questions that lead to a better understanding of the normative functioning of public communication, while it makes pragmatic sense to stipulate normative standards that are minimally demanding but sufficient for the desired aims to obtain.

Practical feasibility, or getting the-world-to-fit-the-norm

Both normative and empirical thinking on public communication are ultimately concerned with practice—and practice is a matter of getting the-world-to-fit-the- norm. Empirical and normative approaches can be bridged, in practice, by specifying *conditions of enactment*—what Rawls broadly referred to as non-ideal theory's task of figuring out how we can work towards these normative aims. Another approach renews efforts to give free-standing norms procedural legs to avoid normative slippage, by differentiating between substantive and *meta-choices* (i.e. choices about procedural norms), and remitting both to collective choice. Though this may serve as a practical solution to circumvent the problem of normative slippage, it arguably just turns a second-order problem into a third-order one.

Conditions of enactment—norms as action guiding

Well-structured public communication can be thought of as a regulative ideal. It is supposed to motivate us to conduct communications in a particular way, to guide our practices of public communication. As Mansbridge et al. (2010) remind us, regulative ideals are never fully achievable, but are intended as action guiding. The degree to which normative conceptions of public communication are successful in guiding our actions will depend on whether they are accompanied by, what Held calls, conditions of enactment:

> "if a theory of the most desirable form of democracy is to be at all plausible, it must be concerned with both theoretical and practical issues, with philosophical as well as organizational and institutional questions. Without this double focus, an arbitrary choice of principles and seemingly endless abstract debates about them are encouraged. A consideration of principles, without an examination of the conditions for their realization, may preserve a sense of virtue, but it will leave the actual meaning of such principles barely spelt out at all." (2006, 266)

Too often questions about the realization of normative aims remain under-specified. If we stipulate a limited (e.g. national) domain for public communication, then how can this be realized in a situation where ever fewer of our communications are relayed through national, language specific broadcast media, and ever more are diffused through decidedly transnational, multilingual social media? Similarly, if the aim is to maximize political knowledge, how can that be achieved when political information is increasingly diffused through peer-to-peer networks on the social web, rather than being delivered to the public directly by traditional information intermediaries such as newspapers?

Choices and meta-choices

It is sometimes argued that normative slippage—the need for antecedent standards of adequacy—can be avoided. Michelman (1997) suggests that in practice it is acceptable for normative standards to be incrementally revised in and through public debate. To conceptualize this, normative standards are conceived as meta-choices or meta-agreements (about the conditions that public communication and collective choices should satisfy), and distinguished from substantive choices (about substantive matters of the common good) (see Figure 1; List 2002; Ottonelli and Porello 2012). Meta-choices regard questions about how a choice process ought to be structured (e.g. who should participate, etc.). Substantive choices regard questions about the content of a choice (e.g. should we build more schools). The former informs the conditions of the latter.

Treating ideals of public communication as meta-choices allows us to consider them 'in progress' and susceptible to change over time (Steiner 2012). Processes of choice formation are open-ended: For Habermas (1987; 1996) deliberative processes are never fully concluded (unabgeschlossen), and norms are fallible, always open to potential revision in the future. In fact, collective choice processes, and the public communications that furnish collective choice situations with information and relevant arguments, are not causally linear, structured *ex nihilo* according to fixed principles, working their way towards a conclusive collective choice. They are non- linear, dynamic, dialectical, and over time capable of revising the standards that guide them. Some studies have operationalized the idea of meta-choices, finding deliberation capable of generating agreement at the meta level (Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007; List et al. 2013). If this is the case, an opportunity is on offer to thematize the normative goals of democratic procedure in public discourse (e.g. what are the aims of journalism), allowing public communication to self-revise its guiding norms.

5   Conclusions

The role of media and communications in politics is as pertinent as ever, as is public communication's normative task of facilitating collective choices that can reconcile pluralism with a shared understanding of the common good. It aims to do so procedurally, in ways that avoid substantive normative commitments. Yet, a gap remains between what is and what ought to be that often goes unacknowledged. In the study of media and communications there is often a paucity of analytical continuity between normative ideals and empirical observation. Herein I have begun to anticipate how a procedural account of public communication can yield analytical continuity across the gap that separates ideals and empirical data points. I have suggested that normative slippage recognizes the necessary concomitance of is and ought, leaving us with a set of ideals and observations about the same phenomena, that are methodologically and epistemically distinct, but non-rival and non-dualistic.

To remain conceptually fruitful, empirically productive and practically useful, the study of media and communications demands this double-focus. It requires clarity about the values that frame our research, and the ideals that guide the interpretation of empirical results. And it requires us to reflect on the normative implications of these results. On the other hand, normative enquiry must not lose sight of the field of empirical results. The normative ideals we stipulate for public communication will never hit the road of communicative practice if they fail to account for the socio- political context within which social agents access information, discuss, debate and deliberate, in which journalists and other information intermediaries work, and indeed changing communication technologies which enable new public communications phenomena (e.g. algorithmic filters, computational propaganda, customizable info- spheres, bots, trolls, etc.). We have to live in the world we have, with its contradictions, incongruities and divisions, not the world we wish to live in. We should, in short, be clear about the values that guide our research on media and communications, and we should carefully consider how empirical research informs those values.

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