

## **Book Review:**

**Ofer Feldman and Sonja Zmerli (Eds.),**

**The Psychology of Political Communicators: How Politicians,  
Culture, and the Media Construct and Shape Public Discourse  
(2019)**

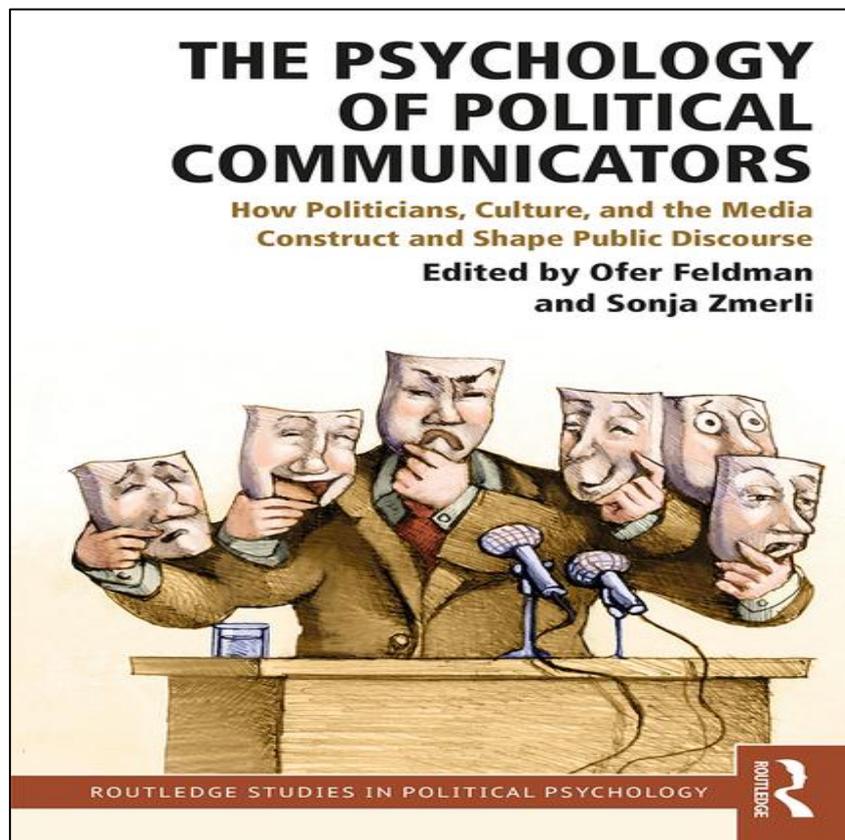
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Political communication, as a multi-disciplinary field of study, draws contributions from history, psychology, international relations, sociology, marketing, and economics and is researched in marketing, branding, public relations, and public diplomacy. It is involved in studying the media system, public opinion, political parties, and political actors set within the context of the electoral system with the audience seen as consumers and co-producers of messages.

The two recent handbooks on political communication by Semetko and Scanmell (2012) and by Kenski and Jamieson (2017) acknowledged political communication, in the words of the pioneers in the field, Blumer and Gurevitch (1987), as a hybrid with permeable boundaries drawing and borrowing from a wide range of social science and humanities.

The book edited by Ofer Feldman and Sonja Zmerli (2019), *The Psychology of Political Communicators: How Politicians, Culture, and the Media Construct and Shape Public Discourse*, with 12 chapters, contributes toward the enhancement of the field of political communication, although more attention should have been given to the audience and the communicators themselves. *The Psychology of Political Communicators* provides valuable insight into the interplay of politicians and the media within the cultural context. In addition, observable developments were related to the media (print) landscape and media ownership. Contributions by numerous scholars touched on several aspects of political communication but little discussion was about the audience themselves. Perhaps the concern was political communication, yet not much was focused on analyzing the psychology of the communicators.

The book's overall objective was to show that public discourse can be regarded as an essential ingredient of liberal democracy. Public discourse is essential to solidify the relationship between citizens and state toward enhancing the political actors' responsiveness. Hence, the more public discourse, the wider would be the discussion to enhance liberal democracies.

The book's context was based on the developed political entities of Israel, Europe, and the United States with the exclusive inclusion of Japan as one of the liberal democracies in Asia. One wonders what public discourse would be like in emerging democracies if space could be given to that area of the world.

The book aims to study how politicians, culture, and media shape public discourse in liberal democracies. Taking note that the major goal of political communication is to influence political opinions, attitudes, and behavior, the book investigates three major areas of discourse analysis: political figures, populist communication, and media in framing political parties and political actors.

The book is organized in three broad themes:

- i. Political leaders in discourse,
- ii. Populist communication and negative campaigns, and
- iii. Media discourse.

The analysis is about the challenges faced by liberal democratic societies based on three pivotal elements that are interrelated and indispensable, namely, the politicians as political communicators, the media, and the cultural context in which political discussion is embedded (p. 3).

Readers notice the psychology of communication is substituted by narratives on the politicians and statesmen such as the Japanese and American representatives in the United Nations.

Discussions were held on the political commentators' intention to determine the social representation of issues by framing them according to their ideological predisposition or self-interest.

Three elements are given emphasis in studying political communication, namely, the media (or media system), the political communicators, and the audience. In this book the audience or the receiver (or co-producer of messages on social media) is not accorded a proper standing although they are the outcome of the structured messages theoretically driven from the addresses made through framing and agenda setting. The articles were favorable to the print media with little attention given to social media.

The articles seemed to be guided by the Lasswellian model of the powerful media. This was noticeable in discussions about the media, such as Trump's ability to comply with the TV reality show or Murdoch's control of Fox media or on the issues raised in studying populism.

The populist and negative campaigns driven by the media and through the media brought similar findings on the rise of populism in Europe. There were two studies on the populist movement in the Netherlands based on the broadsheet and tabloid papers and another in Italy where an analysis was made of five newspapers on their coverage of the Five Star Movement (FSM) and its leader Beppe Grillo (p. 112, 117). Populist movements or neo-populism seems to have captured the voters in Europe and in the United States (see latest reports on populism in Europe by Schulz, 2019; Wettstein, et al., 2019).

Gender image was also discussed. The coverage given by the Israeli newspapers in explaining the significant differences between the two election periods in 2009 and in 2013 attribute local factors for the positive coverage given to the female candidates in the second election. The media reported the female candidates in the German election as “competent players in the political field situated in the idea of a contested modernization” (p. 200). It would be a good comparison to know how the press in India and Bangladesh, less developed countries, had reported during the campaigns of the female candidates to suggest whether contested modernization had also taken place.

The language analysis of the political interviews on Japanese television and a separate article on the Japanese and US leaders in addressing the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) are related to the understanding of the communicator.

This book exhibits one strength, namely, the multiplicity and creativity of the methodologies used. The majority of the articles used content analysis, and the theoretical approach appears to be framing. Hence the articles on the populist movements used content analysis in dissecting the core messages of populism, its pervasiveness in the media, and its persuasiveness among the electorates in the different tabloids and broadsheet newspapers.

Chapters 9 and 10, which were about female candidates in Israel and in Germany, respectively, used content analysis. The former considered two newspapers (*Haaretz* and *Yedioth Ahronoth*) and also used logistic regression. The latter used qualitative content analysis to analyze four newspapers. The article on negative campaigning by the political parties in the United Kingdom also conducted a content analysis on three tabloid newspapers and three broadsheet newspapers by concluding

that the Conservatives and Labour parties were mainly attacking one another. The literature appears to add that negative campaigning is widely used in the US, and the one presented in the UK merely added to the existing literature.

The analysis on the television debates of US presidents and prime minister candidates in Spain and the UK used qualitative content analysis of newspapers. Again, it was stressed that the newspapers would, by representation, influence candidates' behavior. The audience members in the US, the UK, and Spain gave different interpretations of the televised debate, saying it was a democratic right in Spain, as a political event in the US, but branded as something superficial in UK

The question of trust was also presented by indirectly going through a study on how audiences evaluate public opinion polling reported in the media. A content analysis was conducted and supplemented with an experiment involving university students. It concluded that the impact of role perception on framing based on the use of surveys and shallow reporting may result in a decreased public trust of the newspapers.

The book raised more issues to be researched. The final chapter on ownership summarized their approach that whatever the outcome, whoever controls the media is in a position to frame messages to the audience. It implies that the audience has little to do to interact given such a mighty press system. Can the populist movement in Europe find semblance in the United States with the rise of Trump? Can Reality TV with its "invited behavior" placing Trump on the "new pseudo-reality created by Reality TV Methods" (p. 5) find accord if populist leaders use the same format in capturing the votes in Europe in addition to the use of the tabloids and popular magazines? This proposition indicates a very passive media audience glued to their TV (medium) with a low ability to engage in political analysis. The TV Reality Shows create a pseudo-leader or a demagogue on and from the small screen onto the larger societal political screen thus threatening the spirit of democracy. Or can the public discourse in the media be used as the conduit to propagate populism popularly placed within the charade of liberal democracy?

*The Psychology of Political Communicators* has whetted the appetite for more writings on public discourse in liberal democracies. Based mainly on content analysis,

the book makes inferences about audience political behavior and discusses the political communicators and the media. More public discourse is needed on the role of the social media and the younger generation, which the second edition should address.

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### Biographical Note

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