Communication and Political Understanding as Political Participation

Michele Micheletti
Political Science
Karlstad University
Sweden
michele.micheletti@kau.se

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“What McLuhan writes about the railroad applies with equal validity to the media of print, television, computers and now the Internet. ‘The medium is the message’ because it is the ‘medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’.”

- from the memorial website for Marshall McLuhan @ marshallmcluhan.com/main.html
Communicating as Participating Politically
Current writings in the ever-expanding field of political communication point in a direction of special interest for political scientists studying citizen participation in politics. The news is that information-seeking, information-providing, information-retrieving, and information interpretation is political participation. Communication and political understanding—the need for individuals to inform themselves and others about goings-ons in society and to situate themselves politically—is moving from its conventional classification as a precursor for political participation and part of the prefabricated package provided by party and organizational membership to a form of political participation in its own right. Not only that. Societal forces like the media, advocacy groups, corporations, and even established social movements and political parties invite ordinary people to involve themselves directly in communicative actions. Growing numbers of citizen networks and advocacy groups ask people to take information materials offered on their web sites and tailor-make their own political understanding and messages. Political communication and political understanding have entered the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) world.

This paper discusses the increasing importance and centrality of communication in political participation. The next section uses examples of new developments “on the ground” and in other academic disciplines to illustrate how communication is viewed as participation. Then the paper reviews what political science state has to say about the relationship between communication and participation. This is done in a discussion on the contribution of research on democratic theory’s implications for participation scholarship, academic debates on the proclaimed proclivity for Western citizens to disengage in civic life, and scholarship on newer ways of understanding politics and collective action to study this issue. The paper ends by claiming that communication has become a central form of participation because reflective political understanding is necessary for individualized political responsibility-taking, the “meta-participation” for sustainable development.
Viewing Communication as Political Participation

For a growing number of political activists, social scientists, and political businesspeople, communication is no longer just a way of getting across messages. It is action in its own right. Like other forms of participation, communication mobilizes and structures political thought and engagement, and it affects the internal and external workings of social movements, corporations, and other societal actors. All kinds of citizen groups acknowledge the importance of communication these days. They even offer “toolboxes” for communication on their web sites for people to build their own DIY meaning and communicate values in a personalized fashion (for examples see Micheletti & Stolle, 2006). Thus, strategic communication is increasingly viewed as the base of successful goal attainment. A few examples illustrate this development.

First, communication has become a business in itself. A multitude of firms now offer communication guidance to political, civil society, and market actors. Political consultancy has to great degree become communications programming. It puts communication in the center of its activities. PoliticsOnline News Tool & Strategies, created by a former U.S. Senate policy analyst Phil Noble who was awarded the International Political Consultant of the Year by his peers of the American Association of Political Consultants in 1997, “provides news, tools and strategies for using the Internet in politics and public affairs” (Nobel & Associates, 2005). The aptly-named “Spin Project” has as its goal to “strengthen the social justice movement by strengthening its communications infrastructure” (The Spin Project, 2005). “CitizenSpeak Your Campaign” provides grassroots organizations and local activists with easy-to-use, powerful e-advocacy tools. It describes itself this way: CitizenSpeak “is a free email advocacy service that enables grassroots organizations and individual activists to launch MoveOn-like email campaigns and track participation…CitizenSpeak campaigns are easy to set-up… With CitizenSpeak users can empower members..., increase awareness..., extend reach..., learn more about supporters..., grow membership and fundraise..., [and] increase website traffic by promoting a web address on a customizable Thank You page” (CitizenSpeak, 2006).
An article on CitizenSpeak in the e-journal of politicking on the Internet (which is, by the way, a project of PoliticsOnline) is appropriately entitled “PoliticsOnline: From Bowling Alone to Bowling Online: How Online Tools Can Build Community and Increase Voter Turnout in 2004” (Lee, 2004). These communication consultants as well as others help societal actors brand their identity and channel their energy and creativity (see e.g. Radley Yeldar, 2005).

Second, educational institutions have also caught on. Special units, like the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at Seattle’s University of Washington, have been established because “the ways people communicate, to whom, and with what effects are crucial elements of vibrant public life, democracy, and social relationships” (CCCE, 2005). The Center for Communication Programs (CCP), established by John Hopkins Blomberg School of Public Health, focuses attention on the central role of communication to save lives, improve health, and enhance well-being. Among other things, it uses strategic communication programs to influence political dialogue, collective action, and individual behavior (JHUCCP, 2005). It appears that communication is social capital.

A third group is politicians, who are also getting into the communicative institutional-building. Niklas Nordström, controversial politician and former President of the Swedish social democratic party’s youth organization, started Votia, a communication and opinion-making company for interactive democracy, whose mission—“involving, activating, and engaging individuals in all segments of society” (Votia, 2005, my translation)—echoes that of political parties and other membership groups. In the summer of 2005 former U.S. Vice President Al Gore revealed Current, a new TV channel that aspires “to make television...a two-way conversation” by using new digital tools that “make it possible for citizen journalists, new filmmakers, average citizens to participate and make this medium a multi-way conversation” (Journal Sentinel, 2005). Current explains its mission in these words: “It works like this: Anyone who wants to contribute can upload a video. Then, everyone in the Current online community votes for what should be on TV. You can join in at either stage—watch & vote or create & upload. (We’ve also got online training to help you get the skills you need to make TV!). This is definitely not a traditional TV network.
Watching Current, you’ll see more, on more topics, from more points of view. But if we’re going to succeed, we need you to do more than watch; we need you to jump in and participate” (Current, 2005).

A fourth example is the new academic terms that highlight these developments in political communication and political understanding. Media scholars analyze “citizen journalists” and “participatory journalism,” which is a bottom-up process giving individual citizens and groups opportunities to engage in “acts of journalism” by playing “an active role in the collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Business scholars show how corporations “write together” with their stakeholders, a group of people much broader than shareholders, employees, and customers that also includes activist groups, loose consumer-oriented networks, policy analysts, and even academics. They even bring consumers directly into marketing by, as Crest toothpaste, Chevrolet, and other now do, asking consumers to participate hands-on in shaping their marketing campaigns and e-vote for the flavor, color, or shape of their choice (NYT, 2005, 2006; Carat, 2006). Or, as they grapple with demands for corporate social responsibility, they may open their corporate doors for dialogue with political consumerist activists (Boje, 2001; Knight & Greenberg, 2003; Conley, 2005; Nike, 2005a). Social movement and communication scholars follow Marshall McLuhan’s lead (see quote on title page) and venture the conclusion that communication is now an ontological force in the world today.¹ Communication is more than just getting across one’s message. It is the message, the meaning, and the action all in one. The bottom line is that thinking and talk is, in certain circumstances, political participation and action.

Interesting, the authors of We Media, the report on participatory journalism, conclude that the future of journalism will depend not only on how well it informs but how well it encourages and enable conversations (deliberation, interactivity) with citizens. Engaging citizens in conversation has also become important in the business world. The web sites of global corporate giants like Nike, H & M, and Shell

¹This signifies that information is a communication structure that is displacing and, thereby, changing the structure and meaning of actors as well as traditional and modern social structures (See Lash, 1997; W. van de Donk et al., 2004).
Oil offer ordinary citizens opportunities to seek and provide information and to develop their own political understanding. They want “to dialogue,” as interactive communication is called in current vocabulary, and engage in corporate writing with activists and ordinary people about their corporate social responsibility. Shell Oil describes “Tell Shell Forum” as concerning global communications and “how we get our message across to you and how you get the chance to air your views” about us (Royal Dutch Shell Oil, 2005). The very large Swedish multinational corporation H & M offers the web service “Make a Difference” in several languages and urges visitors to participate in simple survey question on corporate social responsibility (H & M, 2005). Nike too now takes the pulse of its community in a survey whose aim is “to help us understand what you know about Nike’s corporate responsibility (CR) efforts and performance, and how we might improve our reporting tools in the future” (Nike, 2005b).

The conclusion is that weblogs (blogs), chat sites, yahoo groups, personalized news, email lists, and other Internet opportunities facilitate information-seeking, information-giving, information creation, and information interpretation. They are also pushing along the development of political informing and understanding as political participation (Van de Donk, 2004; Meike, 2002). In this sense, blogging, googling, clicking, forwarding, downloading, and constructing websites function as membership in organizations and parties. They too can create and enhance social capital and political understanding and should, therefore, definitely be included in the question batteries used in citizen surveys to probe civic skills and forms of political participation. Online involvement and cyberactivism are now offering growing numbers of citizens abundant occasions to participate directly by creating, reconstructing, interpreting, and critiquing information in order to craft politics in the world today. They aid citizens in developing a political understanding of the

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2 Of course it can be argued that these opportunities are just “sweatwash” and “greenwash,” meaning that corporations can whitewash their image and just give the impression of concern about sustainable development without doing anything to improve their policies and practices. But this argument needs to be investigated empirically. Among other things, it is necessary to know how the corporations use the information in their activities. It can also be debated whether they are similar to the function of deliberative democracy, which many scholars claim is to create democratic and system legitimacy.
world locally to globally and privately to publicly. When seen in this fashion, communication is a form of reflexive political participation (see last section).

**Political Science Views on Communication and Participation**

How does political science view the increasing importance and centrality of communication in political participation? Research on democratic theory’s implications for participation scholarship, academic debates on the proclaimed proclivity for Western citizens to disengage in civic life, and scholarship on newer ways of understanding politics and collective action are the political science contributions reviewed in this section to help answer this question.

A good starting point is political science discussions about the importance of enlightened citizenship for democratic development. Enlightened understanding is one of the criteria that Robert Dahl developed in his highly-influential theoretical works on liberal democracy. In Dahl’s words, “Within reasonable limits as to time, each member must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences” (Dahl, 1998, 37). Moreover, “to acquire an enlightened understanding of possible government actions and policies also requires freedom of expression. To acquire civic competence, citizens need opportunities to express their own views; learn from one another; engage in discussion and deliberation; read, hear, and question experts, political candidates, and persons whose judgments they trust; and learn in other ways that depend on freedom of expression” (Dahl, 1998, 96-7). For him and others who use liberal democracy to frame their work, good democratic government requires enlightened citizens who are and stay informed about government and politics. Otherwise, citizens will not be able to assess relevant policy alternatives and make informed choices (i.e., vote) at election time, the main focus of political participation for scholars of the liberal democracy school of thought. “Acts of knowledge seeking”\(^{3}\) thus lay the ground for participation. They are precursors, prerequisites, and the “givens” for using representative democratic government’s means for people to influence politics. Liberal democracy theorists do not assume that citizens are active

\(^{3}\) The term “acts of knowledge seeking” is taken from Virginia Sapiro (no date).
communicators, but they expect them (somehow) to know their political preferences at election time and in other settings that demand citizens to make informed choices among alternatives relevant for politics.

Survey work influenced by liberal democratic theory reflects this assumption. It does not study citizens’ participative struggles for information. Survey questions generally only scan media consumption, interest in politics, and knowledge of political facts and positions. The explanation for the use of these survey questions is liberal democracy’s view of political participation as an instrumental act through which citizens attempt to make politicians respond to their will. Participation is efforts and attempts to influence government primarily through choice (voting) among a set of alternatives (parties and candidates). This definition excludes all activity dealing with politically informing oneself and others from the realm of participation. At least some political scientists state that they have made this choice consciously. In the now classical study on participation and role model for other studies, *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, authors Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady declare openly that “communications—political discussions among friends, letters to the editor, calls to talk radio shows—in which the target audience is not a public official” are not included in the questionnaire (1995, 39-40).

Swedish citizen studies as well as the encompassing Citizenship, Involvement, and Democracy program (CID) have also been inspired by Robert Dahl and the liberal democratic tradition (Petersson et al., 1987, 1998; Center for Democracy and the Third Sector, 2005). The Swedish study explicitly broadened the definition of politics to concern attempts to exercise influence over societal (and not just governmental and parliamentary-oriented) issues, but it did not consider information-seeking, the quest for political knowledge, and the creation of personal/reflexive political understanding as political participation. Well, at least they (and I am a guilty one here) have not included these ideas in the measurements. Like other surveys, political knowledge (measured as

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4 This is a common definition that can be found in investigations on Sweden, Europe in general, the United States and elsewhere. See Teorell 2003 and the concluding chapter in Norris, 1999.

5 This book offers a broader view of participation than many other American studies. Information-seeking is also excluded from the definition of participation in another Verba and Schlozman collaborative book with Nancy Burns (Burns et al., 2001, 55).
answers to factual questions) and information-seeking (basically questions on media consumption) are used as independent factors that explain a citizen’s political participation. Political understanding is not really given much focus in these path-breaking studies. And political science scholarship has not seriously considered what the concept of political understanding is all about.6

Possibly surprisingly given the new term “participatory journalism,” another important strain of democratic theory, classical theories on participatory democracy or self-government, do not focus on communication as a form of direct and immediate citizen participation in decision-making.7 Participation in these self-governing settings can, of course, be learning-by-doing and DIY. It can include learning new facts and perspectives (understanding), but this process is viewed as more of a side effect of participation than participation in itself. Neither does this democratic theoretical strain acknowledge the “ontological force” of communication. Instead, just as with its liberal democratic cousin, information-seeking, information-relaying, and various forms of knowledge management and interpretation are shelved away as precursors to or secondary to “real” political participation in the form of attempts to exercise hands-on political influence as illustrated by the making and implementing of policy at the very local level and in smaller political arenas as exemplified by school boards and workplaces.

One strain of democratic theory, deliberative democracy, gives prominence to political communication and political understanding. It challenges the other democratic theories’ assumption about preference formation (a kind of political understanding) as a prerequisite and “given” for political involvement. According to this theory, developing one’s political understanding and stands on issues is a form of participation. An important message that this theory sends to survey researchers is that the questionnaire alternative “don’t know” needs follow-up questions that

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6 Dahl (1989, 181-2) connects understanding with self- and other-interests. A dictionary definition of understanding leads to the following questions. Is “political understanding” a quality or condition of the one who understands, a kind of political comprehension? Is it the faculty by which one understanding, a kind of political intelligence? Is it an individual or specified judgement or outlook, a kind of meta-political opinion? Or is it political compromise (reconciliation of differences) or political solidarity (a disposition to appreciate or share the feelings and thoughts of others? (The Free Dictionary on line at thefreedictionary.com/understanding; Accessed April 5, 2006).

7 Important theorists here are Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber.
penetrate what “don’t knowing” means for politics, political communication, political understanding and political participation generally.\(^8\) It also challenges survey researchers to probe more into the meaning of answers to the standard question “how interested would you say that you are in politics.” If nothing else and given the known gaps in political interest and factual knowledge in politics found in different countries, it seems necessary to focus increasingly more research attention on the impact of “citizen unenlightenment” on political processes and the public sphere in general. Survey research has historically tapped “unenlightenment” by measuring the public’s level of political information (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1983; Galston, 2001; Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook & Jacobs, 2004). More recently, the American survey on citizenship, involvement, and democracy (CID) asked: “how often does politics seem so complicated that you can’t really understand what is going on” (Center for Democracy and the Third Sector, 2005). But much more operational theoretical development is needed on this point.

For some scholars of this third theoretical school of democracy, the point of deliberating participation is to make consensual decisions on public matters. They believe that the point of deliberation is changing one’s mind on issues. For others, deliberation’s function is opinion formation, sharpening arguments, and figuring out where to stand on issues of public relevance (for a discussion see Teorell, 2003). Deliberative democracy theorists also debate how collectivist or individualized deliberation must be to fulfill its function for democracy and, therefore, to be considered political participation. The extreme positions are face-to-face, territorially-based reasoned dialogue in a collectivity of people (including deliberative polls, study circles, citizen panels, and public debates) and one individual seeking in a DIY way to improve her political understanding (find out what to think, write, and say as well as contextualize her views in the larger picture of political things) through the collection, sifting through, and comparison of information with the help of such Internet functions as blogs, chat sites, testimonials, and frequently asked question

\(^8\) Perhaps people cannot answer a question because they have internal value conflict, have qualms over deciding their preference ordering, and/or cannot find an adequate survey alternative to express this problem. Perhaps people don’t know because they cannot find adequate information in the media and/or from politicians and others in their search for political understanding. Research also shows gender, class, age, race/ethnicity, and educational differences in using the “don’t know” alternative.
(FAQ) captions (London, 1995). However, whatever one’s position on the collectivist/individualized deliberation divide, when compared to liberal democratic theory, deliberative democratic theory is open for considering political communication, knowledge-seeking, and political understanding creation as a form of political participation.

But there is a problem with this theoretical perspective. Some of its proponents disregard an important quality of participatory democracy that was mentioned above because they—like proponents of liberal democratic theory—tend to stress the parliamentary sphere. For them, issues of representative government (the parliamentary arena) are the focus for political deliberation (e.g., Fishkin 1977). This is explained by their tendency to consider political deliberation as playing a legitimizing function in representative government. For other scholars in this theoretical school (e.g., Dryzek, 2001), the focus of deliberative democracy is broadened to the entire public sphere, which includes global civil society and the global marketplace.

Viewing communication as political participation without attaching the functional strings of democratic legitimacy-making to it gives communication and the pursuit of political understanding another—and I would argue richer—meaning. When information-seeking, information-retrieving, information-relaying, and information interpretation are seen as full-fledged political participation, political scientists can explore the importance of socio-economic and demographic characteristics, trusting, political organizing as well as power and political relations locally, nationally, and globally for enlighten citizen and even reflexive political understanding. Not only does this imply that developing a political understanding is political participation. It also means that communicative political participation is a vital part of the scholarship on critical democracy and power studies (Blaug, 2002, 105f; Tarrow, 2002; Lash 1997; Van der Donk et al., 2004; Meike, 2002; Peretti with Micheletti, 2003, Stolle & Micheletti, forthcoming).

9 Different deliberative theorists represent this thought. Among them are Joshua Cohen and Bernard Manin. For a discussion see Teorell, 2003.
When political participation is seen in this light, scholars can develop a new research agenda on the role of communication in politics. Can it be that citizen thirst for information and new venues of communication (as shown in increases in media actors and the fractionalized media environment) have become more acute, important, and engaging activities because citizen trust and interest in the actors and institutions of representative government have declined and social capital in many countries is on the wane? Are the reasons for “bowling alone” triggering more political communication and “bowling online”? What is—if any—the implication of lower traditional political participation (lower voting levels, declining membership rates in large membership organizations like political parties and unions) and high levels of distrust of politicians and the mass media for how citizens these days develop a political understanding?10

Where (in which arenas, settings) and with what tools (technologies, civil skills) do citizens create their political understanding? We can round up the usual suspects—home life, friendships, schools, workplaces, political parties, civil organizations, and the traditional media—and compare them with an additional (“unconventional”) and increasingly numerous settings for political literacy education—including consumer goods, brands, market exchanges, testimonials, the Internet, music, art, sports, television entertainment (late night shows, game shows, documentary soap operas, etc.), and the renaissance of adult comic books.

Unfortunately, the political science arsenal of rapid response to these provocative and crucial questions is fragmented, incomplete, and limited. It would be a research effort in itself to pull together the bits and pieces of scientific insights from our different disciplinary fields to provide a complete overview of our state of the art on these questions. What follows is a partial summary from the perspective of participation studies. The summary offers a few initial thoughts based on survey results in the field of political participation and touches briefly on empirical work from the field of social movements, transnational advocacy campaigning, political consumerism, and cyber activism.

10 For an excellent overview of the decline debate see Stolle & Hooghe 2004.
Following the liberal democratic survey tradition, most studies classified under the heading of political participation scholarship use the simple measures of political interest and factual political knowledge briefly discussed above. Important studies in political science find high levels of factual political knowledge and political interest among citizens who still trust parties (and acknowledge that it is not possible to determine the causal direction), clear intergeneration differences in factual political knowledge and political interest (with the older generation as more knowledgeable and interested), fewer “newshounds” (as measured by a question on the need to get all kind of news every day) among younger people, a higher use of comedy shows and late night television as a source of political information among people thirty years and younger\textsuperscript{11}, and a disturbing relationship between the decline in social capital and declines in traditional political participation (including severe declines in membership in organizations and parties) (See Holmberg, 1999; Petersson et al., 1998, 55; Howe, 2003; Putnam, 2000, 36, 45, 222; Pew Research Center, 2004). A small Swedish study even finds that people who generally have good trust in politicians are more likely to believe that citizens should primarily try to influence politics in elections and less trusting citizens among those who believe that other forms of participation must complement voting (Gilljam & Jodal, 2002, 167). These latter citizens are also found more among “post materialist” Swedish political parties.

Other surveys and qualitative studies do not dispute these findings. However, they tell us that citizens are less authority-bound than in the past, when people believed more (trusted) what authorities and experts (hierarchical organizations) told them and what they were taught by their parents and in schools (Petersson, Westholm & Blomberg, 1989, Ch. 6; Inglehart, 1999). Although we should not become nostalgic about the historical significance of the “bowling together culture” for politics, the impression from scholarship is that political information and political understanding were to large degree prepackaged and served to members. They were “given” and not DIY-activities as they increasingly appear to be today. Citizens from the same social class or associational membership tended to hold the

\textsuperscript{11} I want to thank Gregg Bucken-Knapp, Karlstad University, for giving me information on this interesting Pew Research Center Study.
same opinions, viewpoints, world view, and political understanding (See Micheletti, 2003, 24-34; Sörbom, 2002, 103-112; Bowman & Willis, 2003, 50). Today, as concluded by Ronald Inglehart, people generally “are becoming increasingly critical of hierarchical authority, are also becoming increasingly resistant to authoritarian government, more interested in political life, and more apt to play an active role in politics” (Inglehart, 1999, 236). A Swedish study of young people illuminates the relationship between system criticism and interest in political life. It shows that, while a growing number of young Swedes say that they were not interested in politics (which most likely means parliamentary politics to them\(^{12}\)), almost all state that, in order to affect social affairs, they have been involved or could consider being involved in boycotting, which is a form of political participation using the market as its arena for politics and targeting multinational corporations more than national governments (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2003, 12, 162 ff, 171). When seen together, these studies generate a number of exciting questions about political information communication, political interest, political understanding, and political participation. They are listed below.

Political scientists may agree that citizens today are more critical and cynical about politics. But we tend to disagree about the consequences of criticism and cynicism for politics. Some scholars—and most prominently Robert Putnam—draw the conclusion that a growing number of Western people are increasingly alienated and “turned-off” from societal concerns. They care less about politics; they just don’t care one way or the other about politics. Possibly it can be concluded that they are less interested in seeking political understanding. Others argue that it is important to take a multi-dimensional view of politics and consider other issues, arenas, forms, and tools of political participation. When seen together, this latter group of scholars concludes that Westerners are elite-challenging and that political participation can be found in areas other than the representative democratic parliamentary system (see Norris, 1999, 2002; Stolle & Hooghe, 2003, 2005). As well-articulated by Ulrich Beck (1997, 101), “[w]hat appeared to be a ‘loss of consensus’, an ‘unpolitical retreat to

\(^{12}\) Hans Zetterberg, emeritus sociology professor, and I discussed the meaning of the survey question on “political interest” after his talk for the International Social Science Seminar, International Graduate Program, Stockholm University, spring 2004.
private life’, ‘a new inwardness’ or ‘caring for emotional wounds’ in the old understanding of politics can, when seen from the other side, represent the struggle for a new dimension of politics.” Questing for new political understanding may be very important in this regard, and “political life” (as illustrated by the survey of young Swedes) seems to have a different meaning than in the past.

The problem is that the knowledge-base necessary for this kind of more reflective and individualized political understanding is not provided in the traditional political places. The prepackaged political understanding offered by political parties, interest groups, and other civil society associations is often too self-interested, too own-group-interested, and too focused on the parliamentary realm of politics for it to work for this new side of politics. Thus following Habermas, the apparent rise in communicative or discursive political participation may well be an effect of epochal change (globalization, individualization, information communication technology, and risk society) that leads citizens to seek and develop new ideas for newly-created forums for rational-critical debate (for a discussion see Salter, 2003).

There are a number of innovative research topics here just waiting for us to craft them. One is to study if critical, reflexive, elite-challenging people are also those citizens who actively pursue political information and political understanding and who—like Al Gore, Niklas Nordström, Phil Noble, and others less well known—are leaders of participatory journalism and strategic communication. In the era of political distrust, where do critical citizens collect their information, and how do they develop their political understanding? Do they and how do they build their own framework for or package of political understanding? In short, where does their quest for political understanding take them? Perhaps these curious citizens pay attention to critical democratic networks and movements that challenge the shape of politics globally and use unconventional formats to communicate their ideas. Or perhaps they use conventional media and established political organizations in a different way (as touchstones) than trusting, non-critical, or alienated citizens. Has established politics—political parties, unions, and other representatives of old civil society—become an arena for retrieving but not contextualizing (that is, processing
and interpreting) politically-relevant information for a growing number of citizens? Another important research task is, of course, to study how uncritical and politically inactive citizens understand politics and where these groups of citizens receive their political information and communicate their political understanding. As political scientists schooled in participation studies, we also want to know if there is an equality divide on these issues when it comes to aspects like gender, education, civic skills, income, age, ethnicity, class, and political leanings.

Results from studies on the market as an arena for politics (political consumerism) offer a bit of assistance in pondering this laundry list of questions. They show that political consumers have a much more positive view of global protest movements than non-political consumers (that is, adults who have not boycotted or “buycotted” during a twelve month period). However, when asked where they seek and find information on products for political consumerist actions, they at least in Sweden rate Internet low and (conventional) mass media high. The study has not directly asked if elite-challenging global protest movements and media venues were a source of information or how political consumers develop their understanding of “politics behind products.” But this research shows that part of the answer may lie in their involvement in networks and civil society associations, many of which are greener and more global in orientation (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005; Micheletti & Stolle, 2005). Political consumers in the Scandinavian countries are also more interested in politics (using the standard survey measure) and all-round politically active in a variety of forms of political participation. They are also more highly educated than non-political consumers. Interestingly, in Denmark and Sweden they show lower levels of trust in multinational corporations and higher trust of consumer institutions than non-political consumers. Norwegian and Danish—but not Swedish—political consumers still have high trust in national political institutions (Stolle & Micheletti, 2005; Tobiasen, 2005; Strømnes, 2005; ibid.). Unfortunately, the studies do not focus on trust in media actors and institutions.

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13 This research has been financed by the Swedish Council of Research and includes Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle as its main scholars.
A thought-provoking example of a critical, reflexive political consumer who decided to communicate politics in his own DIY way is Jonah Peretti, former graduate student working at the MIT media lab.\textsuperscript{14} He decided to test Nike’s new electronic customer service “iD program” by ordering a pair of customized shoes over Internet with the name “sweatshop” on them. (The word “sweatshop” is the master frame for the global social justice movement’s focus on outsourced production in the Third World.) His order and the ensuing email exchange with the Nike customer service created a culture jam that expressed his and other citizens’ views of Nike’s use of outsourced labor to manufacture its shoes. A part of his Nike email exchange reads: “Your web site advertises that the NIKE iD program is ‘about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.’ I share Nike’s love of freedom and personal expression. [...] My personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order.” Peretti collected his email exchange with Nike and communicated it via email to a dozen or so friends, who forwarded it to others and an estimated 11.4 million people around the globe. He began to receive email responses (3,655 emails over a four month period). He appeared on American national television and was interviewed in many European newspapers. Peretti became a media celebrity, wrote magazine articles, gave lectures, and built a blog about his Nike experience (see Peretti with Micheletti, 2003). Currently he works on contagious media and communication and presents himself as “…director of R&D at the Eyebeam center for art and technology in New York City. Peretti co-created FundRace.org, a popular website that promotes transparency by allowing anyone to see the political contributions of their neighbors, friends and coworkers; ForwardTrack, an innovative social network platform that tracks and maps the diffusion of email forwards, political calls-to-action, and online petitions; and reBlog, open source blogging software for people who prefer curating content to writing original posts” (Peretti, 2005).

\textsuperscript{14} Dietlind Stolle and I are analyzing the Nike Email Exchange as an interesting form of global engagement in politics. See Stolle & Micheletti, forthcoming.
Thus, research on critical democracy, counter globalization, risk society, reflexivity, and political consumerism (which includes a good portion of political communication scholarship\textsuperscript{15}) contributes a final political science response on the increasing importance of communication as political participation. These academic fields are showing that innovative politics (new problems, arenas, actors, tools, issues, and thinking) helps explain why information communication and political understanding are now mighty forms of political participation.\textsuperscript{16} Considerable information and communication is necessary to construct a political understanding that dodges the problems associated with settings for conventional political understanding, that is the disaffections in democracies including declining interest in electoral campaigns, flight from political parties, unions and many civil society associations, government and media untrustworthiness, and the inability of representative parliamentary politics to deal with globalized political problems in an effective way.

Communication of new political problems, reinterpretation of old ones, classification of problems as political as well as the quest to understand causal political order is creating politics anew. These developments are represented by a single individual’s attempt through Internet and other means to understand her political life context that involve very banal, everyday, local, and global problems in a variety of settings. The list is long and includes environmental and social justice “politics behind products” offered for sale by retailers, problems with education resources in local schools, multicultural workplace issues, effects of the tsunami disaster and the Katrina storm on animal life, tourist risks associated with terrorism in British subways, effects of industrialization on global warming and for pandemics, the role of individuals in sustainable/unsustainable development, and decisions to make on choosing which candidate and party to support at election time. It is also illustrated by new communities that communicate as a way of working through identity struggles, people who communicate interchangeably to create new interests,

\textsuperscript{15} See, for instance, W. Lance Bennett’s work on permanent campaigns and media markets that can be found on-line at depts.washington.edu/bennett/about-works.html.

\textsuperscript{16} This standpoint can be pieced together from the Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Eschle and Maiguashca, 2005; Amoore, 2005; Falk, 1998; Ho, Barber and Khondker, 2002.
solidarities, networks, lifestyles, and imagined communities as well as discussion groups seeking and providing information to morally persuade others that a particular issue is an important political problem.

These efforts are examples of purposeful political participation which not only posit new ideas but change the social relations in which the public discourse is embedded. For groups and social movements, “…intervening in public discourse and restructuring the surrounding social relations are not just intertwined activities, but two sides of the same activities” (Medearis, 2004, 55f). Communication tells us what is political. It is political power, and as research show time-and-time again, better communication strategies win the discursive battle over the definition of politics. Communication also decides our political identities. It is doing, and doing is crafting a political understanding and engaging in strategic information communication. This is one way for a political scientist to interpret the sociological and social movement scholarly claim about the “ontological force” of communication.

**Communication, Participation, Political Responsibility-Taking, and Reflexivity**
Informing oneself, keeping oneself informed, informing others, contextualizing one’s information, and creating information and news is an increasingly important political task for citizens in today’s world. It is just as important as voting, and perhaps in certain ways more important. For instance in some cases as in the areas of global social justice in the global garment industry, communication in the form of fact-finding, speaking out, interpreting information, defining problems, and talking with corporate giants is one of the few ways for workers, consumers, and activists to take responsibility in politics. Traditional forms of participation—voting, membership in political organizations, contacting public officials—and even market-based actions—boycotts and “buycotts”—may not be available or not considered to be preferred and effective alternatives.

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17“Buycotting” is a word that was made up a few years ago by an unknown source to refer to citizens who deliberately choose certain products over others. It is the opposite of a boycott. For more information on preferred alternatives see Micheletti, 2004.
But the centrality of communication in politics is not just about the effectiveness of forms of participation inside or outside the nation-state container of power relations and regulatory responsibility. Communicating with oneself and others leads to “political maturity” and “life political” identity, meaning finding one’s own political voice and formulating one’s own political opinion or judgment. In this view, communication is political empowerment and community-building (White, 2004). As shown in environmental and feminist scholarship, it is also increasingly vital for political responsibility-taking. This signifies that political understanding need not spring from narrow self-interest, interest-articulating political ties (parties and organizations), and a narrow conception of the public interest. Rather, its root may be a commitment to (global) political equality and the global common good that is held by certain (probably not very representative) citizens. It may also involve infusing global public interests in private affairs; thereby taking individualized political responsibility daily in ordinary life.

Thus, the participative import of communication today is closely connected with the need to rethink the value foundation of the Western world. This claim may seem bold; it surely needs more theoretical and empirical development. However, it follows from research on political consumerism, postmodernization, sustainability, globalization, and reflexive modernization, all of which find that the coordinating principles of class, nation, and industry are decreasingly the points of departure for anchoring the social, economic, and political future of our common good life. (They may even be decreasingly the point of origin for political participation.) Communicative participation is of current, central importance because it is political action working to deal with challenges to political responsibility caused by global problems and problems associated with nation-state political problem-solving.

When seen it this light, communication—more than specific actors and movements—is key to the transformative struggle to revamp values and introduce a new belief system (new ontological foundation of community) in the Western world.

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18 For Immanuel Kant, enlightenment is one’s emergence from a self-imposed immaturity or the incapacity to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another (Schmidt, 1996).

19 Sidney Verba (2003, 670 ff) write interestingly about the more educated and, therefore, more active echelons of the population as “higher quality” citizens who are “moral reasoners” and “social scientific reasoners.”
This communication work takes its point of departure in the painful awareness that our political system (founded on class, nation, and industry) is exploiting nature and peoples to a threatening extent, creating global risks (cf. Lash, 1997, 110-111; Beck, Bonns & Lau, 2003, 2), and making citizens dependent on a division of public and private responsibility-taking that runs counter to sustainable development, which, at least to this reader, seems to be the meta-ideology of our common future. It is our utopia.

What can be distilled from scholarship on risk society, post-colonialism, feminism, sustainability, political consumerism, and human rights is that a new political understanding must be developed to deal with problems of political responsibility that are threatening the good life (sustainability) globally. In varying fashions, scholars representing these research traditions argue that we must understand politics anew. To do so we need to see politics from a different perspective and use global problems as the conceptual lens to give serious consideration to the contradictions, unintended side-effects, ambiguities, and perplexities of Western well-being (cf. Young, 2006). Communication as political participation is, therefore, intimately tied with reconstructing political understanding to view spheres of responsibility and the role of institutions and individuals in them in new ways.

In sum, there are a number of very good compelling reasons for political scientists to rethink political participation and political understanding conceptually and empirically. We must consider that political participation is, in fact, political responsibility-taking and that politics may now be situated in arenas (for instance the global marketplace) outside the parliamentary sphere. How else should we analyze citizen use of the market as an arena for politics? And perhaps political participation has even moved outside the conventional realm of politics. Recently a legal scholar told me of University of California students who decided to vote for the first time because they wanted Arnold Swarzenegger to become governor of California. Their reason was the desire to have his signature (autograph) on their graduating diploma. This kind of reason for electoral participation and candidate selection is not confined
to sunny California’s celebrity politicians. It can even be found in European democracies.

A theoretical and empirical analytical penetration of political communication and the questing for political understanding may end up arguing that the causal relationship between political knowledge, understanding, and participation is completely opposite from the one postulated in conventional political participation studies. The analytical conclusion may be that conventionally-defined political participation (voting, organizational membership, etc.) is the precursor and prerequisite for political knowledge and political understanding. In all fairness, it should be mentioned that survey analysts are, actually, somewhat open to this interpretation.

Political understanding must also be given a richer conceptual definition and not just—as is the case of enlightened understanding that has dominated Robert Dahl’s and Amy Guttman’s work—an important procedural one referring to equal opportunities for learning, education, and deliberating political issues (Dahl, 1998, 1989; Guttman, 1987). Today political understanding may entail communicative actions of “figuring things out,” putting political puzzle pieces together as much as possible in a cohesive new ideological frame, and getting a good cognitive and emotional (intuitive) grip on politics and life politics. Communicative participation and understanding politics is, therefore, a form of reflexivity. It is acknowledgment that our lives are embedded in a variety of social, political, and economic uncertainties. Political scientists should, therefore, view political understanding as political epistemology and that it can empower citizens to grapple with the relationship between private and public life.

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20 I want to thank Bronwen Morgan, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol for telling her experience with Californian university students.

21 My Swedish husband (also a political scientist) told me a story from the 1960s. In his school, students engaged in a “political” campaign for their teacher who was a candidate for election. Their motivation was that they wanted to get rid of him as their teacher.

22 Sören Holmberg (1999, 111) writes in his chapter in Critical Citizens that the direction of causality between political interest/political knowledge and trust in parties and politicians cannot be determined. Jørgen Goul Andersen and colleagues (2000) discuss the “inverse” relationship between political interest and political participation. Similar ideas can also be found in Sidney Verba’s work. The question is why these scholars have not given more attention to problematizing this relationship. See also Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993,
When seen in this fashion, communication and constructing political understanding is innovative political action. This action may, moreover, involve awareness of problems and other people, uncovering relationships between facts and actors, situating and contextualizing events, relating self-interest to other-interest, seeing distant problems in local decisions, settings, and things, assessing fragmented and conflicting knowledge, processing experience as well as actively using new cognitive and emotional inputs to shape values, formulate political viewpoints, reason about the political world, create political identity, and take political responsibility personally. The political knowledge to build political understanding can, therefore, come from a variety of sources (not tapped in conventional survey measures) but definitely part of the 1006 ECPR workshop on forms of participation.

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