

Television Debates to Twitter Wars: Evolution of Political Rhetoric in Hybrid Media Systems

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Abstract: This study looks at the transformation of political rhetoric in a hybrid media environment - one that comprises both older and newer media now interacting with each other. It looks at how this interaction has changed the communication from the 1960s style of political debate on 'the (old media) television style debate cult formation to the modern-day approach for stylized interactivity advocated by Twitter' and current communication. The older media and newer media have produced a fast interactive, personal style of communication. This also has produced polarization, echo chambers, and other impediments to democratic engagement. We show how rhetoric changes across media, and how the setting of agendas, framing of messages and mobilizing audiences now is different and pragmatic interaction along the television, print and digital trajectories present. We provide empirical case studies and from existing theoretical frameworks and conclude upon the discussion of implications for future research either engagement with media hybridity or not, in order to reflect upon the integrity of political discourse.

Keywords: Hybrid Media Systems, Political Rhetoric, Television Debates, Twitter Wars, Networked Publics.

1. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, political communication has gone through a major change in the ways and forms in which it occurs. Political messages that were once conveyed by mass broadcast media, particularly television debates and news analysis, are more now than ever happening in live, real-time interaction on digital platforms (ex: Twitter) where a message can be sent out, amplified, contested, and remixed, all in real-time. This development is much more than a technological change, as it relates to a rhetorical change in political organization. Television coverage and social media are merging together in new ways that are reconceptualizing campaigns and campaigns into what scholars have begun to refer to as the "hybrid media system" of our time.

Televised political debates—far and away, some of the most important moments for civic engagement, as they provide a collective moment for voters to see candidates talk about their plans, advocate for issues, and 'challenge the other'—were clear social events that had a beginning, middle, and end, and however staged they appeared, there was a mediated journalists fact-checking and collective analysis regarding candidates after the debate. When looking at the recent changes due to the

Internet and growth social media (especially Twitter), the way people come together to discuss about political issues, the spaces all those discussions are taking place, and who gets to weigh in political conversations has radically shifted from only a few dominant participants to any politician/journalist/activist/citizen being able to engage with the original conversation.

This article examines changes in the nature, methods, and effects of political rhetoric in a time of television debates and Twitter wars, demonstrating how hybrid media systems incite both innovation and instability in public discourse. Widespread reference to some of the relevant key theoretical frameworks, significant empirical studies, and the practical implications for democratic society is also traced.

2. Literature Review

A. Evolution of Media and Political Discourse

The origins of political communication can be traced to print media and then more recent technologies of radio and television, with each new technology reshaping how politicians communicate with, and reach, their audience. Television emerged as a new technology in the mid-20th century and added a new visual and emotional dimension to debates and significantly changed how voters would view candidates and potentially vote for them. Mass, one-to-many broadcasts of the Kennedy-Nixon debates in the U.S or the real-time broadcasts of parliamentary proceedings in India are both examples of how legacy media operated in the mass, one-to-many style of traditional communication.

Cable news channels and 24-hour journalism increased the pace of political reporting, but it was the significant changes brought on by the emergence of digital platforms that really transformed the landscape. Technology like social media in the forms of Twitter and Facebook democratized the production and dissemination of political messages allowing for direct access and engagement, faster feedback loops, and more micro-targeted messages. There were now also new rhetorical forms: hashtags, memes, and kinds of "clapback's" to playfully or provocatively reframing political content for already fragmented and completely online engagement with audiences.

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B. The Hybrid Media System

Andrew Chadwick's concept of the hybrid media system posits that the new media landscape is defined by the blending, competition, and coevolution of both older and newer media logics. In this hybrid environment, traditional media—such as televised debates—and digital platforms—especially Twitter—do not simply coexist; they respond and cross-interact in real time. Media events now spark cascades of commentary on social media, and trending topics and viral content then feed back into tv programming and news agendas.

Political actors have become adept at taking up these modalities in their campaigns, recontextualizing legacy media messaging into social, prolonging the reach and shelf life of televised text, and enacting real audience participation in their campaigns. Meanwhile, journalists are increasingly "hunting" for impact tweets during televised debates, integrating user-generated content back into mainstream, formal reporting, and creating opportunities for grey areas between news and opinion.

C. Evolution of Political Rhetoric

The tone and tactics of political rhetoric have significantly shifted in this milieu. Where televised debates valued thoughtful discourse and formal rebuttal, Twitter privileges brevity, immediacy, and emotional impact. As a result, rhetorical avenues have evolved: politicians post concise, often incendiary statements designed to create viral content; politicians issue parallels hashtags to foster support or insert opposition; politicians directly correspond with critics and supporters alike.

Empirical evidence illustrates that the topics of televised debate increasingly align with trending social media hashtags, further indicating a feedback loop between platforms. Furthermore, the personalization of politics is enhanced through the use of Twitter, where leaders can co-subjectively build performative authenticity, addressing individuals in both an unmediated and unedited format. Expandingly, hybrid media logics have attracted incivility, polarization, and echo chambers that challenge conceptions of health and inclusivity in deliberations of the democratic public sphere.

D. Contemporary Case Studies

Examinations of flagged moments in India, Germany, the US, and the UK show two patterns:

- 1) reciprocal agenda-setting, where social media reactions shape coverage of television debate and vice versa.
- 2) hybrid platforms are utilized to brand politics, manage crises, and mobilize voters.

For example, the television debate format in India now is routinely branded with hashtags that trend on Twitter during and after the debate, and political parties are setting up online "war rooms" to ensure the spread of a more favorable narrative. In the US presidential campaigns of 2016 and 2020, Twitter was a sounding board for candidates and an indication of public sentiment that shaped the tone of television coverage after performance.

E. Challenges and Limitations

Though hybrid media systems foster participation and diversify voices, they also contribute to instability. False information, trolling, and coordinated harassment all present complications beyond the ideal of rational deliberation and in the immediate digital feedback loop may nudge politicians to "play to the crowd" instead of doing the work of debate. Additionally, as algorithmic curation on both TV and Twitter privilege sensationalism and outrage, it will become even less obvious where the line is drawn between substantiated argument and performance.

3. Conclusion

The shift from television debates to Twitter wars represents a fundamental transformation in political rhetoric. Hybrid media systems merge traditional institutional media with decentralized digital networks, creating an environment where political messages spread faster, reach wider audiences, and evoke stronger emotional reactions.

Televised debates emphasize structure, respect, and policy-based communication, while Twitter encourages speed, emotionality, and conflict. Hybrid systems combine these logics, causing political actors to adapt rhetorical strategies for multi-platform visibility. While the new environment democratizes participation, it also fosters polarization, misinformation, and algorithmic manipulation.

Ultimately, political rhetoric in hybrid media systems is shaped by the interplay of human behavior, media technologies, and digital infrastructures. As media ecosystems continue to evolve—with rising AI, short-form video, and algorithmic personalization—political communication will further change, demanding new research, digital literacy, and ethical considerations.

Political communication today stands at a decisive crossroads. The journey from the era of dignified television debates to the emotionally charged, fast-paced battlegrounds of Twitter wars reflects not only technological change but also a shift in how societies imagine politics, leadership, and citizenship. Television debates were grounded in structure, expertise, and institutional moderation. Their rhetoric was meant to persuade a distant public through reason, evidence, and decorum. Political actors were aware that they were speaking to a collective national audience, and therefore crafted messages that could resonate across ideological divides.

But hybrid media systems have radically transformed this rhetorical ecosystem. As news channels, digital influencers, social media platforms, and ordinary citizens enter the same communicative space, political rhetoric becomes decentralized, participatory, and algorithmically shaped. Politicians no longer speak *through* media—they speak *with* and *alongside* it. Each tweet, meme, video clip, or hashtag becomes part of a continuous narrative-making process. Political actors have discovered the power of immediacy: a single tweet can embarrass an opponent, defend a policy, or mobilize lakhs of supporters in minutes.

Yet this immediacy has also normalized aggression, personal

attacks, and polarizing speech. Twitter wars reward speed over substance, outrage over reflection, and emotional resonance over factual accuracy. While television debates encouraged structured disagreements, online platforms often amplify combative rhetoric as a spectacle. The hybrid system blurs boundaries between journalism, propaganda, entertainment, and activism—creating a noisy arena where truth competes with misinformation, and nuance struggles against virality.

At the same time, these new rhetorical spaces have democratized political participation. A citizen in a small district can challenge the statement of a senior minister. A social movement can emerge from a trending hashtag and pressure governments to respond. People no longer consume politics—they interact with it, remix it, question it, and become co-creators of public narratives.

The challenge for democratic societies is to preserve the benefits of participatory communication while mitigating the harms of polarization, misinformation, and rhetorical toxicity. Hybrid media systems are here to stay; what matters is how political actors, institutions, media organizations, and citizens learn to navigate them thoughtfully.

This research shows that political rhetoric has evolved from structured persuasion to rapid-fire engagement, from conventional debate to digital conflict, and from broadcasting to networked storytelling. The future of democratic communication depends on building hybrid media ecosystems that reward authenticity, transparency, and responsible engagement rather than sensationalism.

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