

Why Harold Lasswell's Model Remains Central to Communication Studies

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Abstract: Harold Lasswell proposed a simple yet influential model describing the process of communication incorporating five core components: “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” It is one of the earliest models that explored political communication (particularly propaganda) during that shaped the social reality during and after the World War II. This linear and cause-effect model has remained central to mass communication studies for the last 85 years. With a clear and simple breakdown, each component of the model helps analyze the communication process from different viewpoints. Moreover, it has applications across multiple disciplines. It's influence on the later theories is so and served as a framework for over 85 years. It forms the basis of curricula in Communication Studies and Mass Communication. This article explores the reasons behind the popularity and relevance of this model by elaborating some of the key characteristics of the model.

Keywords: simplicity, political communication, foundational model, components, viewpoints, interdisciplinary, popularity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Models are useful tools for understanding complex phenomena. The act of communication can be better understood with the help of such models. They allow us to conceptualize abstract processes in a more tangible way. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines a model as “a copy of something, usually smaller than the original object” (*Oxford Learner's Dictionary*). Models are instrumental in conceptualizing the act of communication.

One of the most influential communication theorists of the 20th century, Harold Dwight Lasswell, made significant contributions to mass communication in general, and political communication in particular. He served as a Professor of Law at Yale University and was President of the American Political Science Association and the American Society of International Law. However, he is best known for designing one of the most popular communication models, published in an essay in 1948: “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” The model laid the foundation for later studies as it was among the first to break down the communication process into five distinct components. This linear and straightforward model significantly influenced the academic approach to political

communication and its impact on audiences. Hence, it is important to examine the factors contributing to its relevance and continued significance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the classical model of communication, which views communication as a linear process involving a sender, message, medium, and receiver. Lasswell's model builds upon this structure by adding a fifth component: effect. It owes a significant intellectual debt to Aristotle's rhetorical model, which emphasized three parts—speaker, message, and audience. During the 20th century, communication studies in American universities evolved significantly, particularly due to the impact of World War I and II. The growing interest in propaganda and misinformation during wartime spurred academic inquiry into the communication process. Lasswell's 1948 model, “Who says what...”, is directly linked to this historical context.

3. DISCUSSION

Lasswell's model has remained relevant for the last 75 years because of its classical structure and universal appeal. Some of the key characteristics include: structural simplicity, focus on five core components,

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inclusion of barriers, linearity, interdisciplinary impact, universal application etc. Lasswell model lets us know who is communicating, what is being communicated, which is the medium used, who is the message meant for, how does the message affect the audience. This is a comprehensive framework. The model incorporates most of the units involved in a standard communication. Other models generally focus only a few of the components. For example, Shannon and Weaver model is primarily concerned with the transmission of message and the concept of noise. There is focus on effect and today researchers in journalism, mass communication, political science and new media are more interested in knowing how the message affects the people and how they respond to the content. Some of the important characteristics are elaborated below.

3.1 Simplifying Complexity

Communication involves more than just the transmission of a message from sender to receiver. Numerous factors—barriers, interpretation, feedback—can affect the process. Lasswell’s model helps analyze this complex process by breaking it down into five core components: sender, message, channel, receiver, and effect. It also acknowledges intervening elements like noise and context, highlighting that communication is far from a straightforward act.

3.2 Focus on Each Component

Lasswell’s model introduced five critical questions to analyze communication.

- Who – the sender or source
- Says what – the message or content
- In which channel – the medium or method of transmission
- To whom – the receiver or audience
- With what effect – the impact of the message

These components provide a foundation for five areas of communication study: source analysis, content analysis, media analysis, audience analysis, and effect analysis. By focusing on each element, Lasswell enabled a more systematic approach to studying communication.

3.3 Identifying Barriers

When the five core elements are studied separately, it becomes an easy exercise to know where the process of communication may fail. A barrier may manifest at the level of individual core element. For example, the source may lack credibility or may be poor in communicating. Similarly, the content may be vague and unclear and inaccurate as well. The channel may be full of noise or sometimes the sender chooses wrong medium of exchange of information. If the receiver has a prejudiced attitude to the source or the content, the communication may fail due to misinterpretation. Sometimes as a result of the failure at any of the above-mentioned stages the receiver may not understand the message and send feedback. Therefore, the model helps in understanding various obstacles in the process of

communication. M. Gernjit Darnish and Murugan Ramu pointed out that the “effective communication matters to organisations. Communication may breakdown as a result of many communication barriers that may be attributed to the sender or receiver. Therefore, effective communication requires familiarity with the barriers” (Darnish and Ramu 57).

3.4 Defining Roles

Lasswell’s model clearly defines the role of each element. The sender creates and transmits a message via a chosen medium. The receiver interprets this message based on personal and cultural filters. The effect could be a change in behavior, attitude, or knowledge. For example, leaders often use mass media like radio and TV to maximize message reach and influence.

3.5 Linear in Nature

The model describes communication as a linear, step-by-step process, starting with the sender and ending with the effect. This sequence reflects how most communication processes unfold, especially in mass communication during the mid-20th century, when radio and television dominated. It presumes a passive audience—a common assumption in early communication theories.

3.6 Influence on Later Models

This model created a base for other models. That’s why, in later years, many models drew from Lasswell’s model of communication. Shannon and Weaver’s Mathematical Model of Communication was largely inspired by Lasswell’s model. Their model includes stages like sender, encoder, channel, decoder, receiver, feedback, etc. Therefore, we can say that Shannon and Weaver borrowed the structure from Lasswell’s model. Secondly, they seem to be more interested in explaining ‘the effect,’ which is central to Lasswell’s model. David Berlo’s SMCR Model is built upon the foundation of Lasswell’s model. It has stages like source – message – channel – receiver. Lasswell’s model provided the framework for Berlo’s model because he retained the four key components in his version. The key premises in Lasswell’s model continued to echo in Schramm’s model of 1954, which introduced feedback and shared knowledge. Later, the model also influenced Westley and MacLean’s model (1957), which elaborated on the gatekeeping function of mass communication.

3.7 Framework for Further Research

By dissecting communication into five distinct areas—communicator, content, medium, audience, and effect—Lasswell’s model enables focused research. It remains relevant across multiple disciplines, including Political Science, Sociology, Journalism, Media Psychology, and Public Relations and offer scope for further research.

3.8 Applicability to All Types of Communication

Lasswell model is unique because it represents all the essential stages in any act of communication: interpersonal or mass communication. While primarily developed for analyzing propaganda and political messaging, Lasswell's model it has proved beneficial to understand interpersonal, group, and mass communication content and their impact. It serves as a foundational tool in studying public speeches, advertising, political campaigns, and more.

3.9 Centrality of Political Communication

Political communication has assumed importance in today's scenario because people understand how the political system operates, what its implications are, how it affects society, and how power functions. In a democratic setting, it is even more important to take cognizance of political communication because it helps one understand how people perceive issues, express their opinions, and respond to political campaigns. Harold Lasswell was a well-known political scientist; however, he took a deep interest in studying the act of communication because he was interested in examining how political communication influences society. Out of this necessity, he developed the model of communication. The fact that Lasswell proposed the model just after World War II shows that he was concerned with the prominence of propaganda, the bias of information, the effects of mass media, and targeted messaging. The model has a wartime backdrop. Its aim was to analyze the effect of political communication on the masses.

3.10 Studying Propaganda and Biased Information

In today's digital age, misinformation spreads rapidly. Lasswell's model helps in identifying the intent behind communication (who), message authenticity (says what), media influence (which channel), audience expectations (to whom), and impact (what effect). It aids in detecting propaganda, misinformation, and biased content—especially during elections and political campaigns. R. J. Shah has pointed out that “the trajectory of propaganda politics in India has shifted dramatically, with multiple actors competing for influence within the political arena. These actors employ strategies that resonate with psychological theories of persuasion and behavior previously outlined” (Shah 4).

3.11 A Foundational Framework

Before Lasswell, communication was often studied from philosophical or rhetorical perspectives. Lasswell introduced a scientific, analytical model that was concise and easy to understand. It is a starting point for the allied disciplines and forms their core principles. By focusing on essential elements—source, message, channel, audience, and effect—he set the stage for modern communication theory. The model due to its cross disciplinary significance inspired a large number of studies in later years.

3.12 Promoting Media Literacy

Lasswell did not design this model with a view to generating media literacy. His aim was to further academic research; however, by extension, the model has been instrumental in generating media literacy. The study of the first unit, ‘source,’ empowers people to critically receive the message because the speaker may have a concealed intent. Similarly, the analysis of ‘content’ can be useful in discovering the structure of the message. The study of ‘channel’ is also important because a biased channel affects the transmission of the message. The audience profile is a crucial factor in any communication. Lastly, the effect of the message is the outcome of the entire process of idea sharing. This is how the model generates media literacy. As Malik puts it, “media literacy comes down to having enough understanding to distinguish fact from fiction and comprehend media messages” (Malik 1).

3.13 Relevance to Digital Media

Despite being developed in 1948, the model applies to modern digital communication. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube follow a linear structure in message delivery. The model's components remain useful in analyzing content across blogs, news websites, messaging apps, and other digital formats. As Peng (2022) notes, “Under the new media environment, communication process and the research of such five elements will have greater opportunities and broader prospects for development” (Peng 245).

4. CONCLUSION

More than 75 years after its creation, Harold Lasswell's 1948 model remains a cornerstone of communication studies. Its simplicity, clarity, linear structure, and interdisciplinary relevance continue to make it useful in both traditional and modern contexts. Built on classical rhetorical foundations, it offers valuable insights into source analysis, content analysis, media influence, audience reception, and communication effects. Widely cited in studies on mass media, political messaging, propaganda, and misinformation, Lasswell's model endures as a timeless analytical tool in the ever-evolving landscape of communication.

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