

**“Emotion and cognition
in
political communication”**

Work in progress

Paper for the 3rd International Conference on Democracy as
Idea and Practice, Oslo, 12-13 January 2012.

Ann Iren Jamtøy

ann.iren.jamtoy@svt.ntnu.no

1. Introduction

In this article I want to explore the theoretical positions between emotion and cognition in political communication. I also want to make a discussion on how the concepts of emotion and cognition relates to communication, and why we should be more attentive towards the role of emotions, feelings and visual aspects in the research field of political communication.

Research on political communication has mainly been focusing on cognitive aspects of the media. But some researchers have recently put attention to the impact emotions can have on political behavior and attitudes, and have argued for the importance of emotion in the study of political communication. Some have stated that there is a gap between rational and emotional democracy (Pels, 2003: 50). Rational democracy has been the legitimized version of the last few centuries, but, according to Have & Waade (2008: 215), television democracy affords a new reevaluation of emotional, bodily and subjective reactions in politics.

Many researchers have over the years been arguing that voters are generally ill informed, less interested and active in politics, more moved either by habit or by momentary passion than by thoughtful judgement (Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee 1954, Campell et al 1960; Lippmann 1922, Neuman 1986). These critics have stated that politics seems to be more and more a drama of personality, scandals, and sensational events, where the media is framing the issues to elicit the desired emotional response. Most of these diagnoses according to Marcus (2002: 5), are directed at reducing the frequency and intensity of emotional appeals in the domain of politics. A lot of studies on media and politics have indicated an awareness of the negative consequences and risks of the changes in political communication (Have & Waade 2008): 228). Though emotion is an undeniable and unavoidable part of human nature, critics have argued that emotion should be constrained and excluded from final judgments on political matters. Within political science it's the rational perspective that has dominated. But in the last two decades more considerable evidence indicates that public opinion is shaped by the moods, feelings, or emotions of citizens (Marcus 2000).

Some characteristics of our society today according to media content, are mediatization, tabloidization and entertainmentization, involving reporting about politics in a way which can attract a larger audience through a more popular style of reporting. In order to capture the audience, the media focus on different aspects of drama (Hernes 1983). The media make use of different techniques for presenting exciting news. One of these techniques is to personalize news, the way journalists focuses on politicians instead of political parties, how different attributes are connected to politicians or to what extent the media focus on their private lives (Meyer 2002). A result of these mechanisms and trends within journalism and news about politics, is a growth in the emotional aspects of political communication. Some kinds of emotions are quite obvious and unavoidable in political communication, because they have considerable appeal and are crucial to obtaining political involvement. Emotions like, credibility, trust, authenticity, charisma and human qualities, as well as ethos as a rhetorical mode, are all connected to journalistic presentation in general as well as in political journalism. Focusing on the emotional aspects of media and news, also implies an emphasize on the visual aspects of political communication.

The visual mode of communication is largely overlooked in the great narratives about politics, democracy and the public sphere (Grabe & Bucy 2010). Ignoring the visual in a televised news report means overlooking much of the meaning that viewers derive from viewing experience (Newhagen & Reeves 1992). During campaigns, political parties actively engage visual framing to promote desired qualities of their political candidates. Journalists and photojournalists apply camera and editing techniques that place candidates in a more or less favorable visual light. Journalists intentionally use the pictures in the newspaper or the visual scenes in TV-news to make a statement and emphasize the journalistic text or the verbal message (Jamtøy 2011b). Also, when citizens are evaluating leaders, visual portrayal in television have an important impact (Grabe & Bucy 2010, Masters 2001). However, research within political science and political communication, with rare exceptions, has not emphasized news visuals and impact of visual are understated in the public debate.

2. Defining emotion and cognition

The debate between emotion and cognition have been going on since the antique. Both Plato and Aristotle spoke of the three faculties through which we think, feel and act. Aristotle claimed that emotions have an impact on and are affected by our thoughts. He saw a close connection between our feelings and thoughts, between our emotions and cognition.

What is emotions? *Emotions* are specific sets of physiological and mental dispositions triggered by the brain in response to the perceived significance of a situation or object for an individual's goal. Emotions arise from brain processes that provide continuous feedback on the relationship between an individual and her environment. It's important to distinguish emotions from feelings. *Feelings* are the subjective awareness and experience of emotions (Damasio 2000). For example, if a person is experiencing fear, then the feeling of fear is what those responses literally "feel like" for the person. The feeling of fear is individual. Feelings are potentially, but not necessarily, consequences of emotions. *Mood* is another concept that must be seen as separate from emotions, where emotions are discrete responses to specific stimuli, moods are diffuse positive or negative states that last for longer periods of time. The concept of *affect* must be seen as an umbrella term referring to an entire class of phenomena that is often taken to include both emotions, feelings and moods, but also pain, pleasure and basic human drives (Brader 2006).

The concept of emotions includes two separate dimensions. The first one, *arousal*, means that emotions wake you up, makes you attentive and ready to make a response. Arousal is regulating your consciousness, attention and information processing. Arousal is much about the intensity and energy in the response. The other dimension, *valence*, is ones positive or negative evaluation of a certain stimuli. Valence is often regarded as the most evident, characteristic element with emotions, because it is a signal from the outside world that arise positive or negative feelings in ourselves.

Cognition includes thoughts, beliefs, inferences, and application of rules such as those governing mathematics and language (Brader 2006). The concept of cognition comes

from psychology and is about the activities going on in our brain. The debate over the primacy of affect versus cognition depends on how one defines cognition. There are different definitions of cognition, which makes the theoretical field somewhat diffuse. Some scholars defines cognition to be the processing of information itself. In this definition emotions are being an included part of cognition. Some scholars defines cognition as being higher reasoning functions and/or conscious thoughts, then this cognitive activity can take place independent of emotions.

3. Why study emotions?

Cognitive processing is often thought of as the opposite of emotional processing and reactions. According to Elster (1999), this is a result of a long tradition where cognition is associated with thinking and the emotional/affect is associated with feelings. We can also find the same distinction in a traditional view where rationality is being seen as the opposite of emotionality.

In political science there have been a traditional view that voters make there decisions almost exclusively based on rational choice. The privileged position of the spoken or written word in society, is a result of a long tradition or rationalism, from the period of enlightenment, where logic and reason were seen as the fundamentals to scientific knowledge (Marcus, Neumann & MacKuen 2000). The long tradition and strong emphasis of rationality in our culture, has blocked for the fact that other mechanisms/insights may have relevance as well. The psychological aspect, on how processing of information and signals actually takes place, have not been emphasized.

Traditionally, political science have had two ways of understanding the voters behaviour. The first position think of the voter as doing a cognitive processing of information or calculation of cost-benefit (within “political psychology” and “rational choice”-theory). A calculation of cost-benefit, means that the voter choose what she thinks is the best solution to achieve her goal. This position think of the voter as just using their cognition, they choose and act without help from or disturbance from

emotions. The other position in political science has focused on the voters political attitudes and group-identity (within “political behavior” and “socialpsychology”). In this position the emotional connection is seen as part of the process of socialization. Both these studies within political science have given a lot of knowledge about political choice and political participation, but they haven’t been able to explain how the emotional appeal in political communication works. In both these positions there has not been any willingness to try to give a systematic explanation of emotions.

During the last twentyfive years there have been conducted new research on emotions. In particular within the field of psychology, much research have been done to learn more about the reasons for and consequences of emotions. An important contribution have been the growth within neuroscience and development of new measurement-techniques to measure the brainactivity. This new research on emotions have emerged athwart social sciences and the humanities. By using insights from psychology, researchers have started to discover strong correlation between emotions and the impact on voters attitudes and behavior (Marcus 2000).

4. Theoretical positions

In this section I would like to present some theoretical positions on the relationship between cognition and emotion. These theoretical field is rather complex, consists of many different theories, and one has not been able to agree upon one common theory or argument about these things. Some of the reasons for this, is partly because of different definitions of cognition.

Some theories take the stand that the cognitive have primacy. These are theories that emphasize the direction of the impact going from the cognitive to the affective. Here, emotions are a result of our evaluation of specific situations (Lazarus 1991, Roseman 2001, Scherer 1994). These theories are especially engaged in individual variations in how we react emotionally, what feelings arouse within people. One of the theories is cognitive schema, which imply that we process information that are being stored in different schema, and these schema is structuring our thoughts.

Another theory claims that everything in our surroundings are connected to emotions. All information surrounding us, are connected to emotions (Abelson 1963). Information about one object cannot be activated without activating this connection.

Others claim affect and cognition being two separate processes (Zajonc 1980). According to this theoretical position, affect can arise without cognitive input. The argument is that people can experience an affective reaction or develop a preference for an object, even if they are not aware of their reactions or its source. Online-models are one of the theories emphasizing affect and cognition as separate processes. According to this theory, people may react both emotional and cognitive. It's the affective information that is stored in memory (one stores the feeling aroused by an issue/argument) and it is the affective (emotional) response that is the most available and the one we first remembers.

In the following I will present theories that emphasize the emotional having primacy. I will describe three theories of this kind; neuropsychological theories, directional theory and the theory of affective intelligence. Theoretical contribution based on *neuroscientific knowledge*, emphasize that cognition and rationality *involves* emotions and feelings. To make a rational decision, you have to rely on emotions (Damasio etc, 1996). *Directional theory* (Rabinowitz & MacDonald 1989) states that emotions have primacy when focusing on political parties issue-positions. For instance, if you are strongly against abortion, there is a strong probability you will give your vote to "Kristelig Folkeparti" in Norway, because they have a strong and clear issueposition against abortion. The third theory is the *theory of affective intelligence*. The researchers maintain that emotions are a result of pre-conscious appraisal-processes. This theory will be presented more in depth in the next section.

5. The theory of affective intelligence

The most full-scale model to explain the role of emotion in political behaviour, is done by Marcus, Nemann and MacKuen (2000). Their theory of *affective intelligence* posits that two fundamental systems operate in parallel to produce emotional appraisal that in turn shape the choices and actions of citizens. We can imagine standing in front of a newsprogram about politics or political ad, and notice which feelings they try to arouse. According to this theory, the incoming information will generate either enthusiasm/satisfaction or fear/depression/frustration. This system of feelings (enthusiasm/fear) is monitoring our surroundings for signals of success or threats.

The *mechanism of enthusiasm* generates positive feelings such as sympathy, proudness and hope, and this mechanism will be stimulated when an individual perceives signals from the environment that she will gain her goal, receive a reward, implicating she will handle the situation and give a promise of success. These signals evoke feelings of happiness, enthusiasm and gives you a positive mood. One will focus on signals about further success, and ignore information that's not in accordance with this.

The *mechanism of fear* generates negative feelings, such as disgust, disturbance and fear. This mechanism will be stimulated when individual receives signals from the surroundings that she/he not will receive their goals, that they will be punished or hurt, that the surroundings will change quickly, be unpredictable, or receive signals about something dangerous is going to happen. In such situations one can react with a feeling of restlessness, being unsecure or worried, that arouse the attention towards new, changing signals in the environment, and this will lead to a search for new or alternative strategies of behavior.

These mechanisms will be stimulated by different signals, and because they act independent of eachother, it is possible that these two systems operate at the same time (one can react both with fear and enthusiasm), just one of the systems can be stimulated or none of the systems. What does a political party need to do, to get attention during an election? A party or party consultants needs to create an image of ones party that will

arouse enthusiasm among their voters. The party needs to stimulate the mechanism of enthusiasm. At the same time, one wish to create the opposite image of ones opponents, that other parties constitute a threat.

Research based on the theory of affective intelligence have made findings indicating that for instance presidential candidates - different candidates, different elections and in different political culture – arouse an affective response to these two mechanism: Enthusiasm or fear. Findings indicate that the feeling of enthusiasm or fear have significance on who gets voters votes at elections (Marcus, Nemann and MacKuen (2000)). This research has also shown that those who experience fear, learn more than others during an election. The feeling of fear/threat makes you search for new information, looks for other ways to behave or act.

6.How can emotional appeal be effective?

Ted Braders have studied campaign ads in USA, where he has tried to find which elements create enthusiasm and fear in the campaign-ads. He finds that both colour, music, sound, drama and video-editing, all play an important part in transmitting emotional signals. In his study, Brader find that 3/4 campaign ads strongly emphasize feelings that includes an appeal to either enthusiasm or fear. Braders findings is showing that campaign ads appealing to enthusiasm, includes colourful, cheerful music, many children and people with different backgrounds, patriotic symbols, pictures of success, joy in life, many and shifting visual-scenes. Campaign ads appealing to fear is rather dark, gloomy, without music or disharmonic instruments, pictures of violence, devastation, threatening or annoying sounds. Another important finding, is that the politicians choice to either appealing to enthusiasm or fear is dependent on what position they already have among voters, how well they do on the opinion polls. If a political party is not doing well on the opinion polls, they may prefer appealing to fear. Brader concludes that by appealing to specific feelings, politicians can change how voters reponds to political messages.

Why do we respond to symbols or abstract signals in campaign ads or in media in general? One of the reasons is that it is an *automaticity* in our brain. Some feelings evokes immediately. For instance, a picture of a wolf is associated with danger. Usually our brain will re-evaluate this (its just a picture, its just on film) and that would exceed our immediate emotional respond. The other factor that is important, is our *imagination*. Our ability to imagine/use our fantasy to see ourselves in specific situation that we consider or identify with the characters, affect the emotional impact. We use cognitive processes to imagine, remember, think through, and these cognitive processes can extort emotional response or make us experience an emotional state.

How can this emotional appeal be effective? The automaticity makes our brain being attentative to whats going on in our surroundings, even if were not completely attentative. Three different factors can be mentioned in connection with this. The first one, moody elements. Both music, smell, specific colours, and change of lights, contributes to set the mood in a specific way. These things can influence our feelings, almost without us noticing, and they can strengthen an intention with an event. If such details are not being noticed, its perceived as a success.

The second one, pictures and music: The use of pictures and music, especially in TV ads, is used to set the mood (West 2000), and this is a part of strengthening the communication and to arouse specific emotions (Smith 1999).

The third, single words and phrases, either written or spoken, can have a kind of symbolic value and give emotional association. Historical events, as 9/11 in USA or July 22th in Norway, are some examples. The aim of all of this, is that pictures and specific elements, especially in TV ads, helps to trigger a mood or emotional response before and during the time an individual use to process the verbal message.

What is the status at this theoretical field today? There are none apparent answers. There are no singe theory dominating this field. Some critics (Isbell & Otatti 2002; Joslyn 2001) have observed that almost all research on emotion and politics to date, including the work of affective intelligence theory, relies on survey data and correlation analysis. Therefore, emotions could be the cause of observed behavior, the consequence

of that behavior, or simply another outcome of whatever did cause the behavior (Brader 2006: 62). We have no evidence that campaign communications can elicit these emotions and change behavior as a result. To be sure that campaign ads trigger the affective intelligence of voters, we have to ascertain exactly how campaign ads, and other information during campaigns, cue enthusiasm and fear.

During the last years there have been conducted some experimental studies, where direct effects have been studied: what feelings arise when we receive different stimuli, for instance in different political campaign ads (Brader 2008). Content analysis of campaign ads have been done, to explore what kind of emotional signals are being transmitted, and which feeling do they evoke (ibid). Some have been doing content analysis of news, to explore which mechanism in different news stories evokes feelings (Graber 2007). Others have been doing content analysis of pictures in TVnews, to discover which signals in pictures do evoke specific feelings (Grabe & Bucy 2009). In all, the research on these areas have given us a solid fundament to show and try to explain how emotional appeal is being used to affect behaviour and decisions among voters. In the next section I will present why its especially important to study the visual in relation to emotions in politics.

7. The visual evoke emotions

Emotions are closely connected to pictures and visual expression. The visual is important as part of informing about politics that have to affect and have an emotional appeal. In one article of mine (Jamtøy 2011b), I have studied this aspect more in detail, the pictures of politics. In the newsmedia, both pictures in newspaper and visual scenes in TVnews, mainly consists of pictures of top-politicians, not many pictures illustrating a specific issue or people affected by political decisions. The emotional expression of politicians in the pictures is used consciously to support a specific journalistic angle in the news story. For instance, the following two pictures of party leader Kristin Halvorsen (Social Left) in Figure 1, is illustrating this point. The two newsstories is both from the election in 2005, one from Dagsavisen and the other from the tabloid VG.

Figure 1.



In both these newsstories, the emotional expression of the party leader in the pictures are supporting the specific journalistic angle in the newsstories. The picture of the party leader Kristin Halvorsen in Dagsavisen is supporting the mechanism of enthusiasm, but VGs topstory, the day before the election in 2005, is intended to appeal to voters fear and insecurity towards SV.

An important tendency by the newsmedia, is their struggle to entertain and appeal to our emotions. Its against this background we have to understand the role of emotions within political communication. It's the medias way to get across to readers and viewers, to get peoples attention. In this way, the pictures and their emotional appeal, must be valued as an important and positive part of political communication (Jamtøy 2011b). But at the same time, we have to ask if the medias intense focus on personality, the many pictures and personal stories on top-politicians, and the conscious use of emotions in the journalistic presentation is becoming too unilateral, too much personal or to much emotional. Is the desire to get peoples attention more important than creating a good political discourse?

My research, on medias covering of politics (Jamtøy 2011a), is showing that entertainment and appealing to emotions is dominating. And we have to study this more

in detail, how the different mechanisms in newsmedia actually affects our emotions, our decisions and behavior.

8. Concluding remarks

In this article, I have tried to explore the role of emotions in politics. Even if this field of research is rather complex, theoretically, much of the recent research is showing that we cannot conduct a strong divide between cognition and emotions. The theories saying that emotions must be understood as apart of cognition, must be valued, and more research on the role of emotions in politics, must be conducted. A strong emphasize on emotions does not implicate absence of logical arguments or political discourse. In fact, all forms of communication involves feelings. Also, issueoriented messages in political communication have one or more feelings associated with it, which sends a signal on how we should interpret the actual message. The main contribution by the visual/pictures in the news, is mainly about evoking feelings, as a contribution to attitudes and decisions about politics and politicians. In the research on political communication one has to accept the importance of emotions and one have to study this more closely.

Future research on political communication should study more closely how politicians use emotions in their communication, and how political consultants think and develops different political campaigns. Different kinds of content analysis should be used, to study how media and newsstories appeal to our emotions. By exploring different experimental designs, one should study how people, the audience, react on different signals that is intended to appeal to our emotions. Such a wide perspective, on the different actors and processes within political communication, will give more knowledge about the role of emotions in political communication.

References

- Abelson, Robert P. 1963. "Computer simulation of "hot cognitions." In *Computer simulation of personality*, ed. S. Tomkins and S. Messick. New York: John Wiley.
- Berelson, Bernard R., Paul Lazarsfeld and William N. MvPhee. (1954). *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brader, Ted (2006). *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: how Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Campell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes (1960). *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.
- Damasio, Antonio R. (1994). *Descartes' error: Emotion, reason and the human brain*. New York: Grosset/Putnam.
- Damasio, Antonio R. (2000). "A Second Chance for Emotion." In *Cognitive Neuroscience of Emotion*, ed. By Rihard D. Lane & Lynn Nadel, 12-13. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Elster, Jon (1999). *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*. Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Grabe, Maria Elizabeth & Eric Page Bucy (2009). *Image Bite Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Graber, Doris (2001). *Processing the News. How People Tame the Information Tide*. New York: Longman.
- Have, Iben & Anne Marit Waade (2008): "Aestheticizing Politics: No-verbal Political Communication in Danish TV-Documentaries," In: Jesper Strömbäck, Mark Ørsten & Toril Aalberg: *Communicating Politics: Political Communication in the Nordic Countries*. Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Hernes, Gudmund (1983). «Media, struktur, vridning och drama». *Nordicom-Information*, 3-4.
- Jamtøy, Ann Iren (2011a). *I godt selskap? Politisk journalistikk som også skal underholde*. PhD-avhandling. Trondheim: NTNU.
- Jamtøy, Ann Iren (2011b). "Bildet av politikk". I: *Norsk medietidsskrift* nr. 3.
- Lazarus, Richard S. (1991). *Emotion and Adaption*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lippmann, Walter (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: The Free Press.
- Marcus, George E. (2002) *The sentimental citizen. emotion in democratic politics*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Marcus, George E. (2000). "Emotions in Politics". *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3: 221-250.
- Marcus, George E. (1991). "Emotions and Politics: Hot Cognitions and the Rediscovery of passion." *Social Science Information*, 32: 195-232.
- Marcus, George E. (1988). "The Structure of Emotional Response: 1984 Presidential Candidates." *American Political Science Review*, 82: 737-761.

- Marcus, George E., W. Russell Neuman & Michael MacKuen (2000). *Affective intelligence and political judgement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Master, Rogers D (2001). "Cognitive Neuroscience, Emotion and Leadership," In *Citizen and Politics*, ed. By James Kuklinski, 68-102. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mazzoleni, Gianpietro (2000). "A return to civic and political engagement prompted by personalized political leadership?" *Political Communication*, 17, pp 325-328.
- Meyer, T. (2002). *Media Democracy. How the Media Colonize Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McDermot, Rose (2004). "The Feeling of Rationality: The Meaning of Neuroscientific Advances for Political Science". *Perspectives on Politics*, 2(4), 691-706.
- Neuman, W. Russell, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler & Michael Mackuen (2007). *The Affect Effect. Dynamics of emotion in political thinking and behaviour*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Neumann, W. Russel, Marion R. Just & Ann N. Crigler (1992). *Common Knowledge - News and the Construction of Political Meaning*. Chicago, IL:University of Chicago Press.
- Newhagen John E. & B. Reeves (1992). "This evenings bad news: Effects of compelling negative television news images on memory". *Journal of Communication*, 42, 25-41.
- Pels, Dick (2003). "Aesthetic Representation and Political Style: Re-Balancing Identity and Difference in Media Democracy," I John Corner and Dick Pels (red.) *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage.
- Richards, Barry (2004) "The Emotional Deficit in Political Communication" In: *Political Communication*, 21:339-352.
- Roseman, Ira J. (2001). "A model of Appraisal in the Emotion System: Integrating Theory, Research and Applications". In *Appraisal Processes in Emotion*, ed. By Klaus R. Scherer, Angela Schorr and Tom Johnstone, 68-91. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scherer, Klaus R. (1994). "Emotion Serves to Decouple Stimulus and Response." In *The Nature of Emotion*, ed. By Paul Ekman & Richard J. Davidson, 127-30. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zajonc, Robert B. (1980). "Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need No Inferences" *American Psychologist* 35:151-75.