Participants:
Trevor Parry-Giles
Suamana Chattopadhyay
Young Mie Kim
Robert Kraig
Tom Salek
Shawn Turner

[Audio Length: 01:03:40]
RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:
This is *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
NCA typically holds public programs twice each year and these public programs serve to disseminate relevant information about communication to public audiences. These programs are open community members, members of the media, communication teachers and students and anyone interested in learning more about communication. Past programs have focused on topics such as the miscommunication of science and health communication in rural and minority communities. NCA's Spring 2020 public program was to be held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of that onsite conversation. NCA remains dedicated to providing our members with access to these important public programs while we navigate this global health crisis. So, we're presenting our Spring

public program, Communicating in Battlegrounds: Politics in the Purple States as an episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

So, in a presidential election year, the select number of states are viewed as critical players in the election's outcome and with the 2020 election approaching, today's conversation features five expert panelists who will discuss the use of political communication in our elections and the effects it has on public opinion.

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
I'm Suamana Chattopadhyay. I'm an associate professor at Marquette University in the College of Communication. I'm also the chair of NCA's political communication division.

Young Mie Kim:
I'm Young Mie Kim at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Robert Kraig.
Robert Kraig. I'm the executive director of Citizen Action of Wisconsin and located in Milwaukee.

Tom Salek:
I'm Tom Salek, an assistant professor at Concordia University Chicago.

Shawn Turner:
I'm Shawn Turner, a professor of strategic communication at Michigan State University.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Now you can learn more about all of our great panelists by looking at their full bios at our website, natcom.org/publicprograms. Hey, everyone and welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. The premise of today's panel is that political communication in battleground states differs from the communication in clearly red and blue states. So, do you agree with this idea? And if so, what differences do you think exist in this type of communication?

Young Mie Kim:
Yeah. I agree about that battleground communication is different than non-battleground. Battleground means by definition more competition among the parties and the candidates or just the action committees and other political actors. So, that means it leads to more information. So, if we just compare the sheer volume with political campaigns broadcast to TV, we'll see a lot of ads in battlegrounds compared to non-battlegrounds. So, a research in political behavior published in 2008 shows that and confirms that broadcast advertising is much more, has a higher level of volumes in battleground states than non-battle ground states. My research in 2012 published in Communication Research also confirmed that idea. And then second, I would

say battleground messages could be more diverse in some issues or topics. Because of the competition, that means you need to address more people, different interests as well and it could be potential more division, like more wet issues like abortion, immigration and racial conflict. Those kinds of issues are more found in battleground states than non-battleground states. So, for example, in 2018 my research conducted Facebook ad data research and then we examined like five million Facebook ads exposed to nearly ten thousand people representing the U.S. voting age population. We found that battleground states particularly Wisconsin and Pennsylvania are targeted the most with the divisive issues.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Interesting. So, with divisive issues and we have an increase in advertising. Are there any factors that you think might be present in battleground states separate from say non-battleground states in terms of communication? Suamana.

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
Yeah. A couple of things. One is that I am going to go back the divisiveness of issues because some of my research also looks at issue ownership so looking at red states versus blue states versus purple states. We have found in some of our past research that in battleground states, both parties tend to issue trespass more, meaning they go into the territory of the other parties owned issues. So, like Democrats own environment, healthcare, education. Republicans own taxes, crime, budget, government size. So, oftentimes what happens is and particularly because Republicans stress pass quite a bit in general at the state level because a lot of the issues they own are national. But in the battleground, it's not just the Republicans trespass, Democrats trespass too. For example, we had a finding from Missouri from governor's races for the last couple of cycles where a lot of the candidates there were actually talking red issues which is not necessarily always something Democrats do because Republicans trespass more at the state level. But in battlegrounds, that happens.

Another difference that also I have found or read about is with horse race. Because these are states that are competitive and the poll numbers are very important, we have found out or not in my research but I've read articles that have talked about how as a result of this, a lot of times battleground states have more discussion on poll numbers and also about candidates and which event they went to, who they talked to, interviews rather than issues themselves. So, it's not necessarily that they get a lot of discussion on issues particularly especially from the media side. It's more about poll numbers, who is leading, who is doing what event. So, there is that difference too.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's fascinating. Yeah, Tom.

Tom Salek:
Yeah. And so, with the idea of the horse race, I think one of the other things we see in media frames is the idea of spectacle. So, even if it's anecdotally, we could take a look at the recent 2020 primary election. So, with it with coverage from the national media but local media, it's looking at oh, look at the giant lines outside of all the Milwaukee high schools, talking about here's the shutdown of certain polling sites. So, with it, shifting that idea of the horse race not just between the parties but also with here's how voters are going to the polls, here's the troubles or difficulties that they're going to face. And so, it's almost kind of like trying to get this mini crisis coverage going on by saying these long lines are indicative of this faulty voting system or gerrymandering that's gone wild. So, with it, I think whether it's Wisconsin or Iowa or even Pennsylvania or Florida, we tend to see that emphasis on the spectacle especially leading up to Election Day but also on Election Day, just sort of looking at that as anecdotally here's what's going on.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I'm wondering if you can think of other sort of non COVID-19 examples of spectacle. I'm wondering Suamana mentioned all of the events that get a lot of coverage as a dimension of the horse race thing and we seem to be in an era at least at the presidential level of sort of large rallies being the dominant characteristic. I'm wondering if that's consistent with what you're saying about spectacle, Tom?

Tom Salek:
Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean it could be something as broad as the Trump rally that gathers a lot of attention. I know that before being in my current position I worked in a rural part of the state of Wisconsin and so with it, there was a Trump rally that was like the formal rally but then in 2016 there were the rallies outside the rally. People would gather and it would kind of be like before a Brewers game. People would have that park your truck, have a grill and sort of—

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Tailgate.

Tom Salek:
Yeah. It's a tailgating party when it comes to hear the people talking about issues. These are the real Wisconsinites that are out talking about how to make the country better. That's something that I think it's lost on in terms of national media coverage but I know local media especially in central Wisconsin covered that. It became a really big part of talking about at least in 2016 here's what's different about this race versus other states or other sort of more urban environments.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Well, and I know that in Wisconsin certainly and most of you are from Wisconsin, lived there or in Shawn's case are living in Michigan right now. I'm wondering about the urban-rural divide and the extent to which that plays into the dynamics surrounding political communication in battleground states and if that's actually a factor or if that's just something that those of us on the coasts invent as a dimension of your political communication in the heartland? Robert, I don't know. You indicated some interest there. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that.

Robert Kraig:
Yeah. I think it's a definite factor but I think it's probably been over interpreted in the media frame where we've overcorrected on it. And it has critically important features that is like if you look at something like the protests over Act 10, the changes in public employee unions, literally it was incomprehensible to people of Milwaukee and Madison how the rest of the state was processing it unless you understood the rural divide and the idea they were getting fewer resources than everyone else which isn't actually empirically true and the idea that public employees and teachers were part of that. Right? And kind of the hidden dog-whistle in rural consciousness in Wisconsin that's been found by some ethnographers which is that the people who are irresponsible—so it's a dog whistle—are the people taking the resources in Milwaukee and Madison, for example. And so, it's definitely a driving force but there's a question of whether it's as decisive as the suburban-urban divide in the Milwaukee metro area which is shifting more frankly than the urban-rural divide. I do think that it creates kind of a polysemic kind of communication that is the same message is apprehended differently by different audiences and that greatly complicates what political strategic communication would need to do and I think there are probably still a lot of unforeseen consequences of certain messages that go to more audiences or different audiences that are understood by the auditor.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah. I know. We just saw some of that play out I think in in Michigan just the other day with the protests in Lansing. And I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on that. It strikes me that Michigan is even perhaps more nuanced in terms of this urban-suburban-rural kind of dynamic than even Wisconsin.

Shawn Turner:
Yeah. No, I think it is more nuanced, however, it's there, it's evident, it's clear to see. One of the things that we're doing at Michigan State University is we're looking at how local media cover the same issue based on whether or not they're in a rural market versus an urban market. And these protests the other day are a great example of what we see there. If you look at the local media in the northern part of the state, the protests in Lansing were characterized very much as people kind of taking back the narrative and standing up for what they felt was right and pushing back on government whereas you look at the very same issue in and around Detroit, Wayne,

Macomb and other counties in that area, it was a very different take on this issue and it was much more focused on the issue of the health risks that were associated with people going down and protesting. Now you've got the same message here but you've got it through a couple of different lenses. One of the interesting things here in Michigan is that it's increasingly the case that because we have so many people in the southern part of the state who go up north, people tend to get their news and information for wherever they're going or where they're interested in. So, you have a lot of people in the southern part of the state in that media market who are actually getting their news from the northern part of the state and we're actually seeing that have an impact on the way they view these issues in a broader context simply because of where they're getting the information. So, yeah, it's a little more nuanced but that divide is definitely there.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I think sometimes we define our understanding of battleground states and politics in battleground states based on what you alluded to where these somewhat subtle but often not so subtle differences in the news media coverage of how politics plays out in these battleground states. In fact, the idea of a battleground state may in fact be a media construction. So, I'm wondering if anybody has any thoughts on how the media is shaping this notion of how politics play out in battlegrounds.

Shawn Turner:
Yeah. Well, I'll take just the first stab at that just to talk about it from a national news media perspective. I spent a lot of time working with and around the three major cable news networks and it won't come as a surprise to anyone that the different networks cover battleground states through a different lens, from a different perspective. But I think what's really interesting is when you sit in those production meetings and you talk about what you're going to focus on in battleground states, those conversations are very different than the conversations about what you're going to focus on in clearly red states and clearly blue states. And we talked earlier about the horse race issue. Look, I think that when we talk about red states and blue states and there's some research that would contradict this but in those conversations, people really tend to focus on the issues. What's driving this red state? And so, people who are in red states who watch the national news media and get information about what's happening in their states tend to get more information about the issues whereas if you're in a battleground state, and I think this was alluded to earlier, you tend to get more information about the horse race of that battleground state. And so, in battleground states, oftentimes people miss a lot of the information about the major issues. Now I will say across the board in the national news media, there is a deficit of focus on real issues that matter. But I think that when you look at who's getting more versus who's getting less, the clearly blue and red states are getting more versus the battleground states.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah. Robert.

Robert Kraig:
I was going to say I think that the idea of a battleground state - can't resist as a rhetorician - that it is a media symbolic construction. And in fact, it's created in Wisconsin, at least a persistent battleground state and there may be newer battleground states where this isn't the case, it changed Wisconsin identity. Wisconsinites love the Packers, the dairy state and we're a battleground state and it stands to reason our votes are worth more in a national election than those in neighboring Illinois just like the Packers are better than the Bears. And so, it's like early primary states, the way Iowa and New Hampshire that their identity is tied up in it and I think one of the things that does is it creates a consciousness of how is the nation viewing us because the identity is tied up in the fact that all the national media are landing in Wisconsin. It isn't just the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel in our neighborhood. It's The New York Times and it's CNN. And so, I think that creates kind of a notion of the persona of the national audiences looking at us and I really do think say in this pandemic primary as it was called, there was a real consciousness that Wisconsin looked bad and Wisconsin Republicans look bad and Speaker Robin Vos of the assembly in his hazmat suit saying everything was safe, that that was an embarrassment to them because the national media and the national audience saw it that way.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Right. Somebody could probably write a really interesting dissertation about the transitions of states. So, Virginia used to never be a battleground state and now suddenly it's really purple out here on the on the East Coast and I think Wisconsin similarly has seen some of that and there's always talk amongst Democrats at least that maybe Texas or maybe Georgia could be battleground states. There's a transitional process that happens with these states and that's fascinating. Anybody else want to weigh in on this notion of how the battleground state idea or construction is somehow having a really interesting impact on our political lives and our political discussions?

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
Yeah. Also kind of goes back to the word battle because it's the attacks. When the very beginning we talked about how ad coverage, like there are way more ads running in these states and one of the things I have heard consistently from my political communication students especially those from Ohio is that by the time they get to Election Day, they're completely totally brain-dead with all the advertising they have been exposed to. And that's a lot of attacks that they hear and when the candidates attack each other which they do more in a battleground state versus in a red or a blue state because they already have those in the bag, so those ads get talked about by the media. They cover it and also that creates more cynicism. So, it's also the nature of going back to the horse race and also fighting that happens between these

candidates and even in their rallies because whenever there is a rally or an event or a town hall in a battleground state, I'm guessing it's going to be on CNN or Fox or MSNBC. So, they get a national audience. And so, candidates also use that as a national forum and, of course, news will covered it more. And so, I almost feel like because of that, the people in the battlegrounds feel cynical but also people that are non-battleground feel left out because that's the other issue about spectator states. They almost feel like their voice doesn't count. And so, that is another issue which I also see on Twitter from people in the red states who want to defend themselves and say hey, this is not what we do. I voted for this candidate but they don't have their voice. So, there's a little bit of that. So, I think it's the whole fighting aspect of it which also is a key part of being a battleground state

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Young Mie, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how the national news media or those of us who study this stuff, what do we get wrong about voters in battleground states? I mean what don't we see in the national media coverage that you guys might see on the ground in those states about the voters themselves and what matters to them and how they're perceived and what they think?

Young Mie Kim:
Well, I just want to make a comment on sort of the consequences the battleground versus non-battleground communication differences. We talked about a horse race coverage in the news media. When the journalists cover elections, it tends to be more horse race style. There is a volume of studies, a lot of literature that confirms that it generates some cynicism about the mainstream politics in general because this is all about competitions between politicians that are very strategic and things like that. Another effect we can think about is, in fact, even though the sheer volume of campaign information is much higher in battleground states compared to that of the non-battleground states. People living in the battleground states are more confused about the campaigns and election processes because they are getting conflicting messages. And so, some studies show that people have a very ambivalent attitude about the two candidates because during the general election because of this horse race and conflicting messages. One of my studies shows that, in fact, as the time gets closer to the Election Day, people feel forced to resolve their uncertainty and ambivalence. So, as a result people all the way go back to their original previous position. So, in fact, in battleground, people who receive more information about campaigns are more polarized. But that's sort of like a paradox of the high volume on campaign information in battleground states. Now that was all about again much of this research is conducted in laboratory settings or more I guess descriptive studies of observation or data. Then the observation or data we have to think about all these campaign messages are based in the broadcast media. So, there is very little research on targeted advertising or targeted messages even though some anecdotal evidence that some research, recent research shows that the Russian disinformation campaigns, this research compared the Russian

disinformation campaigns on Twitter and then looks at the increased patterns in the Retweets and then parallels that pattern with the opinion poll during the election period in 2016 and then their time series analysis basically just to try to tease out their relationship even though it was not perfect shows that every 25,000 retweets by Russian disinformation campaigns, in fact, predicted a 1% increase in the preferences for Trump. So, that is aggregate level analysis. My research has been looking at the sum of the individual level in fact and then we found some anecdotal evidence that certain types of messages like voter suppression targeting African-Americans in fact did seem to influence in a tunnel rate even though it was very marginal.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
It might have had some impact last week in the Wisconsin primary. I've been listening to podcast commentary that said that there's some attribution to—there was a backlash effect I guess to the actions by the Republicans up there with regard to the Supreme Court seat in particular. It's an interesting dynamic. Okay. So, one of the things that we might get wrong about battleground state voters is that they're persuadable. It sounds to me like maybe they're less persuadable than we might originally think which might call into question the vast amounts of spending that campaigns engage in. Anything else that we get wrong about battleground state voters? Yeah, Robert. What do you think?

Robert Kraig:
I mean this follows up a little bit on the persuadability issue. That is I think that there's a mistake being made that battleground states are controlled by moderate voters and therefore you should tack to the center. I would describe Wisconsin anyway as having two very equally matched blue and red bases and then a smaller number of cross pressured voters. And so, there's an issue of turnout which is about motivating the base but then that's complicated because that might turn out the other base depending on what the issue is and I think that's why Democrats lost the previous Supreme Court race when they thought bringing up the homophobic record of the right-wing justice would help them. I think it actually was used by the right to mobilize much higher turnout on their side unfortunately from my perspective, a communication science perspective. And then in addition to that quite frankly, these cross pressured voters get influenced by both sides. And so, I've been at a lot of focus groups and these really are voters that voted for Scott Walker then Barack Obama, Tammy Baldwin, a very progressive U.S. senator and then Donald Trump and so on. And it's not because they're moderate but because they're actually open to both sides that I don't know if communication scientists like Professor Kim have found that but it certainly seems very evident in focus groups and in the fact that there is movement, the fact that Wisconsin actually did go for Trump and then also for Kerry and for Gore and Obama just for example, that there's some movement. But part of it's turnout and part of it's persuasion.

Young Mie Kim:
Yeah. I totally agree with Dr. Robert and there is a research that shows that cross pressures, I guess in my definition here is cross pressures have a strong party ID but they also have a strong issue interest in particular issues. So, for example, Wisconsin voters who for Democrats. So, they've put so much emphasis on the issue of gun rights over their own party ID. So, cross pressures are, in fact, considered to be the most persuadable voters. In the past, they might not. When the political parties are in the booming era, there might not have been a lot of cross pressures but we have to think about the changing political environment. There are an increasing number of cross pressures especially in the electoral college system in a battleground state means that like in Alaska 5% vote margin and then if we target and customize messages to cross pressures, then it might be possible to persuade these people. And I to agree that a lot of research has been focusing on persuasion effect but, in fact, what we need to think about is the mobilization and demobilizing effect based on identity. For example, going back to the rural-urban divide in Wisconsin, a lot of advertising, for example, targeted advertising to more voters in the rural area that emphasize the redneck identity and the redneck is equal to keep the nation safe from illegal immigrants, from different race. And there is a persistent message out there online and then they can mobilize this redneck identity in the rural area. On the other hand, in the northern area, they can target relatively new immigrants or non-white voters and then put some like a voter suppression ad. So, it is sort of asymmetry mobilization based on identity and then that is far different than the persuasion effect we have some studying. So, I think researchers have to rethink about the implications of battleground states in the news media environment. It's not just about persuasion effect but it is about creating narrow interest based identity and mobilizing and demobilizing just based on the campaign's interests.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah, Tom. Go ahead.

Tom Salek:
Yeah. So, I think the idea of identity in terms of how voters in battleground states vote, I think that's a really smart idea because if we take a look at basically what those persuadable voters in battleground states are doing, I don't think it's necessarily strictly voting on specific issues or ideology. I think a lot of it is fighting for that identity that they perceive themselves at and I think one factor that we've left out at least in terms of Wisconsin is there's not just that rural-urban divide. It's also a white-collar/blue-collar divide. And so, specifically when we take a look at 2016 and Trump's rhetoric, the policies, the ideology, it's there but I think a lot of folks responded to the message of the forgotten person feeling left out, feeling alienated by as a cultural elite who are only specifically looking at, at least in the terms of the states, Madison and Milwaukee. They're not really looking at parts of northern Wisconsin that order the UP. So, when it comes to identity, I think the battleground philosophy isn't just about well, who are we going to elect. I

think it's also a battle for the identity of certain parts of the state. Is the state of Wisconsin going to be easy Madison-Milwaukee State or is it going to be the dairy lands that are those farmers, are those blue-collar workers that are in more rural specifically like northern Wisconsin parts? So, when it comes to thinking about the battleground, I definitely think we should be thinking about blue-collar/white-collar because I think that's really kind of where we might see that ideological divide playing out in terms of identity.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Interesting.

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
So, if I may also add, that's a very good point because it's also about the attention. If it just becomes oh, Milwaukee and Madison, one of the reasons Wisconsin is also an interesting battleground is because Wisconsin has a lot of rural areas. It has a big rural population compared to some other states. And so, that's why it's also sometimes harder for like predicting voting trends because here is the rural-urban and also the Rust Belt voters have evolved with time. One of the reasons why Trump won last year, some people make the claim in some studies that he paid attention somehow to the Rust Belt people who have also been sort of on the fence even with unionization changing, unions changing, the Democrats no longer being a party that have the unions in their bag the way they used to. But sometimes I think one thing they missed out on a little bit in the last election which studies have found is that there are issues out there that appeal to all, for example, healthcare. An assumption was made that certain groups cared more about healthcare others, didn't and I think the Democrats missed the mark a little bit in some of the swing states where they did not play on their strengths as much as they should have with healthcare. So, I think that's where we need to do a better job of figuring out what is it that actually matters to these people and catering to those because it goes back to do they listen to us, do we matter to them and that's the part where we as political communication scholars don't always do that great of a job. One of my graduate students did her thesis, MA thesis looking at religious women voters, evangelical women voters that supported Trump. And so, she interviewed them and she found out that sometimes it wasn't as if—religion played a role but, of course, he wasn't the most religious person they knew. So, sometimes it was one or two issues they voted on. Sometimes they even had a hard time calling themselves Republican. But it was more about I believe in conservative values and some of them had voted for Obama. So, it's kind of interesting when you look at that, kind of goes back to the what is it that appeals to a lot of people and kind of reaching out to them because sometimes they just feel that they don't matter. So, there's that as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Shawn said something earlier about sitting in the pre-production meetings at the various networks. I'm wondering if all of this sort nuance and subtlety about mobilization and

persuadability and about identity and about voter perception and all of that even figures into those discussions about the ways in which politics is covered in battleground states or anywhere else.

Shawn Turner:
I'll just say that it has. I have seen it evolve over the last four or five years where I can remember a time where we actually had social scientists involved in those conversations ahead of elections and they did their research and they talked about what would be important to cover in various states. That certainly did not happen in 2016 nor did it happen in 2018. That's a much less common thing to see in those spaces. But I did want to just touch on one brief point on this issue of what drives voters. I think it's also important to recognize that there are sometimes external forces that help drive voters with regards to their own sense of self import. Trevor, you are probably aware of this. In Northern Virginia, people used to say as Northern Virginia goes, Virginia goes. Right? Because people in Northern Virginia because that's the highly populated area and they kind of represent what the state actually looks like even though it's a small part of the state but they drive what happens there with regard to the electorate. And there's a little bit of that same sort of attitude in and around Detroit here in Michigan. So, when you talk to those voters, when you poll those voters, there was a really interesting one in Virginia where we found that if you were outside of Northern Virginia, the further south you were, the more you felt you had in common with West Virginia as opposed to Northern Virginia. Here in Michigan, if you are in and around the Detroit area, you have your own sort of identity and you have your own sense of self import with regard to how much your vote matters in comparison to how much the vote of someone in the UP matters. And that's not only the people who live in and around Detroit but it's also when you ask people in northern Michigan how much they believe their vote matters, you see that they believe their vote matters less than people in those highly populated areas.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I'm wondering to what extent then that sense of your vote mattering and that sense of identity and that focus on a particular area or part of the state influences media consumption. And I'm thinking here about the role and relationship of selective exposure to certain types of media, news media in particular and the ways in which that then circles back on what we would think about vis-à-vis the overall health of democratic deliberation and democratic thought and media coverage in battleground states. I don't know the answer to this but I'm curious as to what you all might be thinking about these questions in an ever-changing media landscape.

Shawn Turner:
Well, I'll just start by telling everyone one of my favorite exercises that I have my students do and we provide the resources for them and it drives them absolutely crazy is every semester all of my students each week, they must watch one hour of each of the three major cable news networks and then they have to provide feedback on—I have a number of questions I ask them

about their experience watching one hour of each of the networks. And I will tell you that I get students who come to me and say I can't do this anymore. It's too difficult for them. Students on both sides of the political spectrum and what that does for me is it really reinforces this idea of selective exposure. They are exposing themselves, they're watching what's consistent with their pre-existing ideological beliefs. Look, I think that from my perspective and my research, this is one of these serious issues that we face because it's not only individuals who are seeking information that's consistent with their beliefs but it's also—and this is really startling—news outlets and information sources that were previously considered to be reputable are actually beginning to embrace the idea that they fall on one side or the other of the ideological spectrum. They're not pushing back on that as much as they used to. You can look at some things that are very black and white like the number of bonafide liberals that Fox News used to employ in comparison to how many they employ today and the same thing with CNN. They don't employ as many conservatives as they used to and you don't see as many on-air and that really does reinforce this idea that they are kind of retreating back into this space where they feel most comfortable. So, I think that's certainly having an impact on people with regard to how they ultimately behave when they go to the ballot box.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Yeah, Robert.

Robert Kraig:
I know far less about national media than Shawn and some of the other panelists but as far as in-state media, part of this is structural. The traditional media like newspapers have declined dramatically and it's not just technological change. All the mergers and acquisitions through finance capitalism have loaded debt on these newspaper chains so the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel is furloughing all its political reporters in the middle of all this not because of lack of interest quite frankly but because of the way Gannett was purchased. Right? And the debt that was taken on. And so, there's been a trend in Wisconsin—I think there are two other states—towards nonprofit media which is partisan media I mean and most of it except for Wisconsin Public Radio which actually has the biggest new staff which has more of a liberal audience but has strict journalism. There are all sorts of new nonprofit outlets to be either liberal or conservative. Some of them like Wisconsin Examiner have real journalists but they're progressive journalists. But they have more capacity and they're spouting dailies. So, in many ways, it's harder to escape selective exposure at least in terms of state media though that's sort of back to the past. It wasn't we always had one big national mono media. It used to be in the advanced print age, there were dozens of daily newspapers and you picked up the one that was your constituency or ideology. I've done a lot of Progressive Era rhetoric in my academic career. There were 19 competing metropolitan daily newspapers in New York during the Progressive Era and you literally could just pick up whatever opinion you wanted, whatever shade. It wasn't just one conservative and one liberal paper.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
And it's interesting you talk about that in television terms and I'm hard-pressed to think about processing local affiliates according to an ideological lens. But if Shawn's right, that may actually—and if Sinclair's ownership of local media across the country is accurate—that may in fact come into play and we know or at least I think I know that a lot of citizens get their political information not from CNN and MSNBC—sorry, Shawn—but from these local outlets, the guy that does the weather and the sports and the woman reading the news about the crime spree down the street. So, I'm wondering if that also influences selective exposure and the influence of selective exposure. Suamana, do you have any thoughts about that?

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
Yes. I was going to say also I presented a paper at NCA last year on editorials that were questioning Trump's claim of the press being the enemy of the people. So, I think it's also the recent rhetoric in the last few years because the polarization numbers in this country have gone up since 2015 when Trump started his campaign and also what constitutes fake news because it's like anything that doesn't satisfy what we believe in. Because Washington Post is fake news now. So, it's also that and that has created an issue with credibility and a much more selective exposure and I'm not just saying it's just the conservatives. It's also the liberals because right now with the current coronavirus briefings, I try to watch them every day but every time I post about it, my friends on social media are like how do you even watch it? We can't watch it anymore. So, it's like people who are considered intellectuals are also doing selective exposure now because of the polarization, because of the rhetoric, because of this whole idea of this is fake, this is not fake. So, I think that has also impacted selective exposure more in recent times.

Shawn Turner:
Yeah. If I could just touch on Suamana's point. You said something I think is really important and we've got some data that's showing that this is really significant in terms of its frequency, when people talk about tuning it out, turning off the television, they just can't take it anymore, it's really interesting to find that it is liberals, it is the so-called more informed content to do that at higher rates and it's actually conservatives who turn it up. They consume more of the information that's consistent with their own values and beliefs. So, when we look at—my liberal friends are always shocked to find that Fox News and Fox News Network is the most popular cable news network by far and the numbers continue to grow. But you are much more likely to hear a liberal say I just can't watch this stuff, I'm just tuning it out than you are to hear conservatives say that because I think for conservatives it's about feeding and reinforcing what you already believe with regard to the other side. And I think that liberals need to really stop and think about that because not only are conservatives consuming more of what's consistent with their own values but they're also more aware of what the other side is saying and believing while at the same time more liberals are tuning out.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
I'm wondering how that is consistent or inconsistent with what Young Mie said earlier about how our focus needs to be on mobilization because I'm wondering the extent to which these media consumption patterns that you're talking about Shawn come back in some ways to have an influence on how people are mobilized or demobilized. I mean one might assume that the liberal who has had enough and is just not tuning in anymore would be demobilized. And similarly, the conservative who is actively seeking out more and more information might be more mobilized. I don't know but it's an interesting way by which these different competing aspects of politics more generally intersect. Yeah, Tom.

Tom Salek:
Yeah. And I think one thing rather than just talking about newspapers and TV, I think the aspect of social media matters here. I was talking to my undergrads the other day about filter bubbles and so, we know that about like 75% of people consume information and news through side door access so not actually going directly to the source but seeing it posted on Twitter or indirectly seeing something referenced on their Facebook page. And so, with that, if we're talking about source credibility, a lot of people now rather than going to the fake news media if they look at it that way, it's oh, well, my pastor posted this so obviously it has to be true or Bob down the street was saying here is this invasion that's happening from Milwaukee that we need to pay attention to, that gets more legitimacy even if it's nonsensical, even if it's not a source I think because people have this attack on the ethos or credibility of journalism which I think has been going on. And so, now it's well, if I can't trust journalism, what can I trust? Well, I can trust the people that I know I like. I can trust my pastor. I can trust my neighbor. I think that's something that is influencing that idea of mobilizing. I think people are using that to indirectly get folks to a rally that can then get them mobilized to vote for a candidate.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
We did an episode of the podcast with Matt Seeger who is the dean of communication over at Wayne State University and we had him on to talk about crisis and risk communication in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and he said that is one of the biggest problems that he worries about is the spread through presumably trusted credible networks, your pastor, Bob down the street, Jane from book club and their capacity to spread inaccurate information and how that really is a challenge for crisis and risk and health communication especially in times like this in the global pandemic. And I'm wondering if you think that's a function of the rise of social media or has it always been there? It's just now we do it faster and there's more of it because everybody's on Twitter. I don't know. What do you think? Is that a persistent concern moving forward I guess?

Tom Salek:
I think it's kind of something that's exacerbated by the swiftness of social media. I mean if we look at basically even traditional media coverage like Robert was saying, beginning of the 20th century, we see 19 newspapers that sort of been consolidated to a handful now. And so, now where do we fill that gap? We fill it with these other forms of media that I think are that same kind of space. I think in terms of the attacks on the credibility of the media, I think that might have to do with political rhetoric that's about anti-establishment and that something that's on both the left and the right whether it's a Trump or a Sanders attacking the establishment that's not standing up for the common person that's left out. Where do you get that new source now? You have to go to the grassroots, the non-elites, those that we can actually trust because you have that direct connection. So, is it anything new? I don't think so. I think it's just something quicker and easier to access today.

Shawn Turner:
There was a time when there certainly were objectively credible sources. I'm thinking about the research that we did where we looked at Hurricane Katrina and when we asked people who made a decision to leave versus people who made a decision to stay where they got their information and what caused them to leave, well, it was really interesting to find out. In the African-American community, people who left, if your pastor stood up and said leave, then you left and there were no questions asked. You left. We look at messages from those kinds of sources that are across the board credible sources. When we look at those same sources in the social media channel, the trust and reliability in those sources is still high but it's not that sort of absolute yes, I'm going to leave. So, your pastor tells you to leave in a tweet, then you might stop and think about it. But your pastor tells you to leave when he's standing there in front of you in church and you're going to leave. That's kind of what we're seeing is regard to the moderating effect of the channel.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
What would you want to leave our listeners with about the role of political communication in the battleground states heading into 2020 and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic? We can start with Young Mie. How does that sound?

Young Mie Kim:
Yeah. So, my final thought is that I just want people living in the battleground states to understand that there will be a lot of message war in the battleground states. There will be a lot of information. That means there will be a lot of misleading information as well especially on digital media because there's targeting capacity. With social media now, even like low resources groups or grass organizations or political action communities could put some hundreds of thousands of ads on social media which are targeted to the messaging on social media. So, at the first level, we have to be wary of that and we need to try our best efforts to diversify our

sources and then verify information. But we can't really blame just like people. I'm so glad that Shawn and Robert mentioned about sort of like the market factors that influences selective exposure or fragmentation especially in battleground states. So, it is in part like a market failure. So, we need some kind of an intervention. I'm not suggesting censorship or content regulation but some transparency and some kind of policies about PAC platform's targeting abilities, some transparent and accountable system for campaign information. That would be much needed.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Call for market reform in political media. That's great. Tom, what do you think? Last thoughts.

Tom Salek:
I'll actually do the flip side of that. I think market reform is really important to think about. Those external big factors are important but at least when it comes to talking with folks in the state of Wisconsin and how do we deal with a battleground state, how do we deal with rhetoric that's filled with resentment or intransigence and people not wanting to sort of talk to each other, I think we could look internally and sort of use some basic argumentation practices or even conflict mediation practices. So, we can't really as individuals reform the media market right now. We can't easily deal with how candidates communicate with voters. But we can deal with help voters and how two ideologically different people can talk to each other. So, one practice that I use in my undergraduate class on public deliberation is having people one, state kind of where they're at so what's there interest or what's their position, why do they believe what they believe. So, if it's hey, it's somebody from a rural part of Wisconsin, let me explain to you why I stand this way on an issue. That then kind of gives us this sort of underlying well, why did somebody believe what they believe. It generates this trust in that relationship because right now we know that, I know from the Pew Research Center like 80% of the electorate is opposite and a majority of Americans say that people of the opposing party are close-minded, immoral, dishonest. Like how can we break through that? I think it's sort of saying hey, let's recognize we're people, we're humans, here's what I believe and then forcing the opposition to sort of confront that and deal with it that way. I think that something that at least when it comes to my career and where I work—I work in a university that has a very fractured, polarized faculty and student population. And so, this is the only way we can actually talk about issues is if we say okay, let's hold back labels here and instead take a look at these things from the perspective of here's where I'm at, here's where you're at, what can we actually do. Is that possible on a large scale? I would hope so but I think it's kind of my hopeful way of saying let's talk to each other individually.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Great. A greater call for better argumentation and a little more recognition of our common humanity. That's ever hopeful. Shawn, what do you think?

Shawn Turner:
Well, Trevor, I'm going to take a look at this from a kind of external influence perspective. I tend to look at these things through a national security lens and one of the things I think is important for people battleground states to know and to be cognizant of all the time is the fact that in 2016 and again in the 2018 midterm elections that Russia and other outside influences really tried very hard to influence the way that people think, the way the people behave, the way that they relate to their neighbors and ultimately, to influence the way they behave at the ballot box. We did a great job in 2018 in the midterm elections of preventing that but it's still out there. One of the most startling things about external influence particularly in battleground states is that in 2016 when we were dealing with Russia, 2015 and '16, Russia was generating misinformation, disinformation and they were injecting it into the information stream here in the United States and then investing and making sure that it continued to circulate. In 2018, they were looking at a very different model and that model was one in which they were simply scooping up domestically generated misinformation and recirculating it in our information stream. So, we're actually doing it to ourselves now. We're creating it and then other outside forces, other nation states can simply put money and resources behind recirculating it as a way to interfere in our elections. So, for people in battleground states, it's important to recognize that as others here have said, they're going to be inundated with a lot of information. I think that this is the time for us to be more skeptical and more discerning about the information that we consume and we need to really be careful about the degree to which that information impacts our behavior at the ballot box.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
That's great. A call for critical thinking as central to our national security. That's really, really powerful. Suamana, any thoughts on what we should take away from this discussion of political communication in the battleground states?

Suamana Chattopadhyay:
Yeah. I think a couple of things I wanted to talk about have been addressed by Tom and Shawn especially in relation to talking to people that don't necessarily see eye to eye because we get to know what others are thinking once we talk to them. Otherwise, we just have assumptions about them. And another thing I don't like especially when political scholars call the other side dumb, I think that's just stupid. You should not be doing that kind of stuff. I have strong opinions and my uncle is across the side of the political spectrum but you know. So, civility and also fact-checking. I received this question many years back I think when Obama was running in 2012, I was in an interview with Wisconsin Public Radio and one of the voters asked me there's so much information out there, how can I make an informed choice? And even back then, I told them you need to cross-reference. It's a little bit of work but the information is out there. So, be a little bit skeptical. If something looks odd or whatever, just go and check and now we know Snopes and PolitiFact, there are lots of sources out there where you can cross check your

information. So, be that voter because my final point is that this is an important election. The country because of everything that has happened with the pandemic is going to be in a state where we will need a lot of recovery in different areas. So, people need to be aware and remind themselves that their vote actually counts and also that there might be a resurgent of the pandemic. So, just make sure that you're ready to vote, that if you want an absentee ballot, you get that ballot or do your credentials check out so that you can go to the polling place. So, this is an election more than ever where people need to cast their voice through their ballot. And so, I would say that's one of the things I would tell voters in a battleground state because your vote truly matters. Even if it doesn't as much in a red or a blue state given the way our electoral college works, in a battleground state, your vote absolutely matters so you should go and cast that vote no matter what. So, that's my one thing I would say, three things for them.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
Suamana, goes GOTV. That's great. Robert, what do you think are the big takeaways here?

Robert Kraig:
Well, it's a tough one because I think most of the panelists in the last question, Trevor, were kind of talking about how we make communication better and have what Wayne Booth used to call the rhetoric of good reasons. Right? To actually make decisions based on the common good or the interest of your community and that's been the Holy Grail since the founding of this country, how to create a structure, how to create an ethic that would do that and I don't think we've ever achieved that. I mean the liberal reformers in the 19th century thought if we made everyone read giant policy platforms, they'd become educated and all it apparently did is drive down turnout dramatically, for example. So, I don't think there ever these wonderful media referees that told people what was right and what was wrong. I think the lionizing of a Walter Cronkite is greatly overstated, not that they didn't do anything but there was really not and there was all sorts of problems with mono media. Right? So, I mean I've been captivated by this as well in my doctoral studies and then as an advocate and I guess what I would hope is two things here. That there's really a problem and this is true with I think negative communication doesn't require as much of a high-quality messenger, one that's highly credible as other communication. It seems to be potentially wired though I don't think that's been—maybe it has been. I don't know it's been fully established. And so, if people could actually begin to question the motives of anyone doing strategic othering, not just strategic racism but all strategic othering and think about is this because they're advancing an interest. Right? Because division is in our interest or is this and therefore I'm being mobilized emotionally or based on identity rather than some common good? Not that identity can be abstracted in all communication politics so that's why the term identity politics is problematic but it's purely that. Right? And can we create that facility in people? And I think part of it is a request for people to try to do that but I think it's another if there are communicators and I think there are communicators who actually prefer a more ethical discourse and real deliberative democracy to not go to othering yourself because plenty of them

resort to othering in response and I think part of the rural-urban divide is real people do and blue-collar people do feel looked down upon by elites and that's been trumped up for strategic purposes but there's also a reality to it that exists. And so, the H.L. Mencken making fun of all the rules actually has bad consequences as far as backlash politics. And so, there need to be communicators that try to win in an ethical way and there's a lot of talk about race class narrative, a narrative that gets over division and we work on that as advocates. But we need a lot of different advocates to try to come up with an ethical rhetoric that's also effective and then to win battleground states such as Wisconsin by doing that.

Trevor Parry-Giles:
A call for an ethical rhetoric that is also effective. That's a great place to wrap up our discussion and I want to thank everybody who joined me today on this special episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. Listeners, as always thank you for listening. I hope you enjoyed this discussion and I hope you'll join us in the future for a public program that we might be offering at a campus or a facility near you. I specifically want to take a moment too to thank LaKesha Anderson and Caitlyn Reinauer, working out of NCA's national office who organized this public program and who were skilled at converting it into a podcast episode. For more information about NCA's public programming efforts, visit the public programs page on the NCA website at natcom.org/PublicPrograms. That's natcom.org/PublicPrograms. As always, thanks for joining us on *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

In NCA news, the May issue of Spectra focuses on the mental health challenges that confront students, faculty, members, administrators and others on university campuses. This is a particularly timely issue given the COVID-19 epidemic and communication scholars in the May issue of Spectra offer perspectives on speaking with troubled students during office hours, the struggles that graduate students face, how campuses can address mental health stigma and other issues related to mental health. NCA members can expect the May issue of Spectra in their mailboxes in early May when they will also be able to access Spectra online at natcom.org/Spectra. That's natcom.org/Spectra. Also in NCA news, beginning on June 1st, the Communication Research and Theory Network (CRTNET) will no longer be active. Current CRTNET subscribers can sign up for NCA's new daily weekday email COMMNotes online at natcom.org/commnotes-subscription. That's natcom.org/commnotes-subscription. All NCA members will receive COMMNotes and starting May 29th, interested parties are encouraged to contribute calls for papers, announcements of academic publications, event announcements, grant opportunities and position announcements. As with CRTNET, postings are free except for position announcements. Position announcements on COMMNotes will remain free for NCA departmental members. Institutions that are not NCA members can publish position announcements on COMMNotes for $100.

Listeners, I hope you'll tune in to the May 14th episode of *Communication Matters* which will feature Dr. Joy Connolly, the president of the American Council of Learned Societies or ACLS, a non-profit federation of 75 scholarly organizations that includes NCA. Dr. Connolly will discuss how ACLS advances the humanities and the humanistically inclined social sciences as well as some recent ACLS initiatives centered on diversity, equity and inclusion. So, I hope you'll join us for that May 14th episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:
Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

RECORDING ENDS