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Where is “the political” in the journal *Political Communication*? On the hegemonic articulation of a disciplinary identity

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Abstract

Critical scholars have long critiqued the circumscribed theoretical boundaries of political communication research in its dominant disciplinary identity. This identity is usually attributed to the hegemonic authority of a functionalist paradigm of political communication anchored in the use of positivist epistemologies and quantitative methods. This article revisits these old debates from a post-foundational discourse theoretical perspective, drawing on arguments about the ontological implications of “the political” to examine political communication’s hegemonic disciplinary form. The primarily theoretical argument is supported by an elementary empirical method that examines how the signifiers “ontology” and “the political”, and theorists associated with that vocabulary, are cited in a 24-year archive of articles from the journal *Political Communication* which we frame as a proxy for the dominant disciplinary identity. We argue that the relative invisibility of an otherwise influential political ontology literature in the journal supports our argument about the lack of theoretical pluralism in political communication research and suggests the enduring authority of a dominant disciplinary habitus that, even when it recognizes paradigmatic differences, sees methodological virtue as the guarantee of scholarly rigour. We end by

reflecting on the politics of how different (inter)disciplinary identities are articulated in communication studies.

Keywords: *ontology, the political, political communication, (inter)disciplinarity, discourse theory; retroduction; corpus-assisted interpretivist analysis.*

The concept of “the political” has become the cornerstone of work in critical political theory in recent decades (Brown, 2019; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Marchart, 2007, 2018; McNay, 2014). It has cultivated an expansive way of thinking about politics that has inspired scholars in different fields, including in communication studies. The concept is associated primarily with different “post-foundational”, “post-structuralist”, “post-Marxist” and “radical democratic” theoretical perspectives¹ that stress the ontological implications of politics (Marchart, 2007, 2018). “The political” is conceptualized in schematic opposition to naturalized understandings of “politics”.

Theorists of the political highlight the potential “politicality” of the entire social order (Marchart, 2018, p. 10). To think about political communication from a political ontology perspective signifies a research orientation that departs from a dominant “functionalist paradigm that focuses on the workings of political systems” and habitually “conceptualizes communication as a mechanistic system of input variables and outcome effects” (Baym, 2016, p. 2). It suggests a theoretical sensibility that has more in common with a minoritarian (but not invisible) paradigm of political communication research that interprets “communication as culture” (Baym, 2016). Ontology is defined usually as the “science” or “philosophy” of being (Hay, 2006). The concept has been associated historically with the metaphysical search for a grounding to earthly existence (see Anderson & Baym, 2004); the identification of “a kind of furniture of the world”, where the “sorts of things” that exist

(and which we then acquire knowledge of) are elucidated and taxonomized (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 11). The “post-metaphysical” (Marchart, 2018, p. 56) account of ontology that centres our argument here departs from this understanding of ontology (White, 2001), in that the question of *how* things exist (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, p. 11) also becomes a focus of ontological reflection. The assumption of the political ontology literature is that social life is political all the way down, because how objects and subjects are socially constituted – including disciplinary identities and subjectivities – is contingent, historical and precarious, and shaped by sedimented discourses and power structures (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

The influence of this theoretical tradition in communication studies has not usually been articulated through explicit appeals to political ontology, but rather through the uptake of critical theoretical perspectives that foreground the concept of the political. The best known of these is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory, as initially formulated in their influential 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Laclau and/or Mouffe’s work has been used to examine different topics, including fake news (Schou & Farkas, 2019), populism (Brussel et al., 2019), media pluralism (Budarick, 2019; Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2020), media representations of education (Salter, 2019), digital activism (Neumayer & Svensson, 2016), radical theories of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2014) and neoliberalism (Phelan, 2014). Their influence on Stuart Hall and others has also been part of the intellectual genealogy shaping cultural studies scholars’ embrace of an expansive understanding of the politics of communication and media since the 1970s (Bowman, 2007; Chen & Morley, 2006). However, the impact of the so-called “ontological turn” (McNay, 2014) in political theory has been relatively invisible in the disciplinary milieu of political communication, at least among those who are most likely to identify (or

be recognized) as “political communication” researchers and publish work in forums self-consciously aligned with that disciplinary identity. This not only says something interesting about how the dominant disciplinary identity of political communication has been institutionalized over time. It is also indicative, we surmise, of a general dearth of explicit theoretical reflection on ontological questions in communication studies (for one recent exception, see Ashcraft, 2020), to the extent that if ontology is talked about at all, the references are often vague and cursory, more ornamental than conceptually illuminating.

Contextualized by the assumption that the question of “the political” invites explicit theoretical reflection on how political communication is constituted as a research discipline and/or field, this article asks: where is “the political” in the journal *Political Communication*?² Our argument frames the journal as a proxy for the dominant disciplinary identity in political communication research, which, as we discuss further below, signifies something more heterogenous and malleable than the notion of a dominant or monolithic paradigm. We begin from an assumption that we (and our imagined readers) take to be uncontentious: as a rule, we do not expect to see explicit discussions of political ontology, or elaborate theorizations of “the political”, in work aligned to the dominant disciplinary identity in political communication. Anderson and Baym suggest that “disagreements over ontology comprise the primary lines of fissure in the discipline of communication” (J. A. Anderson & Baym, 2004, p. 603). We think they are correct, including with reference to political communication (Baym 2016). However, the assumption here is that these disagreements usually operate implicitly in political communication (and conceivably other sub-fields, too), for the simple reason that researchers do not talk much about something called ontology. Our argument is made from a critical theoretical perspective informed by work on political ontology, particularly the post-Marxist tradition associated with Laclau

and Mouffe (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Marchart, 2018). The argument is offered primarily as a theoretical critique of how political communication is hegemonically constituted. However, instead of simply offering what might be regarded as a “purely normative and/or subjective” argument (Donsbach & Brade, 2011, p. 509), our discussion is supported by an elementary empirical method that examines how the signifiers “ontology” and “the political”, and theorists associated with that vocabulary, are cited in a 24-year archive of articles (a corpus of 6.8 million words) from the journal *Political Communication*. Thus, *how* the journal articulates its identity vis-à-vis explicit references to ontology, the political and indicative theorists is our object of empirical analysis. That object of analysis is clearly a reductive one. We recognize that work published in the journal can implicitly discuss the kind of ontological disagreements noted by Baym and Anderson without explicitly invoking the terms “ontology” or “the political”, while we also recognize that political communication scholars have their own preferred terminologies (concepts like “polarisation” and “contentious politics”) for analysing the conflictual dimensions of politics. At the same time, when conducted at the scale of a large corpus of articles, we think our empirical analysis allows us to illuminate how much (or how little) value is accorded to a particular critical theoretical vocabulary for thinking about “the political” and ontological questions in the journal archive.

The argument presupposes a specific discourse theoretical understanding of the relationship between theoretical explanation and empirical analysis that is novel in a communication studies context (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, 2019). Our empirical analysis does not proceed in the archetypal “theory-driven” fashion of most political communication research, for we have already acknowledged the uncontentious nature of our theoretical “hypothesis” (which clearly does not take the form of the kind of hypothesis that would be advanced by most

researchers). Nor is it developed in the inductive fashion of an archetypal grounded theory approach. We think we could make a coherent theoretical argument about political communication researchers' neglect of ontological questions and perspectives without any analysis of the journal archive, so it would be counter-intuitive to proceed in an exaggerated empiricist register, as if the question – do political communication researchers engage with work on political ontology? – was a matter of great suspense and contention. Our approach offers instead a form of retroductive explanation, which Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2017, 2019) contrast to the stylized extremes of deductive and inductive explanations. From this perspective, the relationship between the theoretical and empirical dimensions of our analysis is conceptualized as a to-and-fro process of cyclical reasoning where both dimensions are mutually constituted (Glynos & Howarth, 2019). This approach departs from the conventional (and quintessentially positivist) assumption that “properly scientific” inquiry must be governed by a “sharp distinction” between the “context of discovery” (i.e. the generation of a hypothesis/theory) and the “context of justification” (i.e. the empirical testing of the hypothesis) (Glynos & Howarth, 2019, p. 107). Instead, it assumes that our theoretical argument about political communication's neglect of the political cannot be separated from the kind of interpretivist analysis we need to do to illustrate the argument's empirical manifestations. Based on what we already know about the dominant disciplinary identity of political communication, it can be anticipated that the field's main institutional journal will not give much coverage to explicit theoretical discussions of political ontology. At the same time, the authority of that hypothesis can only benefit from being grounded in empirical analysis of how political communication researchers do talk about – or do not talk about – the topics of ontology and the political. Thus, by reformulating what could seem like abstract philosophical propositions as concrete empirical questions, our analysis promises insights into how political communication articulates its dominant disciplinary identity vis-

a-vis critical theoretical vocabularies and reference points that we think offer productive resources for researching political communication.

Why is any of this important? Because it allows us to better grasp the political – that is, the contestable and power-laden – underpinnings of political communication as an actually existing discipline. Framed through Glynos and Howarth’s methodology, our argument offers an “ontological-level” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) interpretation of political communication’s hegemonic disciplinary identity, which naturalizes particular ways of thinking about political communication and marginalizes others. We do not have space here for a detailed discussion of the merits of an ontological perspective in political communication. However, the value of thinking ontologically is performatively enacted in our wish to denaturalize the dominant disciplinary identity of political communication by treating the lack of engagement with a particular theoretical tradition in its main institutional journal as indicative of the discipline’s lack of theoretical pluralism. To engage in ontological-level inquiry about how political communication is constituted as a discipline means posing critical-interpretivist questions about what political communication *is* and what it *could be*. It means reflecting on the gap between the hegemonic form that political communication has assumed as a sedimented disciplinary identity and an anti-essentialist conception of how the signifier political communication might be articulated. It means illuminating forms of politics that are internal to the academy and the constitution of different disciplinary identities (Riley, 2022; Steinmetz, 2005). It suggests that how political communication is organized as a discipline is itself a site of “the political” (Marchart, 2018), which can depoliticize and circumscribe its object of study by normalizing a disciplinary imaginary that, in the assessment of some authoritative sources, is becoming “less and less” open to interpretivist, humanistic and speculative theories and methods (Bucy, 2016, p. 16).

Indeed, rather than seeing our argument as simply staging a blanket critique of the dominant disciplinary identity, perhaps it might be more productively read as speaking to intuitions articulated by some of the best-known political communication scholars. Consider, for instance, W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar's lament about a disciplinary imaginary that "gives only passing thought" to reflecting on how "theoretical, conceptual and methodological" approaches need to be adapted to changing social and political conditions (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 713; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; M. X. D. Delli Carpini, 2013).

In offering a critique of how political communication is articulated in its most prominent disciplinary journal, we are mindful of how we are arguing from a theoretical perspective that has heretofore been of marginal interest to the dominant disciplinary identity. However, as we discuss in the next section, our analysis builds on insights already articulated by political communication researchers whose work is more visible within a conventional disciplinary milieu. We think our argument also speaks to a growing recognition within the institutional centre of political communication that the discipline has not adequately grasped questions that have become more salient in recent years with the global rise of authoritarian politics. For example, a June 2021 call for papers published by the recently appointed editor of *Political Communication*, Regina Lawrence, invited contributions that "grapple with topics [and "feature underutilized methodologies"]...that have not been at the core of political communication research as a field, such as authoritarianism and democratic backsliding; race, racism, and racial oppression; and the study of underrepresented communities, identities, and regions". Also worth mentioning is a roundtable panel from the May 2022 International Communication Association conference titled "Moving the Field of Political Communication Forward in Turbulent Times" that offered some forceful challenges to the sedimented theoretical, normative and geo-political boundaries of the dominant

disciplinary identity, including a paper from Cherian George (2022) that critiqued the Western-centric nature of theories and methodologies that are articulated as universal despite their restrictive underpinnings. Our argument draws on a particular theoretical vocabulary for critiquing the foundational rationality of political communication research. However, we do not want to fetishize this vocabulary (see McNay, 2014), because simply talking about ontology and the political offers no guarantee of intellectual insight. The limitations of how *Political Communication* articulates its institutional identity could be examined from other theoretical angles not explored here, such as political economy (Davis et al., 2020), or other strands of political theory and philosophy (Karppinen, 2012), including work that highlights the racist foundations of Euro-American political science (Mills, 2017), or the masculine assumptions of positivist discourses (Love, 2017). The politics of the journal's Western-centric identity might also be examined from a more sociologically-grounded perspective to the one presented here: a perspective that would – to quote one of our reviewers – analyse “the hegemonic circuits of academic publishing”, especially the implications of article review, acceptance and rejection decisions for scholars working in, and writing about, the Global South (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Demeter, 2020).

The rest of the paper is organized as five parts. First, we say more about the shape of political communication as a disciplinary identity and research field, and the centring authority of a functionalist paradigm. Second, we elaborate on the theoretical and methodological rationale of our corpus-assisted empirical analysis, which conceptualizes the 24-year archive of articles from *Political Communication* as a disciplinary “discourse” that can be both heterogeneous in its theoretical and paradigmatic sources, yet simultaneously regulated by a relatively stable sense of the proper boundaries and comportment of political communication research. Third, we present an interpretivist analysis of the journal archive, highlighting the

general dearth of discussion about ontology and the political, and the relative invisibility of critical theorists linked to work on political ontology. Fourth, we reflect, in a more speculative theoretical mode, on what our empirical analysis says about political communication's hegemonic disciplinary identity. Finally, we end with brief reflections on the argument's implications for how we might think of the political and contestable underpinnings of different (inter)disciplinary and sub-field identities in communication studies.

Political communication as (inter)discipline and heterogenous research field

The study of political communication has been dominated by a research paradigm described variously as “social scientific”, “functionalist”, “positivist”, “empiricist”, “rationalist” and “objectivist” (Baym, 2016; Blumler, 2015; Bucy, 2016; Dahlgren, 2004; M. X. D. Delli Carpini, 2013; Jones, 2013; Karpf et al., 2015). How the dominant paradigm is named (especially by critics) is its own site of contention, not least because of the baggage attached to some of these descriptors. Baym's preferred term of “functionalist paradigm” might be the least fraught heading, as it better captures the internal heterogeneity of mainstream political communication research than a label like positivism. Indeed, rather than assuming the dominance of a singular paradigm, it might be more accurate to think of a dominant disciplinary imaginary that is a composite of theories and elements drawn from different paradigmatic sources (Anderson, 2021).

The functionalist paradigm occupies a particular (inter)disciplinary space that straddles the division between communication studies and political science. The influence of its “close cousin” (Baym, 2016, 1) political science (generally regarded as the more high-status of the two disciplines) is considerable. John Durham Peters (1986) once noted that political

communication simply means “political science as practiced in the field of communication” (p. 548). Communication is conceptualized primarily through a transmission-based model: analysed as a functional element of a discrete political system (Baym, 2016). Research is conducted primarily through the application of quantitative methods (Bucy, 2016), and a conception of theory based on a “system of well-confirmed assertions about the relationship between variables” (Donsbach & Brade, 2011, p. 509). In its purest positivist iteration, the functionalist paradigm encourages researchers to see themselves as objective scientists and neutral analysts of political communication processes, self-policed by the assumption that “social or political values are illegitimate as content of scientific assertions” and that the context of discovery should be separate from the context of justification (Donsbach, 2006, p. 446). The properly scientific researcher commits to developing “value-free descriptions and explanations” from an epistemological perspective that looks to physics as the prototype of disciplinary coherence and scientific rigour (Donsbach, 2006). At the same time, it would be a mistake to attribute a rigid positivist epistemology to everybody aligned with the dominant disciplinary identity, particularly when some exemplars of an empirical approach would reject the dogmatic tendencies of a “capital P” positivism (Delli Carpini, 2013a, p. 509), while others embrace the explicitly normative dimensions of political communication research (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Blumler, 2015). Indeed, even researchers who might perfectly fit with the positivist label are alert to the risk of “petty number-crunching” empirical research that is disembedded from normative questions and concerns (Donsbach, 2006, p. 447).

The functionalist paradigm has been strongest historically in the US, but it is also replicated in how political communication research and teaching is done in many other countries, especially in Europe (George, 2022). The journal *Political Communication* has been a key

institutional space in the articulation of a disciplinary identity, along with the *International Journal of Press/Politics*. Launched in 1981, the journal *Political Communication* is published by Taylor and Francis on behalf of the Political Communication streams of the International Communication Association and American Political Science Association. On first glance, the official journal identity signifies a pluralistic ethos, attesting to a disciplinary self-image that also animates descriptions of political communication as an “eclectic, interdisciplinary field” (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017b) In the website section titled “aims and scope”, the journal describes itself as welcoming “all research methods and analytical viewpoints that advance understanding of the practices, processes, content, effects, and policy implications of political communication” (Political Communication, 2021). However, it qualifies this invitation by stressing its interest in “cutting edge theory-driven empirical research”. The rhetoric signifies an ideal-type conception of “theory” that is tendentially functionalist, and quite different to how critical theorists might understand theory. These impressions are reinforced by the journal’s emphasis on correct methodological procedures as journal “requirements”, and a valorization of “open science practices” that exemplify a Western-centric scientific imaginary (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2021). Detailed guidelines are listed for the “reporting and use” of different kinds of data: survey data, experimental data, content analysis, computational methods, and qualitative data.

The functionalist paradigm has been contested by other research paradigms that have, in turn, shaped how the discipline has developed over time (Baym, 2016; Dahlgren, 2004), including in forms that have expanded discussions of what constitutes a legitimate object of political communication analysis in the journal *Political Communication*. For that reason, as we use it here, the category of a dominant disciplinary identity should *not* be construed as a simple synonym for the dominant paradigm. Instead, it signifies how a certain doxic

acceptance (however constrained) of paradigmatic difference and theoretical pluralism has been internalized within the most significant institutional spaces in which political communication research is conducted. It also acknowledges the discipline's avowed openness to work from (inter)disciplinary horizons beyond communication studies and political science (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), including scholars "with homes or pedigrees" in economics, psychology and sociology (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017a, p. 6). At the same time, the signifier discipline suggests an enduring desire to police what is consecrated as political communication research, where heterodox approaches still need to justify themselves through the naturalized authority of the dominant disciplinary identity and the image of "normal science" (Kuhn, 2012) it reproduces. This can be contrasted with the pluralistic connotations of the term "field", which, as we use it here, signifies a principled affirmation of theoretical differences. By characterizing the dominant disciplinary identity as a hegemonic identity, our argument draws on Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) understanding of a hegemonic process as one where a particular discourse assumes the status of a universal discourse or identity, meaning a "particular" image of political communication research assumes the professional standing of a total representation of everything that might be said under that nominal heading.

Writing in 2004, Peter Dahlgren (2004) identified the Habermasian public sphere tradition, and what he then described as a relatively new "cultural" approach informed by post-structuralist theories (including theories aligned with our argument here), as the two clearest paradigmatic alternatives to a dominant paradigm aligned to the "mother discipline of political science" (p. 15). He saw signs of a pluralistic ethos "becoming normalized" in the field (p. 8), and a greater openness to theoretical and methodological perspectives not framed previously under the heading of political communication research. Dahlgren's triadic

typology was mirrored in Geoffrey Baym's (2016) overview of different communication theoretical orientations to political communication. Habermas was reframed as part of an intellectual genealogy that focused on the "dynamics of communication interaction", in differentiation to the functionalist and cultural paradigms. Baym discussed the ontological and epistemological differences between the three paradigms, drawing on the four-part typology he developed in an earlier article with Anderson (Anderson & Baym, 2004). He located the functionalist paradigm within "the *foundational-empirical* wing of the wider discipline of communication studies" (p. 172), because it takes the theoretical hypothesis of the researcher to be foundational in locating the precise object of empirical analysis. He aligned the interactional paradigm with "the *foundational-analytical* wing of communication studies", because it is informed by the normative impulse "to describe universal human traits that exist independently of the effort to [empirically] describe them". And he described the culturalist paradigm (the one best aligned with his own work) as informed by a mixture of "*reflexive-empirical* and *reflexive-analytical*" sensibilities, because it embraces a theoretically-mediated conception of empirical analysis that departs from the assumptions of positivist social science.

Baym's overview illustrates the relative novelty of a high-profile political communication scholar explicitly discussing the role of ontological assumptions in shaping the research process. The typology he developed with Anderson was appraised in a 2013 article by Michael X. Delli Carpini (2013a), who approaches these questions from a social scientific perspective focused on the methodological implications of philosophical and theoretical differences (see also Jones, 2013). In his own typology of the field, Delli Carpini distinguishes between "positivist", "critical studies" and "cultural studies" approaches, with – as he defines it – "critical studies" focused on the power dynamics of political

communication, in contrast to cultural studies' emphasis on meaning-making (p. 532). Delli Carpini affirms the image of political communication as a heterogenous research field open to different ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives, even while criticizing a disciplinary tendency to take the philosophical and normative underpinnings of theoretical and methodological choices for granted.

Delli Carpini's (2013) article exemplifies how periodic debates about the relative lack of diversity in political communication research centre on arguments about methodology and the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods (Bucy, 2016). Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen and Powers (2015) make the case for qualitative methods in a field dominated by quantitative approaches (Bucy, 2016). They contrast the quantitative orientation of the dominant paradigm with the openness of foundational figures like Paul Lazarsfeld to combining quantitative and qualitative methods. They underline the historical contingency of political communication's dominant disciplinary identity, highlighting the repressive effects of a "methodological consensus" that continues to define the "core of legitimate research" through the use of quantitative methods, "especially in the United States". The implications of these methodological strictures go well beyond questions of methodology. It not only shapes how political communication researchers do empirical work, it "also shapes the very questions they ask, the answers they provide, and the theories they develop" (p. 1889).

Karpf et al. do not discuss explicitly the place of ontological assumptions in political communication research. This is consistent with how critiques of the dominant research tradition are not articulated typically as arguments about ontology, even when they could be translated into those terms. Consider the following selective examples. Innovative studies of

the relationship between politics and popular culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Street, 2001) challenged how political communication researchers demarcated their objects of analysis, and reflected a conjunctural need to grapple with a ‘porous’ conception of the political (Dahlgren, 2004, p. 14). The uptake of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory in political communication and journalism studies in the early 2000s (see, for example, Benson, 2004) attested to a disciplinary openness to engaging with critical social theories (see also Davis, 2010) that extended the conceptual reference points of political communication research. The late Kevin Barnhurst (2011) highlighted political communication researchers’ failure to engage satisfactorily with questions of representation, meaning, affect and subjectivity (see also Papacharissi, 2014), all core theoretical concerns of critical work on political ontology. More recently, different authors have highlighted how the scholarly (and popular) preoccupation with disinformation, misinformation and fake news as defining social malaises of our time presupposes a partial understanding of political communication that displaces the role of meaning-making in shaping political contexts (Anderson, 2020; Kreiss et al., 2020; Schou & Farkas, 2019).

Criticisms of the circumscribed theoretical and methodological boundaries of political communication have long been echoed in wider critiques of political science. These were given one notable articulation during the so-called “Perestroika movement” in US political science circles in 2000 (Topper, 2005), after the circulation of an anonymous email that “decried the methodological colonization of the discipline” by quantitative work “focused narrowly on technical methods rather than on salient political issues” (p. 6). Colin Hay (2002) describes this hegemonic disciplinary identity as normalizing “rigid disciplinary and sub-disciplinary” (p. 5) modes of analysis that “confine themselves to the narrowly political analysis of narrowly political variables” (ibid, 3). Against these tendencies, Hay (2006) has

been a prominent figure in making the argument for a “political ontology” perspective. He argues that political analysts (and, by extension, political communication researchers) need to explicitly attend to the role of ontological assumptions in shaping how research is conceptualized and conducted. Hay (2002) wrote about these sometimes abstruse philosophical issues in an accessible way in an introductory textbook that stressed the connections between ontology, epistemology and methodology. Students are less likely to encounter similar discussions of ontology in your typical political communication textbook, though one notable exception (see also Ijere, 2020) is Heather Savigny’s 2016 book *Political Communication: A Critical Introduction* (Savigny, 2016). Savigny poses a sister question to the one posed in the title of this article: “what is political about political communication?”. Neither Hay nor Savigny conceptualize political ontology from a perspective aligned directly with the theoretical sources informing our argument here, but their work embodies a similar critical interpretivist sensibility. They both help us see how political communication’s hegemonic disciplinary identity is itself a contingent phenomenon – something that might be taken-for-granted in its being and “is-ness”, but which is nonetheless the product of a specific disciplinary politics and imaginary. Examining how that hegemonic identity marginalizes explicit discussion of ontological questions, including the question of the political, is the focus of the rest of this paper.

Corpus-assisted interpretivist analysis: theoretical and methodological rationale

The previous section described how political communication is marked by enduring tensions between a hegemonic disciplinary identity and a theoretically and methodologically pluralist conception of the field. It sets the scene for our corpus-assisted empirical analysis, where we examine how concepts like ontology and the political are explicitly used in a 24-year archive of the journal *Political Communication* and track the relative visibility of authors linked to

that theoretical vocabulary. Our approach brings together two perspectives that may seem like unusual methodological bedfellows: Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and corpus analysis. We are not the first to explore the value of "corpus analysis" approaches to discourse theory (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019), and the methodological rationale also takes inspiration from research that combines critical discourse studies and corpus analysis (Subtirelu & Baker, 2017). Our empirical analysis examines the entire archive of *Political Communication* from 1997 to 2020. The journal published its first issue in 1981, but our sample is limited to the post-1997 period because the journal archives all journal content as PDF files from 1997 onwards. That way, files could then be uploaded directly to the corpus analysis software Sketch Engine. The corpus is 6,867,689 words, based on 1098 individual files. The files comprised all the different article types published in the journal in the sample period. They were sourced directly from the journal website by a research assistant, and the first author then checked the sample to see if everything from the period had been included. Even a cursory examination of the sample illustrates how the journal has been given different editorial identities over time, simply through the composition of different article types. For example, book reviews, and even film reviews, were prominent in some periods, such as 2007, compared to their absence in others.

We conceptualize the journal corpus as a discourse in the precise theoretical sense articulated by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). They define discourses as "structured totalities" (p. 105) that produce patterned, but also constitutively precarious, identities through the routinized articulation of different linguistic and non-linguistic elements. The journal archive is clearly the site of different theoretical, methodological, analytical and normative discourses for researching political communication, as anticipated by the earlier discussion of different paradigms. Yet, these heterogenous discourses contribute to the making of political

communication as a hegemonic disciplinary discourse, which, like all discursive identities, is given definition through its differences from other (existing or potential) identities. This structuring dynamic is captured in Laclau and Mouffe's notion of antagonism, which Marchart (2018) regards as the key concept of Laclau's political ontology. Antagonism signifies the negative underpinnings of identity, meaning that all identities that present themselves to us, in the natural attitude of everyday life, as fully-formed positive identities are partly constituted by what they consciously or unconsciously exclude (Marchart, 2018). Put in the form of a speculative argument about the journal archive, the hegemonic disciplinary identity of *Political Communication* is not just constituted by its own positive discursive content. It is also constituted by a patterned exclusion of theoretical and philosophical perspectives that would challenge its own paradigmatic conceptions (and especially the dominant paradigm's conception) of political communication. The precise boundaries between the inside and outside of this hegemonic disciplinary identity are not set in stone, and a certain level of theoretical and methodological pluralism should be expected at the level of broad paradigmatic differences. A new editorial team at *Political Communication* might (as we suggested earlier) inflect the identity of the journal differently from a previous editorial team by opening the field to perspectives previously excluded, without radically challenging the authority of the dominant disciplinary identity. By examining how work published in the journal engages with conceptual vocabularies that we anticipate will be peripheral, our analysis promises to illuminate the boundary markers of political communication's disciplinary identity vis-à-vis theoretical traditions and authors that would think about political communication very differently.

The use of a corpus-assisted approach is imperative to our empirical analysis, in that we would not even countenance examining a journal archive of 6.8 million words without the

aid of computational software. We have already suggested that a stand-alone theoretical argument about the limitations of political communication research could be made without any supporting corpus analysis. However, by exploiting the affordances that come from both corpus analysis software and the digitization of journal archives, our argument can be grounded (at least to some extent) in verifiable empirical claims that could be evaluated and queried by other researchers. By definition, corpus analysis brings a quantitative element to our analysis, but it is not useful to name our analysis as “quantitative analysis” as such, since we are clearly *not* trying to do the kind of statistically sophisticated analysis conducted normally in political communication research, including work done in the name of “computational political communication” (Theocharis & Jungherr, 2021). We are also not trying to do corpus analysis in a way that addresses the disciplinary expectations of corpus linguists (Subtirelu & Baker, 2017). Our empirical method is elementary, but appropriate for our argumentative objectives and their articulation within the word count constraints of a single article. We recognize the analytical value of basic quantitative data (Lewis, 1997), which is why we begin with a simple count of how often the terms ontology and the political are cited in the journal archive. By organizing the empirical inquiry around an initial search for how often particular terms are used, our analysis could therefore be subjected to the justified criticisms that can be made against any quantitative exercise – that our evidence is built around the counting of things that cannot be counted.

Nonetheless, the incorporation of a simple quantitative element should not obscure the interpretative, exploratory and humanistic (Bucy, 2016) nature of our empirical investigation. The initial overview of how often particular signifiers are used is supplemented with an interpretivist mode of analysis, where we contextualize how signifiers like ontology and the political are articulated, not to individualize the argument as a critique

of specific authors but rather to illuminate the normalized workings of the disciplinary imaginary. The great advantage of a corpus-assisted approach is that it allows us to do interpretivist analysis at scale, while also enabling the production of basic quantitative data about the corpus. Simon Lindgren's (2020) suggestion that interpretivist researchers should "hack" quantitative and big data methods offers one source of inspiration for what we think of here as corpus-assisted interpretivist analysis. Lindgren argues (not dissimilarly from Delli Carpini, 2013a) that critical interpretivist researchers should embrace quantitative methods when they help illuminate the research problem, rather than rest content with a stereotypical critical posture that dismisses their assumed "positivism". The research problem centring our analysis here is a familiar one, in that we are hardly the first to argue that political communication is governed by rigid disciplinary strictures. Nonetheless, by exploring the workings of those strictures in an empirically novel way, we think our analysis offers illuminating insights into what is excluded from political communication's hegemonic disciplinary identity. The next three sections present our corpus-assisted analysis, before we then consider the wider argumentative implications.

Political Communication and ontology-talk

This section gives an overview of how grammatical variants of the term "ontology" are used in the corpus. An asterisk-based search for the abbreviated word form "ontolog*" records 29 results, most of which cite the adjective "ontological". The last citation was in 2013, suggesting the journal did not become any more encouraging of ontology-talk over the sample timeframe. In a corpus of 6.8 million words, 29 is a low number. But the figure can be put into some kind of meaningful context if we compare its use to grammatical variants of two other research keywords (Hay, 2002) epistemology and methodology. A search for the abbreviated word form "epistem*" generated 97 results, suggesting a greater disciplinary

openness to epistemology-talk. The much higher figure of 806 results for the abbreviated search term *methodolog** (along with 2,679 results for “*method**”) illustrates which concept is most important to the disciplinary imaginary of the journal. The prominence of methodology-talk is hardly surprising, given the stated editorial remit of the journal and the term’s regular placement in the sub-heading of journal articles.

The signifier “political ontology” is never used in the corpus, while the signifier “social ontology” is used only once. The latter appears in a sentence that uses the term ontology twice, to note how “most constructivist approaches to international relations typically assume an intersubjective or social ontology that rejects an individualist ontology” (Nisbet & Myers, 2010). Thereafter, the term ontology is only used on 2 more occasions in the entire archive. The significance of the non-articulation of the category of political ontology should not be exaggerated; it does not even appear in texts seen as foundational (see Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) to critical work on political ontology. The single reference to “social ontology” (a category which Laclau did use to define his own theoretical project) is not especially surprising either, through here we can point to the work of prominent media and communication scholars (Couldry, 2012) who have been developing theoretical reflections about “social ontology” for some time. Nonetheless, the general absence of the term ontology in the journal suggests a terminological and theoretical lacuna that is reinforced by how “ontological” is used as an adjective.

The word “ontological” is used 22 times in the corpus. 8 of those are from a single article about the post 9/11 TV drama series *24*, which deploys the term to analyse how newspapers appropriate a fictional show to reflect on social reality (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). The references to ontology are not directly supported by references, though the use of the term

“ontological openness” (twice in scare quotes) suggests that Tenenboim-Weinblatt may have had specific theoretical sources in mind. 1 article by David Ryfe (2006) on the “nature of news rules” invokes the term twice: once with reference to John Searle’s distinction between “constitutive rules [that] are ontological” and “regulative rules [that] are epistemological”; and a second time with reference to a discussion of how the need for recognition (“by themselves and others”) “acts as a kind of ontological ‘bedrock’” of journalistic identity. Ryfe’s metaphor of an “ontological bedrock” is also cited in a 2013 review of his book *Can Journalism Survive?* by Matt Carlson, which Carlson supplements with his own observation about how definitions of journalism represent “the ontological heart of journalism”. Another article cites the term “ontological truth” twice with reference to Benedict Anderson’s work on imagined communities, to contrast different historical perceptions of the truth status of printed text (Rusciano, 1997). The other 8 citations are once-off uses of the term from different articles, including 1 already mentioned. 5 support the discussion with a reference or a direct quote, though none (of the immediate references or quotes) cite figures associated with the traditions of critical political theory informing this article. Nonetheless, the term is sometimes used in a suggestive way that resonates with critical theoretical work on political ontology, as in Dahlgren’s (2005) expression of doubt about the suggestion that online culture will lead to an “ontological transformation” in the condition of political discourse. The term also appears in a review essay by Margaret Scammell (2004), in the form of a direct quote from Barrie Axford about “the faltering universalist project in an era of ontological uncertainties” (502). Of our final 3 results (from the total figure of 29 results for “ontolog*”), one (the aforementioned Ryle article) uses the adverb “ontologically” once. The other two are taken from a review of a book, *Museum Politics*, which uses the term “ontologues” as a noun in a way that speaks to our argument. In a play on the French word for “ontologist”, the review notes how the book’s author uses ontologues to signify how museums ‘presen[t]

us with apparently objective “givens” that belie their selective, positioned political agendas’ (MacDonald, 2004).

Political communication and “the political”

When the exact phrase “the political” is cited in our corpus, most of the time “political” functions as an adjective as part of extended noun phrases like “the political context”. To demarcate the small number of cases where the phrase functions as a stand-alone noun, both authors manually (and independently) examined the full list of concordance results of 3,371 citations of the phrase. The task was made easier by Sketch Engine’s presentation of concordance results in alphabetical order, based on the word to the right of the search term.

We identified 44 uses of the signifier “the political” as a stand-alone noun, and a further 4 citations of the hyphenated noun “the political-normative”, resulting in a total of 48.³ All uses of the hyphenated term were taken from Baym (2007), and discussed the interactional paradigm attributed to his work earlier. After checking the individual articles in which the basic noun phrase appeared, all but 6 of the citations appeared in pre-2011 articles. This suggests (similar to the ontology results) a disciplinary identity that did not gain enthusiasm for critical interpretivist vocabularies over the sample period. 17 results are taken directly from the titles of books or articles, including two that equate “the political” with “the personal”. 9 cite texts explicitly theorizing the political, including: 5 references to Seyla Benhabib’s 1996 edited volume, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*; two references to Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott’s 1992 edited volume *Feminists Theorize the Political*; and single references to Mouffe’s *The Return of the Political*, and an edited volume called *Revisioning the Political*. 5 cite a book titled *Blogging the Political*, which, on inspection, does not use the term in a self-consciously theoretical way. There is also one citation (Kreiss et al.,

2018) of a 2015 article from the *Journal of Communication* titled “Dual Screening the Political” that does not cite the explicit term in the rest of the article (Vaccari et al., 2015).

The other 27 uses of “the political” are a mix of brief theoretical references and generic citations of the term unsupported by references. The term is sometimes invoked through direct connections to the critical theoretical tradition informing our argument here. For instance, Dahlgren (2005) cites Mouffe to argue “that the political is an irreducible dimension of all social relations” (p. 157) and that “[t]he political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed” (p. 158). Similarly, Cammaerts and Audenhove (2005) cite Mouffe to discuss the transformative possibility of an “unbounded” and transnational notion of citizenship, where a particular ethical stance “gets translated into the political”. What is more common are taken-for-granted uses of the term that do not cite any explicit theoretical sources, but which hint at the term’s potential complexity. For example, in an article that invoked the stand-alone phrase 4 times (the most in the corpus), Roudakova (2009) refers to “the political” with quote marks in one case, as if to implicitly acknowledge that a lot more could be said of the concept. The term is also used as a shorthand to describe research at the heart of the discipline, as illustrated when Swanson (2000) cites a well-known article by Blumler and Gurevitch to underline how “the old boundaries between the political and the nonpolitical fade in the face of new issues and power centers” (p. 410).

Two other illustrations are worth considering more closely, because of how they illustrate the normalized workings of the disciplinary imaginary. The term is used in two different articles by the distinguished political communication and journalism studies scholar, Michael Schudson. He cites the term twice in a 2001 article titled “Politics as Cultural Practice” (Schudson, 2001), in a passage where he reflects on progressive politics in the US:

This raises questions about what kind of a human activity is “the political.” Certainly some of the organizations at the heart of the political are strange sociological beasts, none more than the political party.

Schudson’s uses of scare quotes clearly signals his awareness that the notion of “the political” is not straightforward, but no explicit line of argument is developed based on the concept. The term appears in a second Schudson article six years later:

But what is politics? What counts as politics in the American press? What topics migrate in, or out, of the political? (Schudson, 2007).

The term is again not the focus of explicit theoretical reflection, even if the article title (“The Concept of Politics in Contemporary U.S. Journalism”) signals a clear alertness to topics that offer tacit reflections on questions of political ontology. What’s notable in this instance is how Schudson’s use of the term collapses the distinction between “politics” and “the political”, in a fashion markedly different from the insistence of Laclau and Mouffe and others that the question of *how* the social is constituted (i.e. the political) should always be conceptually distinguished from politics’ historically contingent empirical form.

The second illustration relates to the term’s citation in a 2002 review essay by Annabelle Sreberny (2002), an author who otherwise does not feature in the 24-year archive. Sreberny praises a book *Transnational Muslim Politics* by Peter Mandaville as “the most theoretically self-conscious book reviewed here” because it cites, among others, Laclau and Mouffe. Sreberny describes the book’s account of the “the political” as signifying:

....not a set of practices between given actors within specified territories but, rather, ‘a space of interaction situated across and between many territories—interaction which is itself constitutive of new political identities. (Sreberny, 2002)

Sreberny’s enthusiasm for the book’s account of the political does not seem to have been shared by other readers of the journal. Neither the book nor Mandaville have been cited in the journal ever since, though the book has received (at the time of writing) 1,133 citations on Google Scholar. Sreberny cites the term a second time with reference to a 1997 book by Gadi Wolfsfeld, *Media and Political Conflict*, which she suggests “best fits the remit of this journal, aiming to ‘put the political [sic] back into political communication’”. Sreberny’s interpretation of the journal’s remit (the spirit of which we can only affirm) reads rather ironically, however. A check of the original Wolfsfeld (1997) reference suggests that the original quote may have been to “put *the politics* [italics added] back into political communication” (p. 3), which would offer a more apt description of the journal when evaluated from the perspective of the theoretical distinction between politics and the political.

Names and theoretical sources

The final part of our empirical analysis examines how authors directly associated with critical theoretical work on “the political”, or authors who have influenced that theoretical tradition, have been cited in the journal archive. This exercise allows us to identify potential cases where the work of authors who have written extensively about the political is cited, but without explicit references to either ontology or the political. To give the findings some comparative context, we first identified the top five authors cited in our sample. Sketch Engine allows us to gauge this quickly by giving a comparison of “keywords” in the *Political Communication*

corpus relative to a general reference corpus, which in this case is *English Web 2020* – a corpus of 38 billion words taken from different online sources. The top keywords include many surnames, so it is reasonable to assume that they represent the authors most cited in the corpus. The same surname could, of course, potentially reference different authors. But based on the most likely associations with the discipline the most cited surnames were [Shanto] Iyengar with 1332 citations, followed by [John] Zaller with 1,010, [James N] Druckman with 884, [Robert] Entman with 679, and [William] Eveland with 639.

To identify authors linked to critical theoretical work on political ontology, we searched for names identified in different book-length sources (Brown, 2019; Marchart, 2018; McNay, 2014). Lois McNay identifies six contemporary figures associated with the ontological turn: Chantal Mouffe, James Tully, William Connolly, Jacques Ranciere, Linda Zerilli and Wendy Brown. Mouffe is cited a comparatively bountiful 25 times, while Laclau is cited only 4 times, 2 of which are reference entries. The Canadian political philosopher Tully is cited only once, again in the references. None of the other 4 figures are cited. The absence of any references to the American political theorist William Connolly seems particularly striking, as he has been engaging with mainstream political science and political theory, including the language of pluralism (Connolly, 2005), since the 1960s. The absence of any references to Wendy Brown (2019) seems symptomatic of a post-political sensibility, given her work on neoliberalism's place as the dominant political ideology of the last 40 years, an ideology which she defines by its explicit aversion to the political (see also Phelan, 2014).

A second useful source for identifying relevant theoretical sources, beyond the contemporary focus of McNay's book, is Brown's own 2019 book. Along with noting Laclau and Mouffe, she identifies five other authors as inspirations for work on the political: Carl Schmitt, Hannah

Arendt, Claude Lefort, Paul Ricoeur, and Sheldon Wolin⁴. As we might expect, given the scope of her intellectual influence, Hannah Arendt is cited in the corpus on 35 occasions. Paul Ricoeur is not cited, though the name “Ricoeur” is tagged to four articles published in the pre-sample period. Claude Lefort is only cited once in a single article (Kaplan, 2006), while the American political theorist Sheldon Wolin is not cited at all. The name Schmitt appears 61 times in our corpus, none of which seem to reference Carl Schmitt. Interestingly, if we go beyond the 24-year timeframe of our sample, Schmitt’s “political theology” was the explicit focus of a theoretical article published in the journal in 1992, illustrating how different editorial regimes shape the disciplinary imaginary. Another author not cited in our corpus, but who was also cited in at least two articles in the pre-sample period was Martin Heidegger. There may be good moral and political reasons for not citing either Schmitt or Heidegger in a political communication journal, given their affiliations to the Nazi party. Nonetheless, their invisibility offers further evidence of the comparative narrowness of the philosophical and theoretical sources underpinning the political communication literature. The non-citation of Heidegger in our corpus is noteworthy, given his influence on different critical theory traditions, including work on the political (see Marchart, 2018; Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Our overview of theoretical sources is necessarily selective, and it would be a mistake to conclude that the journal is blanketly hostile to critical theoretical work that invites tacit reflection on questions of political ontology. For example, two authors cited extensively in the corpus are Habermas (386 citations) and Bourdieu (240 citations). We might also note the disciplinary influence of foundational figures like (Murray) Edelman (106 citations), whose work on political spectacle took inspiration from figures like Foucault (38 citations), Baudrillard (8 citations) and Derrida (5 citations) (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Nonetheless, the relative invisibility of authors aligned with critical work on political ontology is replicated in

the seemingly low uptake of communication theory literature that talks about the implications of ontological differences. For example, two of the articles that informed our earlier discussion of paradigmatic differences in the political communication literature are never cited in the corpus – either Anderson and Baym (2004) or Baym (2016) – while even Thomas Kuhn’s landmark 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (the book that made “paradigm” a keyword of social scientific discourse) is only cited in a single article (Peters, 2001). What’s more, even widely cited articles highlighting the heterogeneity of the general field of communication theory go uncited in the corpus (e.g. Craig, 1999).

Locating “the political” in the journal *Political Communication*

Before we clarify the implications of our empirical analysis, we first need to acknowledge its limitations. This article has not presented, nor has it tried to present, a detailed corpus analysis of what’s in the *Political Communication* archive of 6.8 million words. We have focused instead on the simple task of tracking how the signifiers ontology and the political have featured in the journal, and interpreted their marginal visibility and casual usage, along with the low citation of authors linked to these terms, as symptoms of the boundary markers of political communication’s dominant disciplinary identity. Focusing on how specific signifiers are *explicitly* used is a clear limitation of our analysis, and the topic could be empirically explored from other angles, including by potentially extending the inquiry to other journals that publish political communication research. Some of the richest discussion of de facto ontological disagreements in political communication research can take place without any talk about ontology, as in debates about the relative place of structure and agency (Corner & Robinson, 2006; Street, 2005) and it would not be hard to cite examples of such theoretical reflection in the journal archive. Moreover, the simple act of invoking terms like ontology or the political offers no guarantee of theoretical and intellectual insight. It is not hard to find examples of

ontology-talk across the social sciences and humanities that are vague, waffly or mystifying. There is also nothing inherently emancipatory about ontological reflection, as the notorious case of Heidegger exemplifies.

Nonetheless, the evidence presented here clearly supports the conjectural argument we outlined in the introduction: that you will not find much explicit reflections about the political or the ontological implications of politics in *Political Communication*, and when these terms are cited the references are usually cursory. These absences are predictable. They fit with everything we already know about the dominant disciplinary identity of political communication, especially in its positivist and empiricist iterations. However, the obviousness of our findings should not obscure a sedimented scholarly reality that is far from trivial, in shaping hegemonic disciplinary understandings of what constitutes meaningful, good, or “interesting” (Goyanes, 2020) political communication research. Indeed, this obviousness might be regarded as the very target of our desire to “reactivate” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) the question of what political communication is and what it could be.

From a more speculative theoretical perspective, explaining the discursive silences and absences in our corpus is no mystery, for they point to the logic of the dominant disciplinary identity in action. It might even be suggested that there is nothing exceptional about that identity, given Kuhn’s (2012) account of the professional strictures and imperatives that regulate the paradigmatic operation of normal science. “When the individual scientist can take a paradigm [or “set of paradigms”] for granted”, Kuhn (2012) suggests that “he[sic] need no longer...attempt to build his [sic] field anew, starting from first principles and justifying the use of each concept introduced” (p. 138). Not having to think about ontological questions becomes, in effect, an enabling condition of normal science: a symptom of an (official) anti-

metaphysical disposition that normally does not “aim to invent new theories” or, in a more reactionary idiom, is “often intolerant of those invented by others” (146). Accordingly, it does not seem particularly contentious to argue that the editorial identity articulated by *Political Communication* under para-textual headings such as journal “aims and scope” and “instructions for authors” privileges a specific scholarly habitus (Bourdieu, 2000), a specific mode of theorizing and specific forms of politics that are tendentially (albeit never exclusively) liberal democratic and Western-centric in their assumptions. This disciplinary identity is socially reproduced and institutionally embodied in different contexts and gatekeeping practices – in the teaching of courses in political communication; in decisions about who is hired as a political communication scholar; in the performative register of political communication conference panels; in determinations of what constitutes a meaningful and valuable contribution to “the literature”; in peer reviewer judgements about what concepts need unpacking and what concepts can be taken-for-granted; in the media appearances of political communication scholars; in the shorthand narratives and typologies of textbooks that function as “pedagogic vehicles” (Kuhn, 2012) for maintaining disciplinary order; in conversations between doctoral advisors and their graduate students; in the reproduction of naturalized and reified categories of analysis that elide their political valences (Marchart, 2018; Riley, 2022); and in a rationalist, objectivist and masculinist mode of scholarly being (Love, 2017) that obscures the antagonistic, exclusionary, affective and visceral dynamics of knowledge production (Connolly, 2005; Demeter, 2020; Marchart, 2018); It is a disciplinary universe where methodological rigour is consecrated as the supreme virtue of “good” research, and where work done in a more overtly conceptual, philosophical or normative register (Peters, 2001) is regarded more warily. Periodic affirmations of the value of qualitative methods articulate a welcome ethos of methodological pluralism in what has been a primarily quantitative research field (Bucy, 2016), shaped by a general tendency to equate “empirical research” with

quantitative methods (Goyanes, 2020) and the revelatory power of statistical abstractions (Peters, 2001). However, we do not think that the lack of *theoretical* pluralism in political communication research can be adequately grasped or addressed through a simple valorization of qualitative methods. On the contrary, we think that the preoccupation “with questions of methodology as the source and guarantee of rigour” (Grossberg, 2010, p. 52) is a defining feature of a disciplinary habitus that devalues other ways of thinking about the theoretical, philosophical and political underpinnings of political communication research.

How might we therefore answer the provocation posed in our title: where is ‘the political’ in the journal *Political Communication*? Well, if we treat that question as a shorthand for scholarly engagement with the kind of critical theoretical perspectives lauded here, we can say that the concept is largely invisible, or at best articulated in a tacit and taken-for-granted way that can be taken-for-granted because of the normalization of a disciplinary imaginary that does not accord much theoretical value to talking about the political or ontology. Put another way, we can suggest that the bracketing of the political reflects a disciplinary universe that focuses its analytical attention on sedimented understandings of political conflict and is generally suspicious of the kind of philosophical and political reflections on political conflict and subjectivity that are valorized in discussions of political ontology. The cumulative effect is a disciplinary imaginary that normalizes a constrictive notion of both disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. Some disciplinary insiders could conceivably justify the status quo on the grounds that affirming theoretical pluralism and diversity “does not necessarily help [us] to come up with a coherent description and explanation” of communication processes (Donsbach, 2006, p. 440). However, others might potentially take a different view, especially in light of calls to rethink political communication in a mediated political atmosphere where many of the assumptions of the functionalist paradigm “no longer...hold up.”⁵ (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p.

246). We contend that some of that rethinking should take the form of greater openness to thinking about the ontological condition of politics and political communication, as part of clarifying of how the field might better understand the “being” of its objects of study.

Our argument should not be construed as suggesting that embracing ontology-talk offers a singular path to human emancipation and enlightenment. Lois McNay (2014) has written well about how the search for the meaning of “the political” can potentially become its own dead-end, at least when it cultivates an abstracted mode of scholastic analysis that speaks over concrete social experiences. Figures associated with the ontological turn (including Laclau and Mouffe) have sometimes been dismissive of “merely” sociological, empirical and epistemologically-centred forms of analysis – as if the effort to systematically describe and explain the contours of the existing social order involves a capitulation to its imperatives; as if it means succumbing to a naturalized attitude that can see no other universe but the terrain of “the given” (McNay, 2014). This kind of argument might sometimes be justified polemically, particularly when confronting reactionary forms of positivism and scienticism. However, it is not a tenable ethos if we want to pluralize political communication research in an agonistic way that acknowledges the contestable underpinnings of all theoretical approaches, including our own (Connolly, 2005). In making the argument for a theoretical perspective alert to ontological questions, we therefore do not wish to dismiss the value of existing approaches, including work aligned to the functionalist paradigm and work published in *Political Communication*. To call into question the discipline’s preoccupation with a certain image of scholarly virtue is not to make it a vice. Instead, our objective has been to renew critical focus on the hegemonic authority of the dominant disciplinary identity in prefabricating, delimiting and depoliticizing how political communication research is done, theorized and imagined.

Conclusion: “the political” and communication studies

This article offered a novel critical theoretical perspective on old questions (Peters, 2001) about the theoretically conservative underpinnings of political communication research. We showed how explicit talk about ontological questions, including the question of the political, is a marginal topic in a 24-year corpus of articles from *Political Communication*, and that many of the thinkers who have produced illuminating discussions of these topics are invisible in the journal archive. Our empirical findings are not surprising, particularly given the journal’s established editorial identity. But rather than treating that lack of surprise as the barometer of some naturalized and eternalized disciplinary order that should simply be accepted, we sought to reactivate (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) the question of how political communication might be imagined as a field of study. The argumentative rationale can be redescribed through the motif of a recent special issue of the *Journal of Communication* (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Lee, 2020). Instead of reinscribing communication studies’ naturalized geography of elaborate sub-field divisions (where discussions of the political find their “natural” home in the cultural studies division), we attempted to speak across the differences between political communication’s hegemonic disciplinary identity and an expansive understanding of the politics of communication that would engage with the kind of theoretical perspectives valorized here.

We will end by signposting the potential implications of our argument for how we might critically evaluate the “wildly heterogenous” (Calhoun, 2011) underpinnings of communication research, in ways that incorporate, but also transcend, our specific focus on political communication. The main benefit of the discourse theoretical ontological perspective informing our argument is that it cultivates an interpretive sensitivity to the ineluctable gap

between how identities are contextually articulated, phenomenologically experienced and naturalized, and how they might be *potentially* articulated, or perhaps even dissolved completely. The same point applies to how disciplinary and sub-field identities are articulated across the entire disciplinary universe of communication studies. How boundaries are drawn, reified and institutionalized between one sub-field and another can be conceptualized as a latent horizon of the political that can be obscured by the naturalized common-sense distinctions that regulate the habitual organisation of the disciplinary imaginary and the imperatives of normal science. We might also develop the argument by considering the politics of communication from a wider disciplinary frame. We might think about how work done in sub-fields like “organizational communication”, “intercultural communication”, “health communication”, “environmental communication”, or “race and ethnicity studies”, might also offer rich insights about the intersection of politics and communication, based on conceptions of the political that usually go unarticulated under the explicit heading of political communication research.

Recent reflections about the “post-disciplinary” (Waisbord, 2019) status of communication studies might make this article’s concern with disciplinary policing seem antiquated, as if we are exaggerating the power of repressive boundaries in a porous research field where just about everything and anything can be framed as communication research. However, the institutional grip and authority of disciplinary logics in communication studies has always been potent and effective at the level of the sub-field (Peters, 1986), and we think this paper offers a vivid illustration of the enduring consequences of that truth. The notion of disciplinarity should not be opposed unthinkingly to the notion of interdisciplinarity, for many political communication researchers aligned to the dominant disciplinary identity valorize an interdisciplinarity credo. However, the now banal affirmation of interdisciplinarity (and not just in political communication) can conceal as much as it illuminates, and it surely cannot be read as simple

proof of a researcher's theoretical pluralism. The theoretical distance between how a positivist-inclined social psychologist, marketing researcher, data scientist or political scientist would research political communication questions is considerably less than how a communication researcher working with post-foundational approaches might study political communication. The argument presented here has pointed to another way of thinking about the interdisciplinary pairing of the signifiers "political" and "communication", in the form of engagement with critical theoretical perspectives that would challenge political communication's dominant (inter)disciplinary identity.

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Data availability statement

The data presented in this article are based on a corpus of journal articles that cannot be shared for copyright reasons, but anyone with library access to the journal will be able to verify the data.

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¹ For further discussion of these terms, see Glynn and Howarth (2007) and Marchart (2007; 2018).

² Since the question was asked by one of our reviews, we should state that no earlier version of this article was submitted to *Political Communication*.

³ After clarifying differences in our initial searches, we identified a total of 45 results for “the political”. On closer inspection, one used “political” as an adjective, while a second included the start of a book review already counted in a different file. That left us with 43 results. But we ended up with 44 after spotting another use of the noun phrase in Benson (2004) that was missed by Sketch Engine because the word political was used in quote marks. Baym’s use of the phrase “the political-normative” was the only example of the hyphenated noun form.

⁴ Brown (2019) also describes the concept of the political as “spurred by” (55) the work of Max Weber.