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Nwokeocha's PAARA Model of Political Communication: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Nwokeocha's PAARA Model of Political Communication is a conceptual framework developed to explain how political messages move from exposure to political action. The model consists of five sequential communication processes—Presentation, Attention, Assimilation, Recall/Non-recall, and Action—organized within three broader stages: awareness, cognition, and behavioural/conative response. This paper critically analyses the conceptual logic, explanatory value, strengths and limitations of the model and clarifies its distinction from established communication models. Unlike broad transmission models that primarily identify communicators, messages, channels, receivers and effects, PAARA specifies intervening audience processes through which a political message may progress toward an observable response. The awareness stage comprises Presentation and Attention; the cognitive stage comprises Assimilation and Recall/Non-recall; and the behavioural/conative stage culminates in Action. The model therefore conceptualizes political communication as a progression in which message exposure does not automatically produce action: attention is required, assimilation must occur, retention may or may not be achieved, and action represents the behavioural outcome. The analysis identifies the model's principal contribution as its attempt to connect political message exposure with audience cognition and political behaviour in a single parsimonious framework. At the same time, the original linear formulation requires qualification because contemporary political communication is interactive, mediated by social context, predispositions, competing messages, feedback and digital network structures. The paper consequently proposes that the original PAARA architecture be retained while future empirical applications examine contextual moderators, feedback and non-linear pathways. The paper concludes that PAARA has potential as a heuristic framework for analysing political campaign communication, political advertising, political journalism and other forms of strategic political messaging, subject to empirical validation.

Keywords: PAARA Model; political communication; political messages; attention; assimilation; recall; political action

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INTRODUCTION

Political communication occupies a central position in democratic life because it connects political actors, media institutions and citizens through the production, circulation, interpretation and contestation of political messages. Political parties, candidates, governments, journalists, civil society organizations and citizens continuously communicate about political issues, leadership, public policy and electoral choices. The effectiveness of such communication cannot, however, be reduced to the mere transmission of a message. A political message may be presented to an audience without receiving attention; it may attract attention without being adequately assimilated; and information that is assimilated may subsequently be recalled or forgotten. Consequently, the relationship between political communication and political behaviour requires attention to the processes that intervene between message exposure and action.

Existing communication models have made major contributions to the understanding of message transmission and effects. Lasswell's formulation directs

attention to the communicator, message, channel, audience and effect, while Shannon and Weaver conceptualized communication as a transmission process involving encoding, channel, decoding and noise. Other perspectives have shifted attention toward agenda formation, framing, interpersonal influence, audience motivations and cognitive processing. These traditions provide important foundations, but they do not all offer the same level of specificity concerning the sequence through which a political message may move from presentation to attention, cognitive processing, memory and action.

Nwokeocha's (2022) PAARA Model was developed against this conceptual background. The model proposes five core processes: Presentation, Attention, Assimilation, Recall/Non-recall and Action. These processes are organized into three broader stages—awareness, cognition and behavioural/conative response. The model is intended to explain the progression of a political message through audience processing rather than merely describe the structural components of communication. This distinction is important because the model treats communication

effectiveness as contingent upon movement through several stages rather than assuming that message exposure directly produces behavioural consequences.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to critically analyse the PAARA Model, clarify its original conceptual architecture, locate it within the wider field of political communication, examine its strengths and limitations, and identify directions for theoretical and empirical development. The paper is conceptual and library-based, drawing on the original formulation of the model and relevant literature on political communication, information processing, persuasion and communication effects.

METHOD

This study adopts a conceptual and library research approach. The analysis is based primarily on the original formulation of Nwokeocha's (2022) PAARA Model and relevant scholarly literature on political communication and communication effects. Sources include books, journal articles and established theoretical works relevant to communication models, political information processing, framing, agenda setting, interpersonal influence and behavioural effects. The approach is appropriate for a theoretical article because the principal task is to clarify constructs, examine relationships among them, compare the model with existing frameworks and identify propositions for subsequent empirical testing.

Conceptual Background: Political Communication

Political communication may be understood as the purposeful production, transmission, interpretation and contestation of messages concerning political actors, institutions, issues, policies and public affairs. It involves communication among political actors, media organizations and citizens and operates through both traditional and digital channels. McNair (2017) emphasizes the political significance of communication in the presentation of political actors and issues, while contemporary scholarship highlights the hybrid and networked character of political communication.

The strategic character of political communication is particularly relevant to the PAARA Model. Political actors ordinarily design messages with intended outcomes: to inform, persuade, mobilize, defend, attack, legitimate, frame an issue or encourage participation. However, intention on the part of the communicator does not guarantee reception or behavioural compliance. The audience interprets messages through existing knowledge, values, identities, political predispositions and social environments. Research on political information processing similarly demonstrates that attention, interpretation and memory can shape how political information influences evaluations and behaviour.

Political communication has also become increasingly interactive. Digital platforms enable audiences to comment, share, remix and contest messages while political actors can modify messages in response to audience reactions. Recent scholarship conceptualizes social-media political participation as a distinct mode of participation shaped by networked affordances, while empirical work shows that different platforms and discussion networks can have different relationships with online and offline participation (Durotoye *et al.*, 2025; Waeterloos, 2025).

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

Lasswell's Model

Lasswell's (1948) well-known formulation—who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect—provides a broad analytical structure for examining political communication. It directs attention to the communicator, message, medium, audience and outcome. PAARA shares an interest in communication effects but provides greater specificity about audience processes between exposure and action.

Shannon-Weaver Model

Shannon and Weaver (1949) conceptualized communication as a transmission process involving source, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver and noise. Its major contribution lies in explaining the conditions under which a message can be transmitted accurately. PAARA is less concerned with technical transmission and more concerned with what happens to a political message after it encounters an audience.

Agenda-Setting and Framing

Agenda-setting theory explains how the prominence of issues in media communication can influence what audiences regard as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing theory, particularly as developed by Entman (1993), draws attention to the selection and salience of aspects of reality in communication. Both perspectives can operate upstream of PAARA: agenda setting and framing can shape the political messages that are presented and the manner in which they attract attention and are interpreted.

Political Information Processing

Information-processing approaches are especially relevant to PAARA because they direct attention to the cognitive processes linking exposure to political judgments. Contemporary political-psychology research distinguishes effortful and automatic modes of political information processing and emphasizes the roles of motivation, emotion, prior beliefs and misinformation in encoding, storage, retrieval and decision-making (Jerit & Kam, 2023).

Nwokeocha's PAARA Model of Political Communication

Nwokeocha's (2022) PAARA Model consists of five core processes: Presentation, Attention,

Assimilation, Recall/Non-recall and Action. The acronym PAARA is derived from the initial letters of these five processes. The five processes are not intended to constitute five independent models; rather, they describe a progression through which a political message may move from initial presentation toward behavioural or conative response.

The Three Stages of the Model

The five PAARA processes are grouped into three broader stages. The first is the awareness stage, represented by Presentation and Attention. The second is the cognitive stage, represented by Assimilation and Recall/Non-recall. The third is the behavioural/conative stage, represented by Action.

Awareness Stage: Presentation → Attention. The process begins with Presentation, meaning that a political message is made available to an audience through a communication channel. Presentation may take the form of a political speech, campaign poster, political advertisement, radio or television broadcast, newspaper report, social-media post, political debate or other political communication. Presentation creates the opportunity for reception but does not guarantee attention.

Attention is the audience's orientation toward the presented political message. In a media environment characterized by information abundance, competing stimuli and selective exposure, political messages must attract sufficient attention to progress through subsequent stages. A presented message that is ignored, missed or filtered out may not enter meaningful cognitive processing.

Cognitive Stage: Assimilation → Recall/Non-recall. Assimilation refers to the audience's processing and internalization of the political message. At this point, the audience does more than merely notice the message; it interprets and integrates the information into its existing cognitive structure. Assimilation may be facilitated or constrained by prior knowledge, political predispositions, relevance, message clarity, credibility and social context.

Recall/Non-recall recognizes that a political message may subsequently be remembered or not remembered. Recall is therefore not assumed to be automatic. A message may receive attention and undergo some degree of assimilation but fail to remain accessible in memory. Conversely, salient, repeated or meaningful messages may be more readily recalled. The explicit inclusion of non-recall is important because absence of memory can interrupt the progression toward action.

Behavioural/Conative Stage: Action. Action represents the behavioural or conative outcome of the communication process. In political communication, action may include voting, attending a political meeting, supporting a candidate, sharing a political message, donating, joining a campaign, contacting a representative or engaging in another politically relevant activity. The model does not imply that every political message must produce action; rather, action represents the terminal outcome when the preceding processes and relevant conditions converge.

Conceptual Representation of the Model

The corrected architecture of the original PAARA Model can be represented as follows:

POLITICAL MESSAGE
↓
AWARENESS STAGE
Presentation → Attention
↓
COGNITIVE STAGE
Assimilation → Recall / Non-recall
↓
BEHAVIOURAL / CONATIVE STAGE
Action

The model should be read as a conceptual sequence rather than as a claim that every instance of political communication follows an absolutely deterministic path. The analytical value of the sequence lies in identifying points at which communication effectiveness can be strengthened, weakened or interrupted.

Interpretation of the Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 preserves the original PAARA architecture while making its three-stage structure explicit. The upper contextual band represents factors that can condition movement through the sequence, including the political environment, media environment, audience characteristics, social influence and cultural context. These are treated as contextual moderators rather than additional PAARA components. The feedback path reflects the interactive character of contemporary political communication and is deliberately presented outside the original acronym so that the historical formulation of the model remains intact. This distinction is important for theoretical fidelity: the revised framework extends the analytical environment around PAARA without silently redefining PAARA itself. The arrangement is consistent with contemporary research showing that political information processing occurs in complex media environments and that participation can emerge through networked and platform-specific forms of engagement (Jerit & Kam, 2023; Steinfeld & Lev-on, 2024; Waeterloos, 2025).

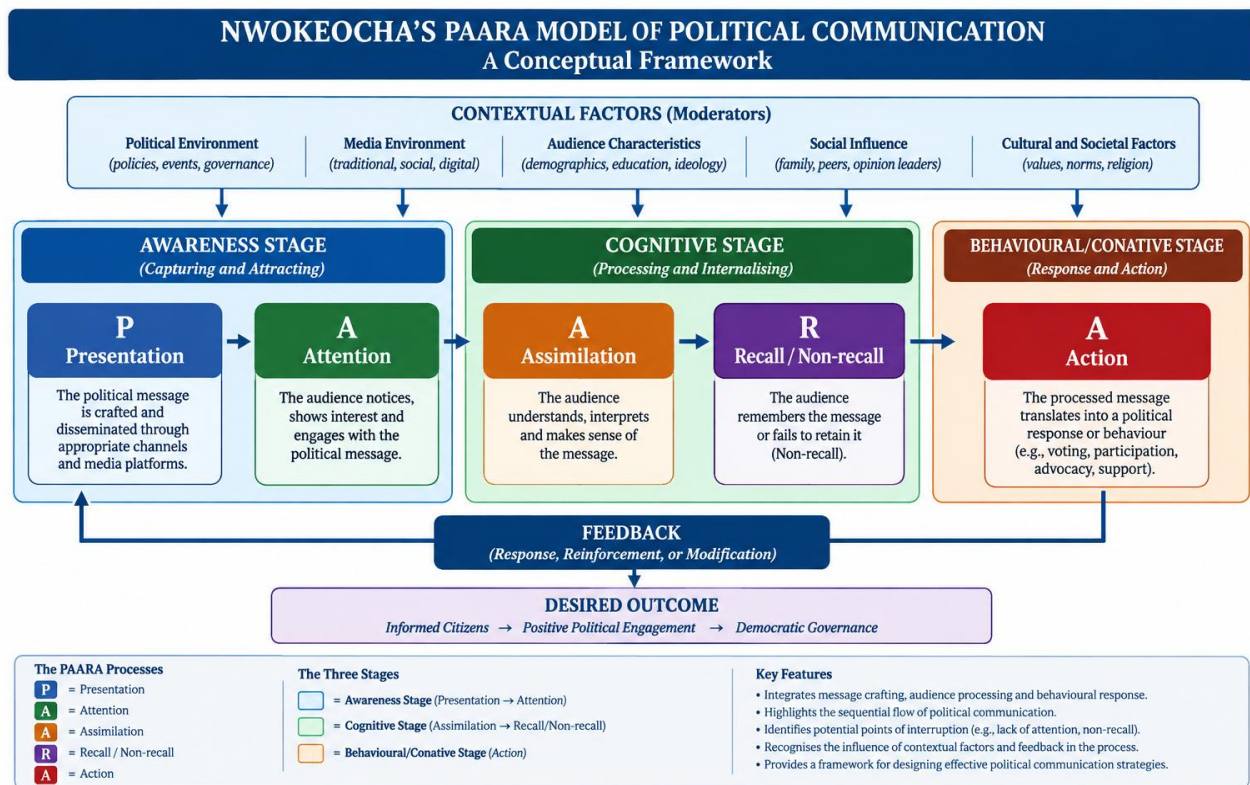


Figure 1: Nwokeocha's PAARA Model of Political Communication
(Presentation → Attention → Assimilation → Recall/Non-recall → Action)

Figure 1: Nwokeocha's PAARA Model of Political Communication: Presentation → Attention → Assimilation → Recall/Non-recall → Action

Note. The five PAARA processes are grouped into three broader stages: awareness (Presentation and Attention), cognition (Assimilation and Recall/Non-recall), and behavioural/conative response (Action). Contextual factors and feedback are shown as surrounding influences in the conceptual framework; they do not alter the original five-part PAARA acronym.

Critical Analysis of the PAARA Model

Presentation

Presentation is the initiating process in PAARA. It recognizes that political communication requires the availability of a message to an audience. The process includes message construction and dissemination through selected channels. Message presentation is influenced by such factors as language, format, source visibility, channel characteristics and the broader media environment.

Attention

Attention constitutes the first major audience filter. The existence of a political message does not establish that an audience member has attended to it. Political communication competes with numerous other messages and stimuli, making attention a critical condition for subsequent processing. Research on political media use supports the importance of attention and cognitive orientation in the processing of campaign information.

Assimilation

Assimilation is the principal cognitive-processing component of PAARA. It concerns how audiences interpret and integrate political information. Assimilation may involve comprehension, evaluation, comparison with existing knowledge and incorporation into an existing belief structure. The concept therefore creates an important bridge between exposure and memory.

Recall/Non-recall

The inclusion of recall/non-recall is a distinctive feature of the model. It acknowledges that communication effects can be constrained by memory. Recall may support later evaluation and action, whereas non-recall may interrupt the sequence. Importantly, recall should not be treated as equivalent to agreement. An individual can remember a political message without accepting it, and may act despite limited recall because of other social, emotional or contextual influences.

Action

Political action can be immediate or delayed and may range from low-cost digital participation to consequential electoral behaviour. Recent scholarship treats social-media political participation as a distinct form of networked participation, while empirical research continues to document links among information

acquisition, expression, partisan identity and participation (Waeterloos, 2025; Wang *et al.*, 2024).

Strengths of the PAARA Model

First, PAARA provides conceptual parsimony. Five clearly named processes can be remembered and applied without requiring a large number of independent constructs. Second, the model connects message presentation with audience cognition and behaviour. Third, it identifies attention and memory as intervening processes rather than treating effects as automatic consequences of exposure. Fourth, the three-stage architecture provides a useful distinction between awareness, cognition and behaviour. Fifth, the model is potentially applicable to political advertising, campaign communication, political journalism, civic education and digital political communication.

Another strength is its potential for empirical operationalization. Each component can be translated into measurable indicators: exposure/presentation, attention, assimilation or comprehension, recall/non-recall, and political action. This makes the model suitable for future survey, experimental or mixed-method research, provided researchers define each construct carefully.

Limitations and Critical Issues

The principal limitation of the original formulation is its linear appearance. Contemporary political communication is often recursive and interactive. Audiences respond to political messages, responses become new messages, and political actors modify subsequent communication. Therefore, the sequence should be treated as an analytical pathway rather than a deterministic law.

Recent evidence further suggests that contemporary media environments expose citizens to political information through combinations of interpersonal, traditional and digital sources, meaning that audience processing occurs within heterogeneous media ecologies rather than a single channel (Steinfeld & Lev-on, 2024).

Third, action does not necessarily depend exclusively on recall. Political behaviour can be driven by habit, identity, social pressure, emotion, organizational mobilization or perceived norms. Consequently, PAARA should not be interpreted as claiming that recall is a necessary and sufficient cause of action in every political context.

Fourth, the model requires empirical validation. As the original formulation is conceptual, its constructs and predicted relationships need to be tested across different political settings, media channels and audience groups. Future research should determine whether the proposed sequence is supported statistically and whether some pathways are stronger than others.

Comparison with Selected Communication Models

PAARA differs from Lasswell's model primarily in its focus. Lasswell identifies major structural elements and asks what effect communication produces; PAARA specifies a proposed pathway through which an audience may move toward action. Compared with Shannon-Weaver, PAARA is less concerned with transmission accuracy and technical noise and more concerned with audience cognition and behavioural outcome.

Agenda-setting and framing are also complementary rather than necessarily competing explanations. Agenda setting helps explain issue salience, while framing helps explain how political information is presented and interpreted. These processes can influence Presentation, Attention and Assimilation within PAARA. The two-step flow perspective similarly highlights interpersonal and network influences that may intervene between presentation and individual action.

PAARA's distinctive contribution is therefore best understood as integrative and process-oriented. It attempts to place several audience-level processes into a single pathway from political message presentation to action. Its value should not be claimed as replacing established theories; rather, it offers a heuristic structure that can be connected to them and empirically tested.

Theoretical Contribution and Propositions for Future Testing

The model can generate testable propositions without claiming that the propositions have already been empirically established.

- Proposition 1: Greater exposure and effective presentation of a political message increase the probability of audience attention, subject to competing stimuli and audience characteristics.
- Proposition 2: Higher levels of attention increase the probability of meaningful assimilation of a political message.
- Proposition 3: Greater assimilation increases the probability of subsequent recall of the political message.
- Proposition 4: Recall of a political message increases the probability of political action when the message is relevant to the audience and other enabling conditions are present.
- Proposition 5: Political predispositions, social context, message credibility and media environment moderate the relationships among the PAARA stages.
- Proposition 6: Non-recall can interrupt the proposed progression between cognitive processing and subsequent political action, although action may still occur through alternative motivational or social pathways.

Implications for Political Communication Practice

For political communicators, the model implies that producing a message is only the beginning of effective communication. Messages should be designed to gain attention, facilitate comprehension and assimilation, support retention and provide clear pathways to legitimate political participation. For political journalists and civic educators, the model also emphasizes the importance of clarity and audience comprehension rather than assuming that publication alone produces knowledge.

In digital environments, communicators should recognize that audiences can immediately respond, contest and redistribute political messages. This means that PAARA can be applied as an analytical sequence while allowing feedback and network interaction to operate around it.

CONCLUSION

Nwokeocha's PAARA Model provides a concise conceptual framework for explaining how political communication may progress from message presentation to political action. Its five processes—Presentation, Attention, Assimilation, Recall/Non-recall and Action—are organized into three broader stages: awareness, cognition and behavioural/conative response. This corrected formulation should constitute the authoritative architecture of the model.

The principal value of PAARA lies in making the intervening audience processes visible. It recognizes that political communication does not automatically translate from exposure into behaviour. Attention must occur, information must be assimilated, memory may be retained or lost, and action may or may not follow. At the same time, the model should not be interpreted deterministically. Political communication is affected by social context, predispositions, competing messages, feedback, emotion and digital interaction.

The next stage in the development of PAARA should therefore be empirical validation. Researchers can operationalize the five components, test relationships among them and examine moderators across different political and media environments. Such empirical work would allow the model to move from a conceptual proposition toward a more robust explanatory framework for political communication.

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