1 Introduction: Why Wisconsin?

During the decade 2010–20, the state of Wisconsin thrust itself into the national spotlight in a way that it had never done before. Wisconsin is historically a politically moderate state with a strong progressive legacy. However, in 2010 the nationwide surge of the Tea Party was felt in Wisconsin, carrying Republican Scott Walker into the governor's office. Immediately upon assuming office, Walker launched a (largely successful) frontal attack on the state's public sector unions via Act 10,[1] which brought national attention from right, left, and center. With this new national public attention, Walker made a bid for the presidency in 2016 that ultimately failed. During Walker's governorship, Wisconsin endured a blistering period of political contentiousness and division: Republicans held control of both the Assembly and Senate, but the state elected Barack Obama as president twice and split its delegation to the US Senate.

Then, in 2016, alongside Pennsylvania and Michigan, Wisconsin shocked the United States by delivering its electoral votes for Donald Trump – the first time it had favored a Republican presidential candidate since Reagan. The elections of 2018 and 2020, in which first Walker and then Trump lost Wisconsin, underscored the state's sharp political division – in the 2020 presidential election, Trump lost by about the same narrow margin (about 23,000 votes) that had delivered him the win four years earlier.

Over the same decade, our research team has been observing Wisconsin, wondering how political life here had become so contentious, so divided, and so chaotic. At the same time, we saw national-level patterns in politics and communication that clearly resembled – and sometimes seemed to follow from – what we had witnessed in Wisconsin. This similarity is produced by larger structural forces that are affecting politics at both state and national levels, and by politicians' and communicators' tendency to observe and learn from events happening elsewhere.

Clearly, state politics matter for national governance. At the national level, rural and conservative states have disproportionate power because of the structure of the Senate and the electoral college. Because these states tend to lean Republican, a very few swing states often shape the outcomes of national elections. State legislatures write laws that affect the nation as a whole: They determine who votes, when, and how long voting will take, and they legislate on criminal justice, taxation, the environment, education, and healthcare. For

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[1] Act 10 was aimed at members of public sector labor unions. The law virtually eliminated collective bargaining rights, limited pay increases, and required union members to pay more for their benefits, effectively reducing their pay by 8 percent.

a long time, states were a backwater in the study of politics, but we have seen a resurgence of interest; recent studies have examined the balance between state and national partisanship (Hopkins, 2018), state legislative activity (Hertel-Fernandez, 2019), the rural–urban divide (Rodden, 2019), changes in federalism (Kettl, 2020), and state political ethnography (Cramer, 2016). However, there have been no systematic efforts to reconstruct state political communication ecologies: the system that binds political actors, the state and local media system, and the local communities where citizens live and form opinion.

The study of political communication within states yields critical insight into growing political partisanship, polarization, and populism. Like other scholars, we believe that political polarization is underpinned by social and civic fracture (Mason, 2018; Mason et al., 2021). These fractures cut across all levels of the polity, from the nation to the state and even to regions of states, particularly in the small-scale relations of urban and rural areas; they are embedded in local social and political life and grounded in the social network patterns that shape the lived experience of citizens. Without understanding how communication and politics interact in the states, it is difficult to assess how nationalized we really are. Wisconsin is a laboratory for the erosion of civil society at scale. As a state, it is large enough to contain every type of social and geographic unit, from large cities to sparse rural areas, but it is also sufficiently bound such that we have been able to analyze political, social, and communicative outcomes across its seventy-two counties (Dempsey et al., 2021; Suk et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2021; Witkovsky, 2021).

Wisconsin is also a continuing laboratory for understanding the conservative, populist revolt in American politics that began in 2010 (Friedland, 2020). The Tea Party-driven victories in Wisconsin were harbingers of both growing conservative control of state governments and the emergence of right-wing populism in American political life (Horwitz, 2013; Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). Wisconsin Republicans held unified control of all three branches of government from 2010 to 2018, exercising outsized political power despite having a sharply divided electorate.

Resentment of both racial minorities and state workers was central to Walker's messaging strategy, mobilizing a deep vein of "rural consciousness" that anticipated Trump's victory (Cramer, 2016). Republicans systematically rewrote the rules of the game of politics, attacking and crippling the Democratic base in public sector and teacher unions (Kaufman, 2018; Stein and Marley, 2013). Republican-controlled redistricting in 2011 led to one of the most extreme gerrymanders in the nation, cementing the "surplus power" necessary for Republicans to pursue an agenda to the right of the Wisconsin electorate

(Daley, 2016; Gilbert, 2018, 2020; Krasno et al., 2019). This eight-year experi-ment unleashed a decade of contention, not only in Wisconsin politics but in everyday social life. Family members and friends stopped talking to each other, sometimes for years (Wells et al., 2017), presaging the fracturing of civil society in the Trump years.

Finally, 2018 brought a Democratic resurgence, driven in part by two years of the Trump administration – and arguably, the previous eight years of right-wing state governance – leading to an almost mirror opposite presidential electoral result in 2020, with Biden winning the state by the same margin that Trump had taken it in 2016 (Gilbert, 2020).

In Wisconsin, we thus have a combination precursor, test bed, and microcosm of what was happening, and would happen, in other states as well as nationally. We ask: What factors explain the highly politically consequential shifts in Wisconsin's opinion climate over the period 2010–20? To begin answering this question, we train our lens on the state-level structures that shape discourse and contribute to forming residents' opinions. Here, we introduce the notion of *political communication ecology* – our term for the interlocked communication structures and economic, social, and political conditions that shape citizens' ideas and opinions about civic or political matters.

First, we describe the set of communication structures and participants who collaborate and compete to shape popular and official interpretations of political issues; and, second, we discuss how the dynamics of social, political, and economic conditions shape citizens' attitudes. Together, these elements provide much of the raw material on which communication processes work (i.e. the subject for interpretation). The concept of political communication ecology is a theoretical framework for interpretation and analysis across these levels.

This Element can only sketch the outlines of our findings from a decade of work. It is, however, a first step toward reconstructing these ecologies on a larger scale. We are interested in a broader, more fundamental question: How do politics, social life, media, and communication intersect to create conditions of polarization, contentiousness, and political upheaval? The study of states and regions can help us understand how national and local political forces combine with news and social media to create civic fracture. While citizens simultaneously live within nations, states, counties, and localities, communication crosscuts and overflows these boundaries. Newspapers are nested in metropolitan regions which intersect with television and radio media markets. Interpersonal networks maintain strong local ties, but social media now connects community-centered networks to state and national politics. Hyperpolarization seeps unevenly through all of these layers and networks; changes in the political economy of media industries and shifts in

communication technology have substantially reshaped the dynamics of civic information networks.

Understanding these fissures – their causes and effects – is a critical first step toward combatting disinformation and rebuilding a functional polity and civil society. To understand the contemporary communication ecology, we must examine all of these layers together and study their interactions. This is a daunting task. Modern political discourse comes from many sources and directions: National elites frame issues via national media and, increasingly, social media; state political elites do the same via local newspapers, TV, and talk radio; and, in communities, citizens talk about their local schools, taxes, roads, and crime, as well as other major issues. Perhaps more difficult is the task of tracking ideas as they circulate through these different and interacting pathways: It is extremely difficult to sort out what political discourses and frames citizens encounter via particular channels. However, this is necessary if we are to understand the dynamics of civic fracture and political polarization so we can begin to address them.

Section 2 sketches our theoretical framework and offers some necessary background on Wisconsin's political communication ecology. Section 3 discusses both our broader methodological strategy of combining qualitative, survey, and computational methods and develops a map of our data and analytical procedures. Sections 4, 5, and 6 focus on case studies of three distinct issues – immigration, healthcare, and economic development, respectively – that demonstrate how political cleavages and party power vary across issues within a single state, shedding light on both nationalization and partisanship. In Section 7, we bring together the dynamics of hybrid, asymmetric communication ecologies, before concluding in Section 8 by analyzing our results and offering a roadmap for our work in the future.

2 Communication Ecologies, Social Structure, and Lifeworld

We study and understand political communication ecology through the lens of Wisconsin: the way that politics, social life, and communication media intersect, and create the current conditions of polarization, contentiousness, and political upheaval.

In recent decades, Wisconsin's communication ecology has undergone seismic shifts. State and local news, especially newspapers, which were once major institutions, have been steadily eroded by corporate decision-making and the rise of the Internet, while others, including talk radio, partisan media, and social media, have grown in prominence. These changes are altering the processes by which citizens learn about public affairs, the media in which they discuss them,

the mechanisms by which campaigns contact potential supporters, and the arenas in which public debates take place. And although our analysis is through a Wisconsin context, similar transformations are occurring across the United States, and indeed around the world. Mapping these processes systematically and in their interrelationships, we argue, is an urgent task for scholars who wish to understand the rapidly changing contexts of political communication.

This Element takes a first step toward this goal by mapping these relations in a single state. We begin in this section by developing our theory of the *political communication ecology*, which encompasses three major elements and their interrelations: the *communication ecology*, made up of the institutions and spaces that foster communication, from the intimacy of interpersonal friend and familial networks to the breadth of news and social media; the *political system*, including parties, elites, and partisanship; and the layer of *social life* that structures community social networks and citizens' everyday experiences in the lifeworld. In what follows, we briefly describe these three components before delving more deeply into the political communication ecology they constitute.

The changing structure of the media system is the subject of ongoing examination within communication research (e.g. Chadwick 2017; Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). This broader theoretical interest in the changing nature of media systems has shaped our communication ecological framework. We attend closely to the contributions of a variety of actors – from journalists, editors, and news-making elites to citizens and activists in social media – and describe layers of flow and interdependence among these communicators. And we examine which communicators, under what conditions, have the capacity to shape public discourse and understanding. We ask the same questions others are asking, but aim to answer them in a more expansive way, accounting for a wider set of relationships and interactions: specifically, between the changing communication ecology and the political and social contexts in which it sits. This more capacious, more integrative perspective is currently only manageable at the level of the single state. We hope to inspire others to do the same in other states and in national regions to build a framework for comparison.

The communication ecology is linked to the political system across a number of axes. One central theme in this Element addresses the growing debate over the nationalization of politics (Hopkins, 2018), testing whether the political orientations of elites and citizens are indeed (as the received wisdom has it) shaped from the top down, springing primarily from elite partisan divisions at a national level and flowing downward through state elites, then onward to activists, and finally trickling down to less politically engaged citizens in their everyday lives. We ask: How well does this pattern hold in the case of a single state, and how does it vary at the state level, both within and across issues?

A second central political theme is party asymmetry – the claim that the two major parties now operate via different democratic and political norms, elite networks, and media ecologies. Most studies of asymmetry have focused on elites and media ecologies at the national level. Here, we advance research in the field by focusing at a more granular level, showing more precisely how political discourses and frames flow across political, communication, and social layers. Our findings support the claim by Benkler et al. (2018) and others that the discourses, which shape everyday political life, reflect the different strategies Republican (symbolic) and Democratic (policy-oriented) elites use when framing issues (Wagner and Gruszczynski, 2016). We incorporate the concept of discursive power, developed by Jungherr et al. (2019), which connects flows of influence and power within and across media systems, but again, we show that there is variation by issue and social location.

The third key political theme of this Element is the effect of social life on political opinion. Political communication analysis has generally not taken account of social life beyond the social and demographic characteristics of individuals. We take two steps in this direction. First, we analyze the socio-geographic and social-structural context that shapes places – regions, communities, neighborhoods (Suk et al., 2020) – as well as social networks (Friedland, 2016), using both qualitative and multilevel analysis. Second, we (re)introduce the concept of the lifeworld to political communication, the everyday experiences that anchor people's place in social life and through which they interpret political and social experience and shape the issue positions that circulate as conventional discourses (Strauss, 2012). Here, we develop an operational framework that incorporates both social-structural and lifeworld perspectives and links them to the communication ecology at local, regional, and state levels.

2.1 Communication Ecology, Media Systems, and Discursive Power

Our theory of a communication ecology is rooted in the assumption that public discussions of political issues, and related public opinions and behaviors, are shaped by the structure and dynamics of the *systems* in which they take place. Such a systems perspective has become increasingly prevalent in the last twenty years, as the digital revolution has diversified and proliferated media forms. Chadwick's (2017) "hybrid media system" is the point of reference for twenty-first century communication scholars thinking of the media space as a system. Chadwick articulated the hybridity of political communication systems, which are neither yet fully "digital" nor any longer defined by the broadcast logics of the twentieth century. His analyses highlighted the growing potential influence of new entrants to political discourse, from networks of bloggers to citizens

armed with the capacities of social media; they also articulated the challenges faced by the political parties and news organizations of the *ancien régime* that struggle to find their footing in the new environment. The movement toward systems thinking in our field has increased our attention to the complexity of contemporary communication environments, which are constituted by: (a) diverse entities (individuals, institutions) with diverse and often conflicting objectives; (b) at multiple levels; (c) interacting with, and in response to, one another; and (d) often producing emergent and nonlinear effects (Page, 2010; Shah et al., 2017).

Central to systems thinking is the question of how power is manifested. To clarify the nature of power within communication systems, Jungherr and colleagues (2019), building on Chadwick's framework, have introduced the notion of "discursive power." Actors can be said to exercise discursive power when they "introduce, amplify, and maintain topics, frames, and speakers that other contributors" then pick up, use, and adopt (p. 409). In other words, the capacity to shape others' interpretations, understandings, and descriptions of political phenomena is a form of political power that operates through communication (Castells, 2007).

Benkler and colleagues (2018) have offered one of the most concretely empirical descriptions of how such power operates within the US national-level political media system. In the context of the 2016 presidential election, they reveal how key actors, located at a variety of points in the system, and working across multiple platforms and modes of media creation (including an array of legacy news organizations and digital-born newcomers), shaped the discourse and news agenda surrounding the candidates. Structurally, they demonstrate that the US political communication system is bifurcated asymmetrically; by 2016, a cluster of strongly right-leaning media (centered on *Breitbart* and *Fox News*) had cleaved off from centrist conventional news, creating a subsystem of its own, while left-leaning media remained strongly tied to centrist news sources. Benkler et al. (2018) present evidence for multiple flows of influence within the larger media system, sometimes in unexpected directions – such as *Breitbart's* apparent influence on mainstream outlets' treatment of information harmful to Hillary Clinton. In Jungherr's (2019) terms, this was a clear exercise of discursive power by the far right, as one set of actors succeeded in setting, to some degree, the terms of the national debate about a key political figure.

2.1.1 The Hybrid Media System: National and Local

The accounts cited above, however, are centered on *national* hybrid media systems, and they focus primarily on the interactions between journalism

and elite political opinion. Our approach to political communication ecology develops and extends these approaches in two ways. First, we stress that the communication ecology is multilayered: Moving vertically, we can identify layers from the national media systems to those in states (in the American context), metro regions, local communities, and neighborhoods, including interpersonal networks and microinteractions. Second, we trace the horizontal communication flows that function differently within each layer, connecting individuals, groups, and networks via news frames and narratives (Friedland, 2001). Given the political and perceptual significance of place (e.g. Cramer, 2016), we suspected that the statewide political communication ecology would be the level at which we could most fruitfully observe the interactions among news media, citizen talk, and individual experience.

The exchanges in the national system have been primarily among political, cultural, and economic elites and the journalists who cover them, setting the boundaries of national or intraparty consensus (Bennett, 2011). We trace a similar set of interchanges that take place at the state, metro, and local levels, with the difference that a broader range of social and community actors has to be taken into account (state and local government, community leaders, citizens) (Anderson, 2013; Kaniss, 1991; Robinson, 2017). We also describe this dynamic as it emerges within communities and neighborhoods, where a rich horizontal flow of communication takes up elite opinion, recognizes what is relevant, circulates it, and translates it into everyday concerns (Friedland, 2014; Matsaganis et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2001).

In this Element, our primary goal is to advance a *theory of political communication ecology*. To illustrate this theory, we apply it to communication about politics in Wisconsin from 2016 through 2018 with the goal of demonstrating how a hybrid political communication ecology works at federal, regional, and local levels. We analytically describe the entities (individuals and groups in communities, as well as parties and their partisan supporters) with diverse political objectives (power, influence, and persuasion) at multiple levels (nation, state, metro-region, and community). We chart and analyze some of these entities' interactions and the flows that pass among them, which cut across multiple media and communication modes (mass, social, interpersonal). We identify emergent effects where we can. But by focusing on the large but bounded domain of a single state, our analysis both demonstrates and points toward even more complex interactions and serves as a preliminary sketch for a more complete and systematic future analysis.

2.1.2 The Political Communication Ecology at the State Level

There are several reasons for attending to communication ecologies at the state level. For one, states continue to exercise formidable political power in critical areas of policymaking, from the regulation of voting and the creation of legislative districts to taxation, education, and criminal justice. Furthermore, discourses developing at state levels can test, mediate, and modify the discourses at play nationally.

Investigating a communication ecology at the state level also allows us to attend more closely to the dynamics of citizens' social lives and media experiences. Historically, American news attention has been strongly locally rooted, and local news continues to make up a central aspect of the average citizen's news diet (Wells et al., 2021). Even after years of local news decline and the increasing nationalization of news coverage, more American households receive a city or state-oriented newspaper than a national one (Barthel, 2019). News outlets have historically been oriented to local concerns (at the level of a city, metro area, or county), with most newspapers explicitly tied to a locale and American broadcast television rooted in local stations, which affiliate with national networks (Usher, 2019).

2.1.3 Nationalization of Politics

We can best explain the nature of statewide communication ecologies by beginning at the familiar level of national political discourse and working down. At the widest angle, states and their media ecologies are interpenetrated with national-level events and national media systems. In the US federated republic, this has always been the case, but nationalization is increasing, and what happens in lower levels of politics more and more closely mirrors dynamics at the federal level. Hopkins (2018) has argued that state and national voting patterns are increasingly aligned with national and state identities, rendering sociogeographic and regional differences almost irrelevant: "[O]nce we know the basic demographic facts about an individual, knowing her place of residence adds little to our understanding of a variety of political attitudes" (p. 14).

However, nationalization bears more fine-grained analysis, as the process is incomplete and unevenly distributed sociogeographically. Just as the United States is divided between more urban and more rural states, each type increasingly dominated by a single party, this pattern is reproduced in state subregions and counties. What is presented as a divide is more of a patterned distribution of concentric circles (Badger et al., 2021; Rodden, 2019; Wells et al., 2021). Even towns of a few thousand are more Democratic than their surrounds. Small cities

and their suburbs are critical swing areas precisely because they don't always neatly reproduce rural or urban patterns.

Nationalization increases the importance of the local information environment by connecting it to state (and, in turn, national) politics. But, paradoxically, nationalization also helps to destroy these local environments. As Hopkins shows, there has been a long-term shift from local news sources (newspapers and local television) to national sources, caused by a primary shift in the *types* of media consumed (from mass to social, and broadcast to cable). According to Hopkins (2018), this shift to cable and online news sources is leaving behind "the sources of what little state and local information we do receive" (p. 212).

If most studies of the American media system focus on the national level, it is because nation-oriented media shape state-level media systems (see, e.g., Benkler et al., 2018). We certainly agree that the major concerns and trends of the national communication ecology reach consumers both directly, as they watch national network news, and indirectly, as nationally defined issues are addressed and interpreted by more local media and within social networks. However, as this Element shows, this is not the whole story: we find much greater variation in the communication ecology at the state level than this account would lead us to expect.

2.2 State and Local News in Wisconsin

State news coverage is dependent on how much state news is reported in local television and newspapers, but local news coverage in Wisconsin, as across the United States, is in linear decline. An unsustainable business model has led to massive ownership consolidation. Shrinking revenue drives radical staff cuts, resulting in "zombie" news organizations and "news deserts" (Abernathy, 2018; Barthel, 2019; Napoli, 2018). What state coverage breaks through to the wider public is determined, in part, by this "last mile" of local news, which is in crisis.

Our analysis of news consumption patterns across Wisconsin (Wells et al., 2021) demonstrated that mainstream media still play a central role in people's *news* experience. Television and local newspapers consistently outrank internet and social media use in every geographic area. Local television is still the modal source of news for respondents in virtually every part of the state, with the suburbs of smaller cities showing significantly higher local TV news viewing than other areas. Local TV news has larger audiences than local newspapers (though newspapers still provide the bulk of the original reporting that underpins all local and state news). While local TV viewership may be in secular decline and its audience may skew older, it remains crucial to political communication at the local and state level (Mitchell and Matsa, 2019). Local news