

Political Communication Report
Summer 2026 - Issue 33
“Political Communication Research under Data Constraints”

Letter from the Editor: Data Constraints and the Future of Political Communication Research¹

Isabella Gonçalves, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

In recent years, political communication researchers have faced many challenges, including reduced academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2025), insufficient funding for our field’s core themes (Benton, 2025), and limited data access, materializing as an “APIcalypse” (Bruns, 2019). These challenges are often interconnected. For instance, when the political climate is less supportive of academic and scientific advancement in general, public policies and regulation are less likely to pressure platforms to grant researchers access to data. Nevertheless, gaining access to data represents one of the most fundamental cornerstones of academic research. Even with funding, we cannot gain insights into the questions we are interested in without access to data. In many countries around the world, a lack of funding and restricted academic freedom are daily realities for many researchers since many years. Nevertheless, they find the courage to continue researching their interests. This issue focuses on the theme “Political Communication Research under Data Constraints” because the matter of accessing data is actually about having the raw material as scholars.

Data is where research begins. This issue explores various questions and issues related to data access in our field. In recent years, we have witnessed significant changes in data access policies by social media platforms. We have seen data access become more constrained and social media platforms become less likely to provide researchers with the data they need. The first contribution in this issue, by Bruns and Vodden (2026), illustrates the evolution of API closures in recent years. They demonstrate how API access has transformed into clean room environments, exemplified by the replacement of CrowdTangle with the Meta Content Library (MCL). The authors discuss the limitations of clean room environments and the challenges they pose for empirical research.

A matter that deserves attention, now that multiple countries in the Global North are facing the barriers in accessing this raw material, is how accessing data has been a historic problem in the Global Majority. These barriers originate from multiple reasons. First, there is a structural knowledge barrier. In many institutions in the Global Majority, communication scholars lack

¹ Copyright © 2026 Isabella Gonçalves. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://politicalcommunication.org>.

the programming skills and training needed to access platform data, as well as the quantitative training to interpret the big data even if they gain access to it. Second, there is the policy problem. Countries in the Global North have more bargaining power, and they are more likely to effectively pressure platforms to give access to data for researchers. In their essay, Santini and colleagues (2026) show that we continue to see persistent inequalities when it comes to data access. As they argue, technological corporations are increasingly adopting a selective compliance approach, and the EU and the UK benefit from more favorable data regimes compared to the Global Majority. The path forward, according to them, is to pressure for global transparency standards.

This issue also features reasons for hope regarding data access, as exemplified in the Digital Service Act (DSA). Although data is granted for questions focusing on “systemic risks to the Union”, Klinger and colleagues (2026) show that data can be granted to researchers outside the European Union for questions surrounding platform dynamics, cross-platform flows, affordance effects, and network structures. In their essay, Klinger and colleagues (2026) explain in detail what exactly the DSA is about, what changes, and the possibilities underlying it. The major benefit from the DSA is its historic possibility: now platforms are under a legal obligation to share data with researchers, a historic step that other major global corporations were never obliged to.

As a field, we should also reflect on possible solutions and other sources of data for our research. First, there are always the traditional methods where our field began with, such as survey data. However, it is always important to be mindful about our practice to retrieve this kind of data. In the essay by Jost (2026), he reflects on the price of convenience of using commercial panels. He exercises a critique of the problems underlying convenience samples and also offers new paths forward. Two should be highlighted. First, Jost (2026) argues that high-quality probability-based datasets (such as ANES) are underused in political communication research. Second, he also highlights that our field fails to generate datasets for common use, and this could be a path forward. Many researchers receive funding and manage to conduct surveys with probability-based methods, but the datasets never see the light of the day. Sharing such datasets, if rewarded in our field, could benefit us (and the researchers sharing it) enormously. For example, they could generate citations and be valued just like any other high quality academic publication.

A good hand-on example to this suggested solution is the essay by Soto Ruidias and Casey (2026), where they share their experience in building the CanberraInbox, a dataset with e-newsletters published by Australian MPs. In their essay, they show potential questions that can be answered with this dataset. In addition, they also explain step by step how to build a dataset with similar architecture in other countries (with codes shared!). They also reflect on methodological challenges, limitations, and possibilities. As they argue, in an age of restricted data, maybe what we should begin reflecting on is a new model of empirical research. A possible answer is to begin a culture of building datasets. For that, we should also consider such work as central in our field and recognize it accordingly.

This issue also includes a report by Neyazi and Lawrence (2026) on peer review challenges and the future of scholarly publishing in the age of AI. This theme intersects with our central concern, as AI tools are increasingly being explored as possible sources of data and

methodological tools for data analysis. Their report, grounded in the Workshop for Editors (supported by the APSA and ICA Political Communication Divisions) and the ICA Roundtable in Cape Town, raises timely questions about how the field is being reshaped.

The issue closes with an interview with Ayala Panievsky, recipient of the International Journal of Press/Politics Hazel Gaudet-Erskine Best Book Award 2026, for her book *The New Censorship: How the War on the Media is Taking Us Down*. Her work is a fitting companion to this issue: if data constraints limit what researchers can access, political attacks limit what journalists can say, and how the press responds to the democratic risks we are facing. As I have argued at the beginning of this editorial, the questions of reduced academic (and press) freedom, data access, and resources for academic research are interconnected. We have to always be vigilant about how our field can respond to them.

Together, the contributions in this issue are an invitation to reimagine how our field produces, shares, and protects its raw material. Happy reading!

References

- Benton, J. (2025, April 21). National Science Foundation cancels research grants related to misinformation and disinformation. Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/04/national-science-foundation-cancels-research-grants-related-to-misinformation-and-disinformation/>
- Bruns, A. (2019). After the 'APIcalypse': Social media platforms and their fight against critical scholarly research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(11), 1544–1566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1637447>
- Bruns, A., Vodden, L. (2026). The Challenges of Working with Platform Data from Clean Room Environments. *Political Communication Report*, 33.
- Jost, P. (2026). The Price of Convenience: Commercial Panels and Survey Data Quality in Political Communication. *Political Communication Report*, 33.
- Kinzelbach, K., Saliba, I., Spannagel, J., & Quinn, R. (2025). Academic Freedom Index. FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg & Scholars at Risk. <https://academic-freedom-index.net/>
- Klinger, U., Ohme, J., Seiling, L. K. (2026). Open Sesame? Hopes and Limits of European Platform Data Access Regulation. *Political Communication Report*, 33.
- Neyazi, T. A., Lawrence, R. (2026). Peer Review Challenges and the Future of Scholarly Publishing in the Age of AI: A Report. *Political Communication Report*, 33.
- Santini, R. M., Leal, H., Belisario, A., Mattos, B. (2026). Unequal Data Access Regimes in Social Media. *Political Communication Report*, 33.
- Soto Ruidias, R. R., Casey, D. (2026). CanberraInbox: Building a New Data Infrastructure for Political Communication. *Political Communication Report*, 33.



[Isabella Gonçalves](#) is a postdoctoral researcher at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her work focuses on political communication and journalism studies. Her research examines the structural and discursive factors that contribute to the formation and reinforcement of social divisions, with a particular emphasis on divisive and negative political discourse, the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in political communication and media, and anti-media hostility. Alongside her research, she serves as editor of the Political Communication Report and manages the websites and social

media channels for the Political Communication divisions of APSA and ICA. She is also an active member of the DigiWorld network and the Digital Media and Society Observatory.