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Where Are Opinion Leaders Leading Us?

Commentary

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It is gratifying for disciples of Paul Lazarsfeld to see how many of his concepts have continued to inspire contemporary theory and research. The “opinion leader” is one of these. Together with its companion concept, the “two-step flow,” it has been on the agenda of media studies for 70 years, since publication of the first edition of *The People’s Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). But even earlier, at the turn of the 20th century, French social psychological Gabriel Tarde (1898/1989) announced that an item in the newspaper has no influence unless it becomes the subject of conversation (see also Clark, 1969/2014; and Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014¹).

The three articles in this special section provide a good illustration of this evolutionary process in action, as well as an informed—and generous—awareness of the many predecessors on whose shoulders they stand. Each article reviews and critiques previous efforts to conceptualize, measure, and apply the opinion leader concept (see Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971; Weimann, 1994). Each proposes further steps, theoretical and methodological, befitting our new media environment. What follows, then, is an old-timer’s perspective on this evolutionary process, although I shall not confine myself to the three articles. Nor, I must confess, will my references be up to date. Let me list my thoughts nevertheless, one at a time:

1. The discovery that face-to-face influence was alive and kicking in the presidential campaign of 1940 dealt a further blow to the controversial theory of mass society, which envisioned people as atomized, uprooted, and anomic—easy targets for politicians, advertisers, and others who had access to the media (radio and newspapers at the time). See Scannell (2007) for further details.

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¹ *Managing Editor’s Note*: For Elihu Katz’s latest book, see: http://www.amazon.com/Echoes-Gabriel-Tarde-Better-Different/dp/1625174225/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1422343921&sr=8-1&keywords=echoes+of+gabriel+tarde

2. Because the earliest of these studies concerned decision making in an election campaign, attention was also given to the relative power of personal influence on changing votes, compared with the influence of the media. This direction of research soon gave way to the much more promising realization that media and interpersonal communication were not in competition but, rather, intimately connected. This gave rise to the hypothesis of the two-steps, whereby certain ordinary people among the politically savvy, self-confident and gregarious—later dubbed opinion leaders—pass on what they garnered from the media to others in their intimate circles.
3. Two methods were used to characterize these everyday opinion leaders. One method was self-identification, in which respondents in the survey panel were asked to report on the extent to which they perceive themselves as influential or as relatively passive receivers of influence. The other, more innovative, method was based on the empirical reconstruction of decisions to change vote intentions during the campaign. Whenever a respondent implicated another person in his or her decision to change, interviews were conducted, separately, with both the alleged influential and the alleged influencee in an effort to characterize the attributes of each and to determine the relationship between the two. Repeated in subsequent studies (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006), these two methods produced the finding that the opinion leaders were more attuned to the media than the persons they had influenced—hence, the two-step flow.
4. These influential people popped up everywhere, in all social classes.
5. Further analysis of influential–influencee pairs led to the discovery of situations in which influence has transpired but is unnoticed by one or both members of the dyad and even by the researchers. Consider imitation, for example, where the person being imitated may be unaware that he or she is being copied; or manipulation, where the victim may be unaware of being influenced; or contagion, where neither victim knows who infected whom. Interestingly, these examples of “false negatives” are paralleled by Friemel’s (herein) “false positive,” where what appears, ostensibly, to be an episode of influence may, instead, be a case where persons broke ties with their partners of Time One in favor of associating with like-minded others who think as they do—and thus selection, not influence, is at work.
6. Multiple methods for identifying influentials (or leaders) tend to point to the same individuals. This emerges from studies of small groups where self-identification, reputation, sociometric position, and observational methods are compared (Lippit, Polansky, Redl, & Rosen, 1952) as well as from studies in the opinion leader tradition (Weimann, 1994). The latter added credibility to Noelle-Neumann’s (1983) adoption of a personality-oriented measure of opinion leadership, a psychologistic elaboration of self-identification methods employed by Schäfer and Taddicken (this special section), and by Shah and Scheufele (2007).

7. This discussion makes it clear that research attention has shifted away from two steps to multiple steps—that is, to social networks that extend beyond the dyad of opinion leader and follower. That the earliest research—and much later work as well—focuses on dyads reflects the technological and methodological constraints of an earlier day. Nowadays, network structure can be extended almost endlessly, challenging researchers interested in the diffusion of innovation to change their ways. Traditions of diffusion research such as epidemiology in medicine or cultural anthropology have long been coping with such data.
8. There is debate over whether opinion leadership is a generalized trait or whether different issues produce influentials who “specialize.” Thus, Merton (1949) found early on that the persons who exert interpersonal influence on “local” issues differ from those who are influential in “cosmopolitan” spheres. Or, to choose another example, both Schäfer and Taddicken (herein) and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006) find that, in matters of fashion, young women are particularly likely to serve as influentials, while conversations about politics or education are dominated by others. The recurrent finding that different numbers of people self-identify as leaders in particular areas lends support to this likelihood. Some studies, however, find an overlap of leadership in different areas. In an experimental study to address this problem, Katz, Blau, Brown, and Strodtbeck (1957) observed small groups performing a sequence of tasks in an effort to determine whether—and when—changes in group tasks induce changes in leadership, and when they do not.
9. This does not mean that influentiality in a given area is no more than the expression of high interest in that area. In an explicit test of this possibility, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955/2006) found that interest was prerequisite to conversation in a given area but not sufficient or equivalent to influentiality. Thus, young women proved prominent among fashion leaders, because fashion is of particular interest to young women, followers and leaders alike, and provide the pool out of which leadership emerges. Older women are less likely to become fashion leaders, because their peers are less likely to share that interest. Shah and Scheufele (2006) also find that political interest is associated with political leadership, but as an added ingredient, not as an equivalent.
10. These thoughts bring to mind the suggestion, arising from the factor analysis performed by Schäfer and Taddicken (herein), that innovations in media technologies, especially social media, may have produced a sort of super leader—whom they dub Mediatized Leader. Along with more traditional opinion leaders, these authors propose that today’s culture may have produced a new type of influential whom we have not encountered before.
11. Another suggestion by Stehr et al. (this special section)—more grounded in the past than the idea of mediated leaders—is that certain followers, maybe all of us, create a quasi-intimate and trusting, relationship with a media character whom we enlist as a

Parasocial Leader. Long ago, Merton (1946) explored this process of identification with the persona of Kate Smith, the celebrated radio singer, who served as a supportive and guiding mother figure for millions of Americans during World War II, urging them, among other things, to purchase War Bonds. Echoes of such "virtual" attachments have been found in other studies to be particularly appealing to lonely people, recalling the mass society syndrome (Scannell, 2007). Study of the supposed influence of such personae reminds us that the concept of leadership gradually has been expanded to include functions such as interpreter of complex information and arouser of interest, in addition to the classical role of offering information and advice.

12. That certain studies produce more self-identified influentials than self-identified followers suggests that the influentials may be influencing one another.
13. Personally, I have gradually come to feel that identifying the loci and extent of conversation about an issue makes for a more promising start than the search for influentials. That is, *who talks to whom about what* may be more rewarding than investing effort in sorting leaders from others—especially since role reversals may be quite frequent. The methodologies of Big Data research on the new media make the study of conversation and of extensive networks all the more possible. But see Hampton et al. (2014) for a sobering view of social media as a new public space.
14. Some thought has been given to the question of how to study small groups of interacting individuals and their conversations without losing the representatives of a traditional sample. One answer—which has not been tried, I believe—is to choose a representative sample of individuals and build an ego-centered network around each individual in the sample (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006, p. xxv).
15. For certain purposes, however, it is worth searching for opinion leaders or innovators—e.g., that younger women influence older women in matters of fashion or that certain types of religious leaders incite young people to terror. For yet other purposes—e.g., the amazing speed of the spread of early Christianity or the slow spread of contraceptives in India—the individual, even types of individuals, may be of less interest than the geography or the values of communities.
16. Over the years, major advances have been made in analysis of the role of opinion leaders. At first, the opinion leader was introduced as a kind of conduit between the media and others less active, or less able to cope, in a given area. This led to Gitlin's (1978) famous allegation that, if so, the opinion leader idea was mere camouflage for the hegemonic influence of the media. Perhaps so, except that later conceptualizations (mostly untested) conceive of the influential as a kind of critic who may protect his or her group against disruptive media influence, and altogether lead in critical discussion of the media. In turn, this argument has led to much deeper explorations of the opinion leader role as interpreter of the complexities of media messages and as a mobilizer of

interest in a given issue. Activities such as filtering, gatekeeping, evaluating, and arousing interest are discussed by Stehr et al. (this special section). These thoughts are in sharp disagreement with Bennett and Manheim (2006), who propose that the new media are so tailored to our personal idiosyncrasies that we no longer need mediators or interpreters such as opinion leaders, and hence their proposal for a one-step theory of media influence.

Reflecting on the evolution of this tradition of research suggests that our concepts have moved—rightly or wrongly—from the idea of a lonely and indecisive crowd ready to be devoured by powerful controllers of the media (Fromm, 1941), to decision-making individuals juggling competing influences from media and social circles, to a system of interrelated sources of influence, enfranchisement that requires more cosmopolitan leadership, to an even newer world that affords new opportunities for both interpersonal and mass communication, asking for nonstop participation both in local sharing and in global networks. In these not-so-many years, with the move from newspaper, to radio, to television, to social media, our world has become, paradoxically, both bigger and smaller—more global and more local—making it even more complex and creating the need for ever more access to diverse types of information, influence, and support and, probably, to ever more specialized interpreters and influentials.

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