

Two-step flow

Lazarsfeld's 1940 discovery has been replicated many times, but little has been done to explore the role of the Internet in information that flows from media to opinion leaders and then to wider audiences. Should we now talk about a multi-step flow? Or a two-way flow? (Everette Dennis, Deborah Potter and David H. Weaver)

THE TWO-STEP FLOW IN THE INTERNET AGE

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One would hardly expect an Internet trade association's blog to credit Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, authors of the classic 1955 study *Personal Influence*, as "Facebook's Grandfathers (& MySpace's Too)," but that's exactly what happened on November 12, 2007. The historic link between the scholars who gave us the two-step flow and opinion leaders, better known for their attack on the concept of all powerful media are hailed as visionaries whose work is useful in understanding the power social networking and thus the new media.

Since the 1940s, the story line of the history of media research has accepted the limited media effects theory, even though it never caught on with those who actually work in and around media, marketing and advertising. They "almost reflexively" accept the old doctrine of a powerful media, declaring, "Our programs and ads," we believe, "forge people's opinions [and] it's a tenet deeply-held by copywriters and anchormen alike." [i] Ironically, the true power of media via networking may now be reinforced by a reconsideration of the L&K's two-step flow.

That notwithstanding, the question today is whether the somewhat abstract formulations drawn from early empirical studies are still valid in the face of a very different media scene or whether such new platforms as social networking sites and search engines call for new formulations altogether. This brings back a much-quoted datum in Lazarsfeld, et. al, *The People's Choice* (1944) that only five percent of people sampled changed their voting behavior because of media messages ushered in the limited effects paradigm and later the conclusion that messages are "mediated through our social relationships" as *Personal Influence* would later put it.

The danger with any media theory then or now is the tendency to settle on satisfying but often simplistic answers. Contemporary critics decry the powerful to limited effects story line advanced by Katz and Lazarsfeld (and others who followed) as "textbook boilerplate and literature review dogma." [ii] Or as "a self conscious creation (and now an endless recreation) that sifts, sorts, and rearranges the

accumulated literary debris into a coherent narrative...to give direction and intellectual status to professional teaching and research..."[iii] This does point up the longstanding division between media leaders, managers and regulators who have never bought into the received history so readily accepted by scholars. Critics of the two-step flow have long noted that mass media messages are received at the same time by opinion-leaders and the larger public or audience. Opinion and thought leaders (as well as friends and colleagues) may still be more attentive and thus ultimately more influential in the feedback loop, though. More recently, the idea of "*impersonal influence*," linking distant institutions and other abstractions with personal influence has urged new study connecting interpersonal and organizational communication with mass communication.[iv]

In recent years mass media while still courting large, undifferentiated audiences have accepted the model of market segmentation that requires mediation of the very kind suggested by the two-step flow. Narrowcasting of all kinds abounds. From zoned editions of newspapers, to increasingly specialized magazines, diverse channels on cable systems or radio formats, the idea of influencing the influential has triumphed. Public relations firms and policy-oriented NGOs court "*thought leaders*," across various fields, again paying unknowing homage to the two-step flow. The opinion-leadership cohorts of old could be institutional leaders and others with formal and informal roles that have swayed in the lives of ordinary citizens. Still they were fairly easy to recognize by their proximity to powerful and influential individuals and institutions or by their claim on hearts and minds via social networks from the family to neighborhoods and geographic communities as well as those drawn along ethnic, cultural, racial or other lines. There was a notion in assessing media and media messages that there were both geographic and demographic communities. And there was a call for greater demographic, psychographic and ethnographic research and reflection in our understanding of media and people. The Internet expands and greatly advances all this introducing both more mediation between and among very different communities and, at the same time, encouraging disintermediation where anyone can be a communicator with or without organizational links. The players in cyberspace are at once senders and receivers of messages, beneficiaries of feedback and interactivity across many dimensions.

The age of social networking as represented by Facebook, MySpace and YouTube as well as the interactive capacity of the various search engines, like Google and Yahoo!, is not fundamentally different from the traditional interplay of interest groups and opinion leadership, except that it is transformative across infinitely more platforms with truly global reach and great speed. That means that the social networking platform, now living alongside and integrated with traditional media have far greater capacity both as an intermediary (for the media messages it aggregates) as well as the original content it embraces.

And of course those who would have been mere audience members before now can become disseminators themselves. A Facebook page is a social system with its own outreach reality and strategy. Advertisers now sign up "friends" and connect directly sans the channels of the traditional media, notably on MySpace. But this is not just a simple transportation model either, but one that has potential interventions, such as various ad-stopping devices like Tivo that can knockout the very messages that have heretofore paid the bill for mass and segmented communication.

The two-step flow is still a useful construct, though it requires refinement as it is used to track and trace media messages of all kinds and the rich system of feedback and interaction that attends them. What is needed today is a coherent restatement of the two-step flow based on considerable study of the ebb and flow of messages across the digital landscape, tracking and tracing their origins, interactions and endpoints.

[i] randalrotherberg.com, "Facebook's Grandfathers (& MySpace's too), I, A Bee, Buzz and Pollination from the Interactive Advertising Bureau, Nov. 11, 2007.

[ii] Jefferson Pooley, "Fifteen Pages that Shook the Field: Personal Influence, Edward shills, and the Remembered History Of Mass Communication Research, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2006), 608; 130, p 131.

[iii] James W. Carey, "The Chicago School and Mass Communication Research," in Everette E. Dennis and Ellen Wartella, eds., *American Communication Research, The Remembered History* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), p. 21.

[iv] Diana C. Mutz, *Impersonal Influence, How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 998), xvii; pps. 4, 5.

One step, two step

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I'm no expert when it comes to Lazarsfeld's two-step theory, but it seems to me that it needs to be revised if it's going to apply in an online world. First, there's the question of a starting point. Lazarsfeld posited that information flows from the mass media to opinion leaders and then to the public. But information flows differently in an online world: one-to-one via email, one-to-many via Web sites, many-to-many via chatrooms and listservs. And thanks to the Internet, anyone with an interest in almost any topic can find information about it online. Millions do just that every day. According to the Internet monitoring firm [ComScore](#), more than 10 *billion* online searches were conducted in October 2007 alone. And they're not all looking for pictures of Britney Spears. A 2004 survey found that people seeking information about the complex topic of genetic testing for cancer were most likely to first turn to the Internet, second to public libraries, and third to medical doctors. ([Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology](#) Volume 55, Issue 8, June 2004)

What seems most outdated about the two-step flow concept is its one-way nature. In an online world, information flow isn't linear or top-down, it's circular and often bottom-up. The old-line mass media have become recipients as well as distributors of information, using "crowdsourcing" and online commenting to solicit input from an audience that is anything but passive.

The Internet hasn't invalidated Lazarsfeld's concepts of opinion leaders, however; it's simply redefined them once again. Lazarsfeld and Katz described three factors that identify opinion leaders: life cycle, socioeconomic status, and gregariousness. Robinson (1976) modified that definition. Opinion leaders, he said, are different from followers because of "social position or status or by virtue of their greater interest in the topic at hand." But the Internet has magnified the potential number of opinion leaders to the point that almost anyone can be one. And that makes it difficult to pinpoint real "influentials" that can drive market trends, according to [Information Week](#).

Transferring Lazarsfeld's theory to the Internet isn't without risk, either, as Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg discovered when he decided to make advertisers partners in his social networking site. "For the last hundred years media has been pushed out to people," Zuckerberg said last November, according to [The Economist](#), "but now marketers are going to be a part of the conversation." Using his firm's new approach called Beacon, he claimed, advertisers could piggyback on the "social actions" of Facebook users, since "people influence people." It didn't take long for Facebook users to fight back against Beacon, a system that tracked their shopping habits and broadcast their actions in feeds to their friends. As the [San Jose Mercury News](#) reported, "More than 50,000 Facebook users signed a petition against Beacon demanding the opportunity to opt out of the advertising system. Facebook founder

Mark Zuckerberg subsequently apologized to members and said the company would change the service.”

The incident suggests that in an online world, opinion leaders still exist but they may not play the role Lazarsfeld presumed they would. Instead, they may choose to use their influence not on the public or those in their social networks but rather on those who attempt to manipulate them. Just another piece of evidence that Lazarsfeld’s theory needs to be reworked for an online world.

The Two-Step Flow of Communication in the 21st Century: Networks and Agendas

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There is considerable evidence now that Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) useful attempt to link mass and interpersonal communication influence a half century ago is in need of major revision. Not only have the boundaries between mass and personal communication become blurred with the advent of the Internet's various options for communicating instantly across geographic boundaries to one, few or many persons, but new communication technologies have enabled many more persons to become opinion leaders as well as followers.

Hardy and Scheufele (2005) note that many of the studies of interpersonal discussion's influence on political participation have focused on face-to-face conversations as the only means by which citizens discuss political issues with each other, but computer-mediated interactions and Internet news use also make a difference in political participation. Their study found that chatting online about politics had the same moderating effects as face-to-face discussion.

Using a technique called multi-agent simulation, Liu (2007) found that opinion leader influence often does not diffuse widely to the public because it encounters resistance from communication networks, selective perception of incoming information, and the influence of various other information sources. The influence of opinion leaders is often cancelled out by those persons who have formed opposite preferences in their communication networks. Liu concludes that the path of influence regarding voter preferences needs to include communication networks placed between the influence of opinion leaders and the public. He argues that social networks used to be thought of as mainly family or close friends ("strong-tie") or co-workers and other friends ("weak-tie"), but now people can form their communication networks beyond the geographic boundaries of family, neighborhood and work, and "Influential political discussants may come from weak-tie networks, such as friends met on the Internet." (p. 240)

In addition to the influence of social networks that are sometimes Internet based, the new communication technologies permit receivers to become senders or opinion leaders in their own networks, as Deborah Potter has noted. This implies a two-way influence process rather than the mostly one-way flow proposed in the original two-step flow model. It also means that it becomes more difficult to identify opinion leaders, who in the past were described as more exposed to news content, more knowledgeable about politics, of higher socio-economic status, and having more social contacts. With the advent of Internet discussion groups, blogs, chat rooms, etc., that focus on more specialized topics, anyone with access to the Internet can become an opinion leader on selected subjects.

And as Donald Shaw and his colleagues (1999) have proposed in his theory of social dissonance and agenda melding, individuals these days can choose which groups to join, and thus which agendas to adopt, much more easily than in the past when they were limited by geography, occupation, social class, race and gender. Some of these limits still apply, especially differences in education, in using the Internet, but they are rapidly disappearing, further blurring the distinction between opinion leaders and followers. Shaw and Hamm (1997) also argue that traditional mass media are in decline as people shift to more individualized media, which implies less influence of mass media on opinion leaders than in the past and thus less influence of opinion leaders who are mainly oriented to traditional mass media.

In addition to less direct influence on public opinion from traditional mass media, Bennett and Manheim (2006, p. 213) argue that “Opinion leaders who played a pivotal role in the two-step paradigm are increasingly less likely to ‘lead’ because they are more likely to reinforce latent opinions than to reframe them.” They propose a “one-step flow” of communication involving “the refined targeting of messages directly to individuals” that reflects a transformation in communication technologies.

Even though new communication technologies do allow the targeting of messages to individuals, it seems likely that most people do not trust media messages as much as members of their social networks, that they have more access to alternative sources of information, and that they are sometimes able to act as opinion leaders as well as followers, especially in online networks.

Given these present-day realities, it seems that the two-step flow should be re-conceptualized as a multi-step, multi-directional flow of information and influence among various media, diverse opinion leaders, and various publics rather than as a one-step flow as Bennett and Manheim (2006) have proposed. Interpersonal influence is still important in the formation of opinions, as it was a half-century ago, but such influence can now come from many different sources, some that individuals have never met in person. Thus a social network theory of media influence seems more accurate in today’s world than a two-step flow theory.

It also seems likely that the main influence of the traditional mass media is more likely to be as agenda-setters of events and issues rather than as powerful influences on people’s opinions in a two-step, mostly one-way, flow that includes a few selected opinion leaders. The influence of mass media on public opinions, especially political opinions, appears now to be more indirect and complex through agenda setting, framing and priming than it was in the 1940s and 1950s when Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) were studying it and proposing their two-step flow model. As many agenda-setting studies have shown, interpersonal discussion and personal influence can sometimes reinforce and sometimes work against media influence, depending on which issues and events are emphasized by the mainstream mass media and how they are framed.

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