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Opinion Leadership Revisited: A Classical Concept in a Changing Media Environment

Editorial Introduction

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Along with the media landscape, the patterns of opinion leadership have changed profoundly. The concept of opinion leadership, which was established in the 1940s and has been used in numerous studies since, has been challenged by the intermingling of old and new media. This special section of the *International Journal of Communication* analyzes what kinds of opinion leadership can be found in contemporary media environments and to what extent extensions or adaptations of the original concept might be necessary. The special section presents three empirical studies focusing on different facets of opinion leadership—on the opinion leaders themselves, on opinion leadership in parasocial relations, and on influence and selection processes in adolescent networks—as well as a commentary by Elihu Katz.

Keywords: opinion leadership, communication theory, mass media, social media, media change

Opinion leadership in the 1940s and 1950s was largely a matter of interpersonal communication. The local opinion leaders that Robert K. Merton found in the small town of Rovere (N.J.) in 1949, for example, emphasized the importance of the city's historically grown social relationships, the accompanying trust they enjoyed by fellow citizens of Rovere—and the communicative opportunities that this closely knit local network provided them with. "Local" opinion leaders, as Merton called them, emphasized that this setting enabled them to "speak to 500 people in two hours" (Merton, 1949, p. 193), to regularly meet others on the streets, in shops, or in pubs, and to inform them there and then about the importance of certain issues or the seemingly proper point of view on these issues.

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Since then, the patterns of opinion leadership have changed profoundly. Although interpersonal communication is still an important source of information about the relevance of certain issues and perspectives, a broader and more diverse range of communication channels is now available, ranging from mediated interpersonal communication via e-mail, mobile phone, or messaging services all the way to hybrid forms that blend more than one channel. This special section of the *International Journal of Communication* analyzes what kind(s) of opinion leadership can still be found in contemporary media environments and to what extent conceptual extensions or adaptations of the original concept of opinion leadership are necessary.

In other words, this special section provides a fresh look at a classical concept in (and beyond) communication science. The basic conceptual idea of opinion leadership, which was developed in the 1940s and 1950s, is that of a segmented process of media communication and, particularly, its effects. In their seminal study "The People's Choice", Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet (1944) hypothesized that mass media do not directly influence individuals, but that they reach "opinion leaders" first, who then pass on information and interpretation "to those of their every-day associates for whom they are influential" (Katz, 1957, p. 2).

This concept has been used in numerous studies since then. It still serves as a framework of reference for many scholars (for recent examples, see Clement, Proppe, & Rott, 2007; Curtice & Norris, 2008; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009), and "explicating and measuring opinion leadership continues to be an important theoretical topic" (Nisbet, 2006, p. 3; see also Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Weimann, 1994). At the same time, the eroding importance of legacy media as well as the spreading of online and social media—which are becoming ever more available in formerly nonmediated settings as a result of mobile communication and wireless Internet access, and increasingly pervasive in social relations—challenge the concept of opinion leadership and make adaptations necessary.

This special section of the *International Journal of Communication* deals with the question of how opinion leadership develops, or evolves, in changing media environments. The following contributions largely stem from a dedicated panel at the International Communication Association's 2013 annual conference in London in which members of the German Association for Communication Science (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft, DGPK) presented their research to an international audience. These scholars all take their cues from the long tradition of opinion leadership, build on it conceptually, and present original empirical research addressing the importance and the character of opinion leadership in the current media landscape. All contributions highlight different facets of the concept and its development and trace which—or whether—new aspects of opinion leadership can be found in a changing media environment.

The first article, "Mediatized Opinion Leaders: New Patterns of Opinion Leadership in New Media Environments?" by Mike S. Schäfer and Monika Taddicken, presents results from an online survey. In order to determine whether new types of opinion leadership can be found nowadays, the authors identify social relations in which people give or receive advice on one of four complex issues ranging from climate change, educational policies, and pensions all the way to fashion and style. Although the findings show that many roles that have been identified previously in opinion leadership research still hold up and that

opinion leadership neither disappears nor entirely changes, the study also demonstrates that under these changing conditions a new kind of opinion leader emerges: a "mediatized opinion leader" who differs from other opinion leaders in that this type uses a broader range of media sources for information and interaction with others.

In the second article, Paula Stehr, Patrick Rössler, Laura Leissner, and Friederike Schönhardt analyze the influence that personalities in the media exert on the audience's political opinion formation. The authors' theoretical framework consists of a combination of the concepts of parasocial relationships and opinion leadership. In their empirical analysis of the resulting phenomenon—parasocial opinion leadership—Stehr et al. demonstrate that audience members ascribe certain attributes to media communicators based on their (parasocial) relationships with them, which generates a gradual influence of the media personality on the user's opinions and attitudes.

In his contribution, "Influence vs. Selection," Thomas Friemel analyzes opinion leadership from the perspective of network analysis. He criticizes that opinion leadership research was, and is, often based on the implicit assumption that social networks are structurally stable and that only attitudes and behavior change in diffusion processes. Friemel shows how network autocorrelation emerges in social selection processes in which likeminded people establish new ties and cut dissonant ones. An analysis of a four-wave panel survey of adolescents demonstrates that the importance of influence among the respondents diminishes significantly when selection processes within networks are accounted for.

These contributions are then discussed in a commentary by Elihu Katz, one of the fathers of the concept of opinion leadership (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). He reflects on the development of the concept over the past decades and outlines promising avenues for further research, such as the use of social media analysis to enrich network data on opinion leadership with information about the content of communication. In doing so, Katz demonstrates the ongoing utility of the concept as well as its historical grounding and theoretical core. In our view, there could not have been a better way to conclude this special section and to emphasize the need for further conceptual, methodological, and empirical advances.

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