Two Step Flow Theory

influence of media messages

History and Orientation

The two-step flow of communication hypothesis was first introduced by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in *The People's Choice,* a 1944 study focused on the process of decision-making during a Presidential election campaign. These researchers expected to find empirical support for the direct influence of media messages on voting intentions. They were surprised to discover, however, that informal, personal contacts were mentioned far more frequently than exposure to radio or newspaper as sources of influence on voting behavior. Armed with this data, Katz and Lazarsfeld developed the two-step flow theory of mass communication.

Core Assumptions and Statements

This theory asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. First, individuals (opinion leaders) who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages receive the information. Opinion leaders pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. The term 'personal influence' was coined to refer to the process intervening between the media's direct message and the audience's ultimate reaction to that message. Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. The two-step flow theory has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making. The theory refined the ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behavior, and it helped explain why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes an behavior. The two-step flow theory gave way to the multi-step flow theory of mass communication or diffusion of innovation theory.

Conceptual Model
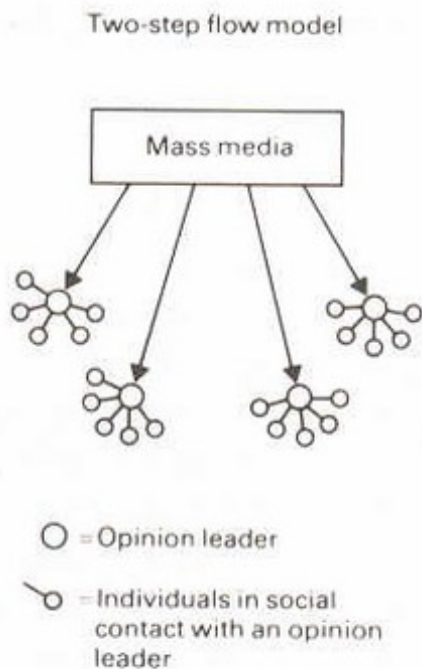
Source: Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955)

Favorite Methods

To be added.
Scope and Application
All kinds of mass media can be researched with this theory (TV, radio, internet).
Example
To be added.
References
Key publications

Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson, B. & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955), *Personal Influence,* New York: The Free Press.
Katz, Elihu (1973). The two-step flow of communication: an up-to-date report of an hypothesis. In Enis and Cox(eds.), *Marketing Classics*, p175-193.
Weimann, Gabriel. (1994). Is there a two-step flow of Agenda Setting? *International Journal of Public Opinion*, v6, n4, p323.

The Two-Step Flow of Communication Theory

The story as told by Sarah Griswold

"The mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment...."

-John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

Introduction
Man has forever fought against the forces of entropy, working very diligently at creating order and meaning, dissecting and perusing until order is achieved. For civilization this has been important. It has lent the world many fascinating theories about our surroundings and the effect human beings can have. As order driven beings, we seek to stretch and apply knowledge gained in all aspects of life to situations and experiences very different from the origin of the knowledge. It is through the stretching and manipulating of old thought that new insights are made,

and new psychological mountains are tackled. It is through this stretching and manipulating of one socio-political based theory that the field of Advertising has defined some of its capabilities and constraints in the area of mass communication. This theory involves the two-step flow of communication.

This paper will address insights to the history and development, the criticisms and praises, recent studies, and current applications of the two-step flow of communication theory. The ultimate goal is to answer one question: "What does a theory based on socio-political research have to do with advertising, anyway?"

Development of the Two-step Flow of Communication theory

As with most theories now applied to Advertising, the Two-step flow of communication was first identified in a field somewhat removed from communications-sociology. In 1948, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet published *The People's Choice*, a paper analyzing the votersi decision-making processes during a 1940 presidential election campaign. The study revealed evidence suggesting that the flow of mass communication is less direct than previously supposed. Although the ability of mass media to reach a large audience, and in this case persuade individuals in one direction or another, had been a topic of much research since the 1920's, it was not until the *People's Choice* was published that society really began to understand the dynamics of the media-audience relationship. The study suggested that communication from the mass media first reaches "opinion leaders" who filter the information they gather to their associates, with whom they are influential. Previous theories assumed that media directly reached the target of the information. For the theorists, the opinion leader theory proved an interesting discovery considering the relationship between media and its target was not the focus of the research, but instead a small aspect of the study.

Lazarsfeld *et al* suggested that "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population." People tend to be much more affected in their decision making process by face to face encounters with influential peers than by the mass media (Lazarsfeld, Menzel, 1963). As Weiss described in his 1969 chapter on functional theory, "Media content can be a determining influence…. What is rejected is any conception that construes media experiences as alone sufficient for a wide variety of effects." The other piece in the communication process is the opinion leader with which the media information is discussed.

The studies by Lazarsfeld and his associates sparked interest in the exact qualities and characteristics that define the opinion leader. Is an opinion leader influential in all cases, on all topics? Or is the influence of an opinion leader constrained to certain topics? How does an opinion leader come to be influential?

The Opinion Leaders

Who are they? How have they come to be defined?

A study by Robert Merton revealed that opinion leadership is not a general characteristic of a person, but rather limited to specific issues. Individuals who act as opinion leaders on one issue, may not be considered influentials in regard to other issues (Merton, 1949). A later study directed by Lazarsfeld and Katz further investigated the characteristics of opinion leaders. This study confirmed the earlier assertions that personal influence seems more important in decision making than media. Again, influential individuals seem constrained in their opinion leading to particular topics, non-overlapping among the individuals. The opinion leaders seem evenly distributed

among the social, economical, and educational levels within their community, but very similar in these areas to those with whom they had influence.

Katz and Lazarsfeld did not identify any particular traits amongst opinion leaders that stand out. The traits that characterize each of the opinion leaders in their niche did have things in common, though. For one thing, the opinion leaders were identified as having the strongest interest in their particular niche. They hold positions within their community affording them special competence in their particular niches. They are generally gregarious, sociable individuals. Finally, they had/have contact with relevant information supplied from outside their immediate circle. Interestingly enough, Katz and Lazarsfeld observed that the opinion leaders receive a disproportionate amount of their external information from media appropriate to their niche.

Studies by Glock and Nicosia determined that opinion leaders act "as a source of social pressure toward a particular choice and as a source of social support to reinforce that choice once it has been made (1966)." Charles Glock explained that opinion leaders often develop leadership positions in their social circles. They achieve these positions based on their knowledge of situations outside their circles (1952).

Criticisms

Although the theory of indirect flow of information from media to the target was quickly adopted, the original study performed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet was not. It had a few faults. The panel method by which they attempted to better understand the influences reaching a voter was unfaulted. It very effectively allowed the researchers to notice changes in a voter's feelings almost immediately. The resulting unit of change was an objective measurement that could easily be recorded and compared. The faults lie in the manner with which the researchers addressed the flow of influences.

Since the research was not designed to specifically test the flow of influence, the experiment was decidedly lacking in explanations. The first problem concerning the findings of the study were that the data had to be collected in a random sample, but subjects in a random sample can only speak for themselves. For these reasons, each person could only say whether or not they considered his/herself an advice giver. Lazarsfeld and his associates in the 1940 election study were unable to determine the specific flow of influence. They determined there were a number of opinion leaders spread throughout the socio-economic groups; however, these leaders were not directly linked to particular groups within the socio-economic levels.

Even within studies specifically designed to determine who opinion leaders are and how they are different from the average populace, there have been problems born from experimental design. "The criticisms of the concept of opinion leaders has focused mainly on its methodological deficiencies (Weimann, 1991)." As Weimann suggested in his 1989 study of pervious research, much of the design problems involved determining the opinion leaders while studying the flow of information. There seemed to be too many factors to control. Despite the difficulties in qualifying the influentials, the theory of a group of individuals that filter the flow of media information has lived on.

Praises and Support

Although the empirical methods behind the two-step flow of communication were not perfect, the theory did provide a very believable explanation for information flow. The opinion leaders do not replace media, but rather guide discussions of media. Brosius explains the benefits of the opinion leader theory well in his 1996 study of agenda setting, "The opinion leaders should not

be regarded as replacing the role of interpersonal networks but, in fact, as reemphasizing the role of the group and interpersonal contacts."

Lazarsfeld and his associates detailed five characteristics of personal contact that give their theory more validity:

- **_Non-purposiveness/casualness_** One must have a reason for tuning into a political speech on television, but political conversations can just "pop-up". In this situation, the people are less likely to have their defenses up in preparation, they are more likely open to the conversation.

- **_Flexibility to counter resistance_** In a conversation, there is always opportunity to counter any resistance. This is not so in media, a one sided form of communication.

- **_Trust_** Personal contact carries more trust than media. As people interact, they are better able through observation of body language and vocal cues to judge the honesty of the person in the discussion. Newspaper and radio do not offer these cues.

- **_Persuasion without conviction_** The formal media is forced to persuade or change opinions. In personal communication, sometimes friendly insistence can cause action without affecting any comprehension of the issues.

Menzel introduced another strong point in favor of the two-step flow of information theory. First, there are an abundance of information channels "choked" with all types of journals, conferences, and commercial messages. These are distracting and confusing to their target. With the barrage of information humans are flooded with daily, it is not hard to understand why someone might turn to a peer for help evaluating all of it.

Recent Studies Based on the Two-step Flow of Communication theory

The true test of a theory lies in its timelessness, its ability to spark interest and provoke thought years after its introduction. The two step flow of communication theory has been able to remain relevant throughout the years. This should not be difficult to believe considering it has fueled at least the past few pages this year, forty years after its debut. There have been several recent studies that have addressed issues arising from Lazarsfeld's, Katz's, and Merton's studies from the 1940s. In two such studies Gabriel Weimann (1994) and Hans-Bernd Brosius (1996) addressed the setting of agendas as a two step flow of communication.

In Weimann's paper addressing the re-emergence of the opinion leader theory into modern day (1991), he addresses several problems that have been overcome sparking the new interest in the old theory. As is further discussed in the section on theory criticisms, the two-step flow of communication theory is difficult to witness in the field. Many researchers have attempted to design credible models for testing the theory, but with only minor success (Weimann, 1991). Brosius and Weimann set out to explain agenda setting using the basis of the two-step flow of communication theory determined by Lazarsfeld, Katz, and the many other researchers. To avoid the difficulties in studying the actual flow of communication, Weimann and Brosius separated the opinion leaders from their two-step flow of communication theory. Participants were studied against a scale to determine the "Strength of Personality".

The Brosius-Weimann study attempts to describe the individuals whose personal communication has impact on agenda setting. These individuals are the archetypal opinion leaders, who still control the flow of information. Weimann and Brosius define agenda setting as a two-step flow,

wherein certain individuals (influentials) "collect, diffuse, filter, and promote the flow of information" from media to the community. The difference between these influentials and the opinion leaders, as Weimann stresses, is that these influentials are usually elitists, not spread throughout the community as the old theory suggested (Weimann, 1991). Are these influentials a new breed? Or is there really a difference between influentials and opinion leaders? This, as yet, has not been addressed. Weimann and Brosius suggest the influentials are a subsection of the opinion leaders.

Applications of the Theory

To those who claim that there are no applications of a socio-political theory in advertising, exhibit A is the barrage of articles written daily on the very subject. No longer does the advertising industry doubt the existence or qualities of influentials, as they are most commonly referred to today. Instead, the discussion revolves around effectively targeting messages to reach these influentials.

For fifty years, the research organization Roper has considered the group of "influentials" important enough to track. Regularly, reports and studies are performed in an attempt to unlock the secret to reaching these influentials. Who are they? What has the term "influential" come to describe? According to Diane Crispell, these people are the "thought leaders" and "pioneer consumers". "Influentials are better educated and more affluent than the average American, but it is their interest in the world around them and their belief that they can make a difference that makes them influential (Crispell, 1989)."

The influentials today seem to be isolated in the upper class. They are the trend-setters. It is this group that is first to adopt new technology, and remains on the leading edge of trends (Poltrack, 1985). This is the group that advertising attempts to reach. Daily articles are published on maximizing the market by reaching these influentials. The idea remains that the most efficient media is word-of-mouth, and it is by reaching the influentials with other forms of media that this word-of-mouth is generated. It seems the opinion leaders of yesterday have been overlooked for the smaller subset of influentials.

References

Brosius, Hans Bernd and Weimann, Gabriel. (1996). Who sets the agenda?:agenda setting as a two-step flow.*Communication Research*, v23, n5, pp561-580.

Crispell, Diane. (1989). The Influentials. Consumers who influence America. *American Demographics*, v11, n3, p12.

Glock, Charles Y. (1952). The comparative study of communications and opinion formation. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter, pp512-523.

Glock, Charles Y. and Niosia, Francesco (1966). The consumer. *The Uses of Sociology*, New York: Basic Books, Inc. pp359-390.

Goeke, Joseph R. (1961). The two-step flow of communication-the theory re-examined. Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Fall, pp459-461.

Katz, Elihu (1973). The two-step flow of communication: an up-to-date report of an hypothesis. In Enis and Cox(eds.), *Marketing Classics*, p175-193.

Lazarsfeld, Paul and Menzel, Herbert. Mass Media and Personal Influence, in Schramm (ed.), *The Science of Human Communication*, pp.94-115.

Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., and Gaudet H. (1948). *The People's Choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Leiss, Julie (1992). Print Ads top TV in reaching influentials (Roper Organization research on reaching influential consumers). *Advertising Age*, Sept 14, v63, n37, p44.

Poltrack, Terence. (1985). Influencing the Influentials (Corporate Advocacy Advertising). *Marketing and Media Decisions*, August, v20, p56.

Merton, Robert (1948). Patterns of Influence: a study of interpersonal influence and of communications behavior in a local community. In Lazarsfeld, Paul and Stanton, Frank (eds.), *Communication Research*, NewYork: Harper and Brothers. pp180-215.

Weimann, Gabriel (1991). The influentials: back to the concept of opinion leaders?. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer, v55, n2, p 267.

Weimann, Gabriel. (1994). Is there a two-step flow of Agenda Setting? *International Journal of Public Opinion*, v6, n4, p323.

Ode to Paul Lazarsfeld

Finally, my advice to all future and present students of communication theories, get familiar with babelfish, the translator. Lazarsfeld was a very influential person in his time, and he remains so today. There are countless websites and readings devoted to his research. Unfortunately, many of them are in German. For those of you who know German, this is no concern. For the rest of us, there is a wonderful utility that will translate these entire sites! (As yet, I am not aware of an easy solution for translating periodicals and books.) Feel free to email me when you find one.

Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz are well-known as the fathers of functional theory, and their book *Personal Influence,* published in 1955, is considered to be *the* handbook to the theory. In researching the effects of the media on the voting public in Elmira, New York in 1940, Lazarsfeld and his team of researchers asked the question as to **whether the Hypodermic Needle approach, where (presumably) the mass media would affect the actions of the voting populations, was a valid model of communication**. In the 1940s, social researchers needed to question psychologically-based communications theories in an attempt to more clearly define how information flows from a source to its audience. Therefore Lazarsfeld investigated the flow

of voting information in Elmira, as well as in Erie County, Ohio, and in the process placed the Hypodermic Needle under the most intense of microscopes.

The specific methods and results of this study were published in Lazarsfeld 's *The People's Choice* in 1948 (first edition). It is here that functional theory and the Two - Step Flow model of communication are conceived. Stephen W. Littlejohn summarizes the results of the Elmira study nicely:

The researchers found an unexpected occurrence that, although unconfirmed, implied a possible strong involvement of interpersonal communication in the total mass communication process. This effect ... had a major impact on the conception of mass communication (1989, p.262).

Essentially what Lazarsfeld discovered is that many voters regard family members and close personal friends, and not the mass media, as major influences in the decision making process (Lazarsfeld et al 1968, p.vi). These people of influence, who pass on information received in the media to other people in society, were coined opinion leaders. The researchers found that "crystallizers," or those who had a 'don't know' opinion as to who to vote for in October before the 1940 election, tended to vote the way their friends and colleagues voted in November - and thus the presence (and importance) of opinion leaders surged to the forefront (1968, p.xxiv).

Katz and Lazarsfeld pursued this notion of opinion leadership further in a study of the flow of information in Decatur, Illinois in 1945. This is the basis of *Personal Influence.* Through this research Lazarsfeld and Katz supported their hypothesis that mass media is filtered through what are known as opinion leaders. These opinion leaders tend to "[exert] a disproportionately great influence on the vote intentions of their fellows" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, p.32). Moreover, through the discovery of the concept of opinion leaders, Katz and Lazarsfeld concluded that:

... the traditional image of the mass persuasion process must make room for 'people' as intervening factors between the stimuli of the media and resultant opinions, decisions, and actions (1955, p.32-33).

Interpersonal communication must have a place in communication models, as the presence of such interaction, judging from the conclusions of Katz and Lazarsfeld, is clearly a large factor in determining which messages become publicly accepted and which do not.

Therefore, a visual model of Functional Theory and the Two - Step Flow model of communication would look like this:

Source > Message > Mass Media > Opinion Leaders > General Public

LOOK!

This diagram is based upon a diagram from the home page of Meng Wong at the University of Pennsylvania. To see their site on Communication Models, click here.

To find out more about Katz and Lazarsfeld and their concept of opinion leaders, click here.

Two-step flow of communication

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **two-step flow model** was propounded by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz. Unlike the hypodermic needle model which considers mass media effects to be direct, the two-step flow model stresses human agency.

According to Lazarsfeld and Katz, mass media information is channeled to the "masses" through opinion leadership. The people with most access to media, and having a more literate understanding of media content, explain and diffuse the content to others.

Two-step flow model laid the foundation for diffusion of innovations.