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Katz/Lazarsfeld (1955): Personal Influence

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[English translation of Hepp, A. (2019) Katz, E. / Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955): *Personal Influence. The Part Played by People in Mass Communication*. In *Schlüsselwerke der Netzwerkforschung [Key Works of Network Analysis]*, (Eds, Holzer, B. & Stegbauer, C.) Springer VS, Wiesbaden, pp. 293-296.]

Personal Influence is one of the most influential and most regularly cited piece of American mass communication research written in the post-war period. It is the sequel to a study carried out by Paul Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) on the influence of media coverage on the presidential elections of 1940 (for further context, see Lazarsfeld and Merton in 1964). The book emerged from a 1944 journal-funded research project that set out to investigate media influence on women's decision-making in Decatur, Illinois. Several other researchers were involved in the empirical investigation, including C. Wright Mills. Elihu Katz's contribution enriched the study with an extensive literature review on group sociological research that introduced the concept of the 'interpersonal network' (pp. 82-115). The second part of the publication presents the results from the Decatur empirical study on peer group 'opinion leaders' and the role they play in decision-making. While the two parts complement each other very well, the authors self-critically note that rather than forming a fully integrative analysis the should be considered as companion pieces (p. 12). *Personal Influence* takes a stand against the mass communication research of the day which, Katz and Lazarsfeld argue, short-sightedly understands media impact as a direct influence of media content on socially isolated individuals. By contrast, as demonstrated by the book's subtitle, the authors emphasize the 'part played by people' (p. 13) in the flow of mass communications and in so doing reoriented media and communications research for decades to come.

Katz and Lazarsfeld's central argument hinges on what they refer to as 'the two-step flow of communication' which maintains that the influence media content has does not unfold in a direct manner. Instead, influence is exerted or mediated through the personal networks in which people are embedded and the communication that takes place within them. Through this process, individuals they refer to as 'opinion leaders', that is, individuals who provide interpretations of everyday life as well as current events that orientate others, play a prominent role. This thesis is justified in two ways: theoretically in the first part of the book and empirically in part two.

In theoretically justifying part one, Katz and Lazarsfeld draw attention to a fundamental connection between interpersonal relationships and communication networks (p. 44): On the one hand, *interpersonal relationships* operate as an anchor point for individual opinions, attitudes, habits and values. On the other, these interpersonal relationships imply *networks of interpersonal communication*. In essence, Katz and Lazarsfeld are not simply interested in social networks in general but rather the influence communication networks have on interpersonal relationships and the opinions and attitudes anchored within:

It is our guess that these two characteristics of small, intimate groups – (1) person to person *sharing of opinions and attitudes* (which we often shall refer to as group norms) and (2) person-to-person *communications networks* – are the keys to an adequate understanding of the intervening role played by interpersonal relations in the mass communications process. (p. 45)

Their empirical study of the 'two-step flow of communication' in part two of the book is based on a snowball sampling technique of follow-up interviews. This approach broke new methodological ground. To this day, their methodological innovation is still tangible in the detailed appendix, included in the book, in which the problems of the procedure are discussed in detail. The aim of the follow-up interviews, which were later used more widely in network research, was, on the one hand, to verify whether the interpersonal communication mentioned in the first interview took place the way it was described. On the other hand, the follow-up interviews were used to help determine whether or not, and if so, in which ways, interpersonal communication had an 'influence' on decision making processes (p. 355). The study's analysis was drawn from around 800 interviews. They focused on four areas of everyday decision-making: marketing, fashion, (local) public affairs, and visits to the cinema.

The main result of their analysis was that in almost 60% of decisions made no other person was remembered as being relevant to the decision-making process as decisions were generally made alone and, at times, these decisions were influenced by mass media. In approximately 40% of decisions made, however, certain discussions were mentioned that were identified as relevant to the decision-making process. Family members and friends were typically mentioned as communication partners (p. 142-143). In this way they were able to identify particular relationships between opinion leaders ('influentials') and those who orientate themselves toward them ('influencees'). The study found that opinion leadership is domain-specific: opinion leaders and the patterns of the opinion leadership they engage in differ in the areas of marketing, fashion, public affairs, and films. The opinion leaders are 'experts' in their respective area and are asked for advice by other members of their communication networks in the course of everyday life.

Katz and Lazarsfeld revealed that opinion leaders can be found within different educational groups, that they are particularly sociable people, and that they have many social contacts. Across the various educational groups, opinion leaders were found to use more media than those who orient themselves towards them and that they used these media as an important information source (p. 310). These opinion leaders then passed on their knowledge to others in their personal networks as if they were the foundation of their opinions and attitudes. This is the essential nature of the 'two-step flow of communication'.

In a moment of reflexivity, however, the two authors criticize their own investigation as they did not fully grasp this "flow of communication" as they could only describe isolated 'influential-influencee' relationships (p. 309). In order to adequately understand the two-step flow of communication, a full investigation of an entire network within a municipality would have been necessary. In looking back at the study in the present day, however, it is clear that this 'ideal' of analysing an entire network is difficult to realize.

In examining *Personal Influence's* reception and the impact it had on the field, it should be noted, as already mentioned above, that this is one of the most influential and frequently cited

American studies of media and communications research of the post-war era. Reviews from the time heralded the work as a 'major contribution to our understanding of the communication process' (Eagle 1957: 176), and as a 'brilliant' theoretical contribution (Riley 1956: 355). From a methodological point of view, the reflexivity harnessed in their approach was considered exemplary. Overall, the study's contribution to media and communications research consists first of all in having dissolved the dominant theory that there exists one homogeneous audience. According to Katz and Lazarsfeld's thesis, personal influences in social groups and their communication networks have the potential to be more significant than mass media content. It is important, therefore, to consider the social context of media use if one wants to imply an argument related to media content's influence. For this approach, the study provided a theoretical and empirical framework to consider the internal structure of groups as well as the subsequent communication about media content in any analysis of media and communications.

From a network research perspective, Katz and Lazarsfeld's book forms an early connection between media and communications research and network analysis as the two authors sought to capture the idea of opinion leadership as supported by media use in group (communication) networks (see Schenk 1995: 6- 13; see also Schenk 1984). Nevertheless, it is precisely at this point that the gaps between the theoretical and empirical sections of the study noted by Katz and Lazarsfeld are revealed. The empirically valid combination of network analysis and research on opinion leadership would only succeed in later studies.

Personal Influence should be considered as the starting point for a long-standing tradition in media and communications research that, among others, Elihu Katz has worked to develop (see Katz 1957, as an overview Okada 1986 and Robinson 1976). To this day, even as our media environment has become rapidly and increasingly more complex, *Personal Influence* remains an important reference point for understanding the relationships between public engagement, social groups, and personal communication (Couldry and Markham, 2006; Watts and Dotts, 2007) by opening up a differentiated view of what was previously only vaguely described as a mass audience.

Translation: Jeanette Asmuss & Marc Kushin

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