Reading 'The People's Choice' in its 70th anniversary: from 'opinion leaders' to 'digital influencers'

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Abstract

This paper outlines some aspects of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet's book "The People's Choice", published in 1948. The aim is to discuss the actuality of some key concepts of the book, especially the notions of "opinion leader", "personal influence" and "two-step flow" in the context of current discussions on the Epistemology of Communication. The contextualization of the book in its historical and epistemological background allows us to observe at least three aspects: (1) the contemporary validity of the notion of "influence" as an analytical category; (2) the place of social media in the formation of opinion; and (3) the idea of "opinion leader" or "influencer" in the flow of opinions of society. These elements are discussed from the appropriation of the book in the Theories of Communication.

Keywords: Communication Theory. Two-Step Flow. Epistemology. Lazarsfeld.

Introduction

When it was published in 1948, "The People's Choice" inaugurated another chapter in the history of Communication research by bringing to the discussion on media persuasion and influence the dimension of interpersonal relationships, previously neglected by researchers[1].

The book, written by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, proved to be highly influential over the following decades, particularly for the proposal of the "Two-step flow" communication model, which underlines the presence of the "opinion leader" as fundamental in the communicative process as an intermediary between the media and other people in the audience.

In the following years, the book sparked several other studies, conducted in part by the authors of the original research, such as "Voting" (1948) and "Personal Influence" (1951). At the same time, its notions attracted innumerable criticisms, some of which questioning the generalization of the relatively limited empirical material of the study,

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1 There seems to be some disagreement about the date of publication: Katz (1955), for example, cites the publication in 1944, while most other references, such as Lacy and Stamm (2016), mention 1948. It is possible that the first edition, published in 1944 by the New York University publisher, has had limited circulation, and the second, from the Columbia University publisher, has been widely publicized. Martino (2010) indicates that "partial results" were published in 1944, indicating 1948 as the publication of the book.

carried out in a small American city, or to the theoretical problems of the categories "two-step flow" and "opinion leader".

The book posed a number of problems concerning both communication research and in politics and democracy issues by analysing the decision-making of voters throughout an election campaign.

According to Katz (1960), the book combined, for the first time, social psychology research on group dynamics and studies of the so-called "mass communication", especially its agency to influence decisions. By doing so, the authors would have modified the earlier perspective of "unlimited effects" toward a more nuanced model in which the media message was counterbalanced by the network of interpersonal relationships.

The debate over these proposals guaranteed the book and its authors in the following decades a special place in media and political studies and their incorporation into the canon of Theory of Communication. In this sense, the idea of "two-way flow" has become a "model" for the study of communication, present among others in the classic books of McQuail (2010), McQuail and Windhal (1995), Severin and Tankard (2000) and Willett (1992), among others.

In Brazilian research, the reception of the book still does not seem to have been mapped. "The People's Choice" has not been translated into Portuguese. The "two-step flow" can be found on Communication Theory books such as Littlejohn (1982), Kunczik (1997), or the McQuail translation (2010). In the case of Brazilian authors, the first detailed presentation is by Barros Filho (1995), followed by Hohlfeldt, Martino and França (2001), and Martino (2009).

In a way, treatment as a "model" or "theory", separated from the rest of the research, has left aside other aspects of "The People's Choice" that is worth a new reading.

The notion of "influence" in media studies seems to persist as a model for analysis even after decades of reception research has shown other perspectives and the digital media environment has opened up specific forms of personal interaction.

This persistence, moreover, was the uneasiness that instigated this re-reading of "The People's Choice". The interest of researchers within the framework of orientation relationships in understanding digital influencers, the "impact" or "influence" of the media, has led to the question: how is the notion of "influence" Communication? A complete answer goes beyond the pretensions of this text; it is an initial approach in the form of a reflection on what a book aimed at media and influence has to say.

This text outlines some aspects of "The People's Choice", discussing its context of production and actuality of some of its key concepts, especially the notion of "opinion leader", from a perspective of the discussions on Communication Epistemology. The argument develops threefold: (1) the contextualization of the book in its historical and epistemological background; (2) Its contemporary articulation of the notion of "influence"

as an analytical category; and (3) the idea of "opinion leader" or "influencer" in the flow of opinions in society.

The idea has no pretensions to novelty. Stamm (2010) makes a critical appraisal of a previous work by Lazarsfeld, "Radio and the Printed Page", from 1941, and Lacy and Stamm (2016) examine "The People's Choice".

The context of publishing

In 1947, three years after the publication of "The People's Choice" by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, the "Dialectic of Enlightement" by Adorno and Horkheimer, most remembered in Communication Studies by its chapter "The culture industry", was published.

The two studies could not be closer and at the same time more distant. "The People's Choice" was the empirical electoral campaign analysis in Erie County, Ohio, USA, based on a detailed survey of voting intentions. A localized, small-scale study, from which some theoretical propositions were made. On the other hand, the "Dialectic of Enlightement" is a kind of fresco elaborated from a philosophical view of history and culture, a long-range study with general propositions and few empirical data.

And yet the two books bear the mark of their time, particularly the concerns of World War II and the presence of advertising as determining factors in the behavior of citizens.

The comparison between two books is not only intended to contextualize "The People's Choice", but also to remember that the work is established as a model for doing research. And, no less, in the years preceding the publication of the book, Adorno worked with Lazarsfeld at the Radio Research Institute, coordinated by the latter at Columbia University in New York. The collaboration was short. Adorno never participated in works like those of Lazarsfeld and harshly criticized this way of doing research, calling it "administrative research" in contrast to "critical research". Adorno aimed Lazarsfeld's positivist ground, and also his institutional ties.

Incidentally, the production context of "The People's Choice" is controversial. For the sake of focus, these problems are not discussed here, but it is worth recalling Porto (2003, p.4): "Lazarsfeld's critics are correct in emphasizing how the communications industries and the state influenced the 'limited effects' model, pointing to some of its major limitations. However, these critics tend to ignore various contributions from the Columbia group".

In North-American research scenario, "The People's Choice" presented itself as a criticism of the "influence" model in a tradition that goes back to Gustave LeBon and positivism. Theoretical construction, incidentally, that never came to be formulated completely. In the later "Personal Influence", Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) indicate this way of thinking as "current", but they do not mention source.

Perhaps its closest dialogue is with Lasswell's "Propaganda Technique in the I World War" (1927). While Lasswell investigated the weight of political propaganda in

public opinion formation, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, looking at the factors that defined electoral decision-making, found no evidence of direct influence but the presence of intermediaries.

The idea, as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and Katz (1960) later recognize, was not entirely original. "The People's Choice" seems to dialogue with a certain "spirit of time" in American sociology at the time. Not surprisingly, according to Becker (1999), the interest of anthropology, social psychology and sociology at that time was to find, in small and detailed empirical studies, general elements of the person and society, as Riley and Riley (1971), Cooley (1976), Park (1972) and Riesman (1995).

From "mass" to "interpersonal" in public opinion

The initial question of "The People's Choice" remains: how and why do voters make their choices? The authors conduct all their research around the possible changes of opinion in the electoral scope, interested in seeing what factors contribute to this.

The scenario is that of the US presidential election of 1940. Led by the University of Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research in New York, of which Lazarsfeld was a director, the study used the campaign to learn about the conditions that led a voter to change of opinion. As Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) mention in the following book, "Personal Influence", the question was to delimit what generated the change of opinion, not just the reasons for voting.

The study was not interested in knowing the roots of settled opinions, closed to any kind of influence - for example, prior binding to one of the parties. For Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1967), these voters were not influenced by their opinions. The goal was to understand the motives of the change - the methodological point needed to assess the "influence" of certain factors.

To that end, the town of Erie, Ohio, was chosen. According to the authors, the decision was due to demographic reasons: in the absence of a particularly "representative" location of American population diversity, they explained, a relatively limited space was chosen with a small population that could be examined from a stratified sample.

The authors followed the entire electoral campaign period, then interviewed the sample - 600 people - to observe who changed. Once these people were detected, the reasons for the change were asked. What factors had influenced your change of mind? Why, at that particular moment, had one candidate outgrown the other in his preference?

The answer of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1967) can be formulated in the simple terms: personal influence. "The People's Choice" showed that, in the case studied, personal contacts were more important than other factors in the election decision. Personal relationships were more influential than the media - at that time, synonymous with radio and newspapers - in forming opinion. Personal contacts, family, friends, and co-workers

formed a "network of personal relationships" that was important in choosing a candidate, acting as a sort of filter for media messages, whether news or political propaganda.

This fact, or "discovery", as the authors of the book call it, seems to have been a matter of surprise even to them. In "Personal Influence", discussing and contextualizing the previous research, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explain that their expectation, based on previous investigations, was that of a strong influence of the media.

It was, strictly speaking, an epistemological assumption, still relevant today: all media research, they say, is a research on media effects. Curiously, however, they cite few authors representative of what would be the "current" against which they stand. Note that this is the version of the protagonists of the story and there are other genealogies possible. In any case, by placing the study within a tradition, the authors recognize the existence of a field of studies in consolidation and a dominant tendency in the investigations - the search for "effects".

In "The People's Choice," according to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), the premise loses momentum as "media effects" are challenged by the influence of personal relationships in decision-making. Thus, the research was no longer centered around "effects", but instead showed definite limits to the expected "power of influence" of the media.

Simonson (1996) indicates that the model, when taking into account some forms of association as a barrier to the flow of communication, fits into what it calls the "hope" of social integration. An eventual heterogeneity of media opinions, Habel (2012) indicates, hinders the formation of media "leaders".

Sociologically speaking, "The People's Choice" seems to abandon the notion of "mass" in the direction of a more nuanced work with the concept of "group". For Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1967), the "mass" would be a homogenized set of atomized individuals, with very precarious personal relationships, isolated in their social actions - what the title of Riesman's (1995) study, "The Lonely Crowd", captures accurately.

"The People's Choice", according to its authors, makes a movement "from mass to people". The "rediscovery of people", as put in "Personal Influence", shows that the strength of social bonds, of the "network of interpersonal relationships" is proportionately stronger, and no more media campaign or propaganda can outweigh the power of social networking - risky but possible translation for "interpersonal network"? - at the time of decision-making.

Political opinion, in particular, is not constructed out of a singular and vertical influence of the media, but rather is formed in private conversations, in the wheels of informal interaction of family gatherings, bars, offices, and workplaces. Mentions of the family, neighbors, and known sources of information for people who changed their minds throughout the research outpaced media references, and placed interpersonal relationships as the deciding element in the choice of a candidate.

But no, and this is another point of relevance of the book, any personal contact. Only those who, for some reason, become reference to other individuals. It is an expression that perpetuates itself up to the present in different forms and forms - the "digital influencers" being its recent version - with the same attitude, the "opinion leader".

The "opinion leader" and the flow of information

As Robinson (1976, p.304) points out, the "two-step flow" model is certainly the most enduring contribution of "The People's Choice" in Communication research. Despite the criticisms made over time, the idea was put forward as a counterpoint to the notion of "effects" of the media on an audience.

This contribution has been articulated, even with the digital media environment, as indicated by contemporary research, such as games studies (JUNG et al, 2012), social media (DALMONTE, 2006; AIRES NETO, 2008; RUSSI-DUARTE; AIRES NETO, 2008; OLIVEIRA; MORAES, 2015; SCHÄFER; TADDIKEN, 2015; ZHANG; ZHAO; XU, 2016) or public relations, folkcommunication and politics (BULEGON; MORTARI, 2009; LIMA; LUCHT; SOUZA, 2007; SILVESTRE; ROSA, 2015; CARVALHO; MOTA, 2016).

The notion of "influence" in Communication studies seems to have surpassed its epistemological site of origin, mass media, and remained as a conceptual operator in the digital media environment, particularly in questions about political positions and consumption. The idea of "digital influencers", that is, people who, via social networks, "influence" or "lead trends" could be understood as a distant offspring of the "opinion leader" originally understood by the authors of "The People's Choice" as a highly specialized person in some subject that others turn to when they need to make a decision. This rapprochement of the concept of influence in an environment in which some discourses localized the possibility of a more branched form of communication is symptomatic. However, when we observe studies such as those of Silva and Tessarolo (2016) or Maurício, Gerolis and Medeiros (2017) on the subject, we can note the duration of the idea of the influence of a "leader" - if not the concept in yes, at least of the phenomenon it describes.

These approximations, of course, are only indices of the permanence of the notion of "opinion leader": it would certainly be an anachronism to use a notion formulated in a totally different context to account for a media phenomenon - digital networks - never imagined by the authors of "The People's Choice". On the other hand, it is possible to find, in theory, elements that allow, within a critical epistemology, to understand phenomena beyond the original to which it was destined. In this particular, as Amorim (2001, p.17) recalls, the possibility of abstraction of a theory puts it in dialogue with other contexts and realities.

One of the interpretative elements in the "opinion leader" idea is the horizontality of the process. It is symptomatic of the authors' use of the word "network" to define the circuit of personal influences in which the "opinion leader" is. This figure is not "above" other

people in absolute terms, but only at the moment when their information, experience and point of view become necessary for the decision making or formation of group opinion; it is not an external, distant figure, but it is inserted in the same context of the other participants, standing out only momentarily.

The sense of familiarity and, why not, of intimacy, point out Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1967), is exactly one of the sources that guarantees the effectiveness of the action of the leaders in forming the opinion of the other individuals. This sense of closeness, they explain, ensures the strength of the interpersonal networks of contacts where the opinion leader is expressed.

Close to this idea is the notion that the conversation is fundamental in the construction of political opinion, another idea that would have large descendants in the studies of Communication. In informal conversations, they say, there is the potential for influence and change of opinion.

Unlike formal situations of debate and exchange of views, in which the interlocutors are already prepared to counter-argument, informal conversations are not necessarily constructed as rhetorical arguments to convince the other.

Moreover, they occur much more frequently, and in a more welcoming environment to dialogue, than the formal political debate. Interpersonal networks in this regard tend to "refract" the opinions expressed in the media and take advantage of them according to the perspectives of the group in which they are discussed. Personal relations are a space of "mediation" - the expression is Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) - for the reformulation or rejection of the reality presented by the media.

In the view of the authors, there is a change in the whole communication process, replacing the idea of "sender - message – receiver" with a circuit of opinion formation and exchange of ideas of which the media is only a part, as a distribution space of an opinion to be later re-elaborated within the groups, especially on the initiative of the "opinion leaders", triggered when (and if) necessary.

Another argument of the authors is also addressed to the everyday: there is no opinion about everything, just as no one is interested in all matters. The "influence" of the media is linked to the prior interest of individuals in a subject. One of the reasons for the predominance of personal influence over that of the media lies in the influencers' knowledge of the interests and dispositions of the people with whom they talk and with whom they share their opinion.

As Tuzzo and Figueiredo (2010, p.81) point out, the emphasis on interpersonal relations indicates "in addition to having different reactions to the messages on the part of the recipients, there were also the presence of other receptors, more attentive and more interested, acting as mediators". Martino (2010, p.9) points out that "the merit of the Two Stage model would not be in defense of the thesis of limited effects, but in pointing out the need to articulate two interrelated communication systems".

The "opinion leaders" are not, in this sense, prominent figures, but who are interested in a topic and, from there, seek more information. The individual does not become an "opinion leader" because of his social position or prestige, but because of his engagement with a subject, about which he reads and informs himself about it.

When the need for a decision arises, the message of the media would reach the leader in the first place - for his personal interest - and hence be shared - the central idea of "Two-step flow". The "flow" is not a discretion of the media message in two (or more) steps: it is the insertion of the media message in a reelaboration circuit.

The idea of "two-way flow" in this sense distances itself from the notion of "effects" and anticipates the idea of "consumption" or "uses" - the notion of "uses and gratifications" of the receiver in relation to the message of the media, sometimes associated with the "Two-Step Flow" model, is cited in a footnote. To what extent are the authors successful in proposing that the influence of the media is displaced in its model is questionable and presents itself justly as one of the subject's controversial points.

Final considerations

To propose a re-reading of classic works of an area means, to some extent, to deal with the temptation of anachronism, as the anticipations of problems and concepts, or to analyze contemporary problems from an indiscriminate "use" or "application" of concepts. This risk is reinforced when it comes to communication-related problems in which the speed of technology and economic flows make the scenarios and environments change rapidly. To bring uncritically to the discussion in the second decade of the twenty-first century a book published in the middle of the last century would be to ignore that in terms of media and technology, these are fundamentally different universes.

At the same time, there is the equally complicated risk of not knowing the history of a field to imagine that all ideas are new and that the contemporary scenario implies only ruptures, not continuities, in relation to previous moments. In this way, the mere fact of having been formulated in the past, in another historical epoch, would be responsible for invalidating a proposition or a theory. This is to reserve for them, as mentioned, only one place in the "museum of theories" - in the scope of Communication Theories, sometimes the "schools" mentioned only as historical curiosity, if not at most for criticism and invalidation.

Reading "The People's Choice" seventy years after its publication is also a reflexive exercise of standing between these two extremes, trying to understand the context of the book's production while questioning the validity of its postulates. It is in this sense that we can observe, in this final text, some ambivalences in the book.

In epistemological terms, his way of doing research based on a radical empiricism, closer to the exact sciences or a positive sociology, has long been object of criticism. On the one hand, it leaves out more critical perspectives that take account of the movements

and contradictions. On the other hand, studies such as these seek to generalize data obtained in relatively restricted universes. Finally, the attempt to model social phenomena is the object of criticism even in the Anglo-Saxon universe of research, where it comes from, as Deutsche (1952) and Willett (1992) recall.

"The People's Choice" seems to present itself as a watershed in Communication research by bringing at least two fundamental concepts for further research, shifting the notion of "mass" into a view of the importance of personal relationships in process of communication and the idea of the "opinion leader" as an analytical concept to understand the formation of an audience's opinion on a particular subject. At the same time, the research does not fail to present what today could be understood as fragilities in the construction of its analysis, something emphasized by followers and critics of the work.

In spite of these theoretical-methodological questions, the influence of "The People's Choice" in the formation of operational concepts of research in the studies of Communication could scarcely be left aside when one thinks of the canon of Theories of Communication. Moreover, the analytical potential of their concepts, as suggested by recent research on the subject, indicate some possibilities of interpreting contemporary phenomena from them. A challenge in the direction of new critical approaches. And, why not, possibilities for reading.

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