

Political polarization, influencers and personal relationships: a reading of Paul Lazarsfeld's studies on voting

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Abstract

The concept of ‘opinion leaders’, formulated in the 1940s by Paul Lazarsfeld and collaborators, has gained a renewed importance in Communication studies, particularly in works on digital influencers. However, the idea is not always situated in its context, the books *The People's Choice* (1948), *Voting* (1954) and *Personal Influence* (1955), resulting in its isolation from the epistemological thread from which it has emerged. This paper, grounded on a reading of the books, highlights three aspects of Lazarsfeld's model that seem to have been less discussed in the area's literature and that can be articulated with contemporary phenomena: (1) the importance of personal relationships and small groups in decision taking by individuals; (2) the emergence of opinion leaders due to trust bonds and (3) the polarization as a result of opinion homogenization within groups and hostility towards opposing opinions. These elements are discussed against the background of communication epistemology studies.

Keywords: Communication Theory. Influence. Opinion Leader. Lazarsfeld.

Introduction

In the early 1940s, a group from Columbia University, United States, arrived in the small county of Erie, in the state of Ohio, to carry out research into the voting intentions of the local population in that year's presidential elections. Led by Austrian sociologist Paul F.

Lazarsfeld and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the group was linked to the Bureau for Applied Social Research, based at the university.

His research question was one of the same ones still asked nowadays in any election: What makes a person vote for this or that candidate? Just like today, there was no shortage of bets: previous convictions, proximity of values, electoral propaganda and media influence were among the candidates for explanation, without, however, being conclusive. To formulate an answer, the research team found it necessary, instead of looking at the media, to study how voters received these messages.

Lazarsfeld was chosen for the work because of his experience with studies of this type. In the immediately preceding years, thanks to a research grant in the United States, he had led research into radio program listening, the Princeton Radio Research Project. Among his collaborators was another newcomer from Europe, Theodor W. Adorno – who, from the very beginning, had sharp differences with Lazarsfeld, later becoming one of his main critics (ADORNO, 1995; POLLAK, 2018; CARONE, 2019; POOLEY; JERÁBEK, 2022).

The scene in Erie was different. The study was not about the radio audience or the public's musical taste, but sought to understand the dynamics of voting. Opinion polls had been developed in a relatively recent period, and the possibility of accurately predicting the outcome of an election was on the agenda of Communication and Politics studies – in addition to being good business both for research institutes and the political field (POLLAK, 2018). In general, these electoral polls were carried out using questionnaires applied to a representative statistical sample of the population, in a relatively similar way to what is done today. This made it possible to understand important variables, as well as their correlations – for example, between voting and age, location or class. And it also gave social research an aura of scientificity that was quite welcome at that time, as Becker (2022) recalls.

Lazarsfeld and his team's gaze was on another aspect. Opinion polls, no matter how well conducted, showed statistically how people voted, but left aside a fundamental aspect: the motives and reasons why a person chose one candidate and not another – and, even more so, why they change their opinion. What made a person choose someone? At what point in the electoral process was this choice made? What factors would lead a person to doubt their choice or even change it? What was the role of the media – at that time, newspapers and radio – in decision-making?

Understanding these questions required a methodology that included, on the one hand, broader interviews; on the other, a broad time interval, covering the entire electoral period, in order to observe the dynamics of changes and choices.

The option was to dedicate six months to research, starting in May 1940 and ending in November, right after the elections. Instead of questionnaires with closed answers, individual interviews with a representative group of 600 people, chosen from an initial group of two thousand, were repeated every month.

The result of the research was the book *The People's Choice*, published in commercial edition in 1948 by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet.

The main aspect of the study was to show the decisive importance of personal relationships in decision-making – more than electoral propaganda or media positioning: far from directly influencing political choice, they were the object of debate and conversation among people. At that moment, there was an important role of individuals who were more engaged or well-informed about the topic, named, in the study, “opinion leaders”.

These points seemed to contradict the perspective of a direct influence of the media on electoral choices and, more broadly, on people’s political behavior. At the same time, they showed that “primary groups”, as Riley and Riley (1973) called them, that is, family, work and friends, were decisive in defining political attitudes.

In the following decade, Lazarsfeld and other collaborators repeated this study in Elmira, New York, and obtained similar results. These results were published in 1954 in the book *Voting*, signed by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee; a further elaboration was published in the following year by Katz and Lazarsfeld in *Personal Influence*. Together, these books form a separate chapter in the history of Communication Theories, a kind of “vote trilogy”. They are generally presented in its literature as the model of “limited effects” of the media. Eight decades later, in a radically different scenario, their contribution to Communication research would be questionable. They would perhaps be considered candidates to appear in an imaginary “museum of theories” in the field.

However, in recent years, the idea of “opinion leader” has received renewed attention in studies on digital influencers. In a previous work (MARTINO, 2018), the articulation of the concept with the study of digital influencers, the so-called “influencers”, was noted. When following the growth of this production in the form of articles in academic publications and works presented at events, a question arises: what did this concept originally say about electoral processes? What aspects could be articulated in a political communication scenario marked by social networks, chat groups on apps, blatant circulation of fake news and intense polarization?

This article outlines some of the theoretical proposals about the role of communication in political processes elaborated by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and collaborators in the trilogy composed by *The People’s Choice* (originally published in 1948), *Voting* (1954) and *Personal Influence* (1955). The conceptual examination of the books allows us to outline points of contact with three contemporary issues: (1) the importance of personal relationships and close groups in the individual’s decision-making; (2) the emergence of opinion leaders as a result of a bond of trust and (3) the polarization resulting from the homogenization of internal opinions within a group and the hostility of opposing views. These three aspects are problematized against the background of communication theories, seeking, when possible, contemporary approaches.

This text continues and expands previous discussions on the topic, presenting a dialogue with critical references to this same set of works (MARTINO, 2010; STAMM, 2010; LACY; STAMM, 2016; MARTINO, 2018).

For reasons of space, we decided to reduce the number of direct quotations, opting for paraphrases when possible; in the same way, although each of the books is signed by different

authors, in different order, we decided, when possible, to highlight the authorship of Lazarsfeld – undoubtedly, the main name; finally, given that the objective is not to make an inventory of all the research or differences between the books, we opted for a transversal reading based on the concepts that appear in all three.

The role of studies on voting in the theoretical discourse of communication

The proposals made by Lazarsfeld and his teams tend to be presented in the literature on Communication Theory as a criticism of the previous conception of “unlimited effects” of the media, sometimes identified as “hypodermic needle theory” and personified, at times, in the figure of Harold Lasswell – erroneously, according to Varão (2009; 2021, since Lasswell never formulated a hypothesis in this sense.

This insertion into a theoretical discourse is defined by Katz (2005 [1955]; 1987) in the preface to *Personal Influence* and in subsequent texts, and also accompanied by other authors such as Gitlin (1978) or Pooley and Jerábeck (2022): although he does not mention Lasswell, Katz points to Lazarsfeld's studies as a counterpoint to the hitherto dominant ideas about Communication, focused on the studies on the unlimited effects of a media endowed with exceptional powers in driving opinions and political attitudes.

It is also important to note that theoretical discourses, like all discourse, cannot be separated from their places of origin, and this definition is established both by affiliations to a genealogy and by contrast with others.

In the case of Lazarsfeld's ideas, there is an explicit affiliation with Gabriel Tarde's (1992) conceptions about the importance of conversation in the formation of political public opinion; it is symptomatic, in fact, that Tarde is the only theorist cited more extensively in the three books, especially in *Voting*. At the same time, they position themselves on the opposite side to Durkheim (1995) on the precedence of the social over the individual – which, in his analyses, would offer a foundation for the idea of the media capable of driving opinions and attitudes.

Thus, the concepts of “opinion leader” and “two-step flow”, central in the three works, would be a rescue of the conversation in the formation of public opinion, in a process in which the media occupies an important, but not central, role in the way individuals and groups make considerations and form opinions.

It is equally symptomatic, in fact, that in the preface to the 3rd edition of *Personal Influence*, Katz (2005) evokes a dialogue with nothing less than “Structural Change in the Public Sphere”, by Habermas (2012), which, due to his Frankfurtian affiliation, would be the antipode of Lazarsfeld's thought. The proposed, but not developed, approach is anchored in the importance given to conversation between autonomous individuals in the formation of political opinions.

In other countries, this genealogical perspective is followed in some of the main texts on Communication Theory, such as Willet (1992), McQuail and Windhal (1993), Severin and

Tankard (2000), Maigret (2004) and McQuail (2005): the three books that form the object of this study are presented as a counterpoint to the notion of media omnipotence.

In Brazilian research on Communication Theory, the place of Lazarsfeld's studies seems to be quite restricted. Although he is cited in 13 of the 36 books published with that title between 1967 and 2016, mentions rarely exceed one or two pages, generally in the context of studies on "North American Schools", "Functionalist School" or "Mass Communication Research".

It should also be noted that a good part of these mentions is made based on the book by Mauro Wolf (1999) on communication theories, with rare forays into original works.

The idea of "two-step flow" and "opinion leaders" stands out as a response to the notion of the "unlimited effects" of the media. However, the origins, questions and criticisms of this perspective are rarely problematized in context in these books. Likewise, in the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations, at IBICT, only eleven works are listed with the word "Lazarsfeld" – and four in the CAPES Catalog of Theses and Dissertations. Slightly broader elaborations can be found in the texts by Barros Filho (1995), on ethics, and Gomes (2008), on reception studies.

One of the reasons for this scenario may be the lack of access to his texts: there are only two works by Lazarsfeld published in Brazil – "Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action", written together with Robert K. Merton and included in Cohn (1971), out of print decades ago, and Lima (1969), still in publication; and "Public opinion and classical tradition", in Steinberg (1975), also out of print. One book, *Sociologia*, was published in Portuguese in the 1970s by the publishing house Bertrand, from Lisbon, and is only available on the used book market.

Even critical assessments of his work are difficult to find: Adorno's (1995) negative opinions on the institutional model of statistical research, "administrative research"; Wright Mills's (1965) reservations about "abstract empiricism"; and the "friendly fire" by Merton (1970) on the use of statistics are all out of print. There are some references to his work in Wieggerhaus (2002) and Carone (2019), but the focus, in both cases, is on Adorno's activity in his first years in the United States.

It is not surprising, in this sense, that Lazarsfeld's work remains relatively unknown, being the subject of episodic citations in books in the field, without further development, problematization or criticism. What may be surprising is that, even in this unfavorable scenario, there is a progressive reappropriation of notions of "influence" and "opinion leaders" in research on digital influencers.

The notion of "opinion leader" in the context of interpersonal relationships

The best-known aspect of the three books and, to a certain extent, of Lazarsfeld's work in Communication studies, is the notion of "opinion leader", a component of the idea of a "two-step flow" of communication. If, in the mid-1970s, Robinson (1976, p. 304) already pointed out

that this was the “most influential and lasting” contribution of Lazarsfeld’s studies, in recent years, his presence in Communication studies has been gaining renewed attention, particularly in research on digital influencers.

Hornhardt (2021), in a genealogy of influencers, mentions this study as one of the sources, and this relationship is followed, more or less closely, by works such as those by Turcotte *et al.* (2015), Zhang, Zhao and Xu (2016), Oliveira and Moraes (2015), Karhawi (2017), Pereira and Boaventura (2019), Gama (2019), Backes (2019), Sperb (2020) and Primo, Matos and Monteiro (2021), in a list far from being complete.

In general terms, the basic idea states that media messages do not reach all people directly and equally; they are received, firstly, by the people most interested or knowledgeable about a subject, the “opinion leaders” who, in a second moment, would pass them on to others. In this way, the communication process would proceed from the media to the leaders (step 1) and then from them to other people (step 2), hence the notion of a “two-step flow”. This simplified version usually appears in communication theory manuals and, in broad terms, captures the essence of the conception developed by Lazarsfeld and his collaborators.

This idea raises a series of questions that a more detailed reading of the three books allows us to outline a little more clearly.

One of the central points of the concept, the notion of “opinion leader”, is probably one of the main targets of criticism in relation to the “two-step flow” concepts. In the preface to the 3rd edition of *Personal Influence*, Katz (2005) indicates how this issue, present since the initial study, is susceptible to criticism – such as that of Troidahl (1966), a few years after the original, suggesting its ineffectiveness –, due to the problematic elements that immediately emerge from its reading.

Removed from the context of empirical research that highlighted its existence, the idea of “opinion leader” presents epistemological problems in terms not only of its empirical demonstration, but also of methodological operationalization. In a quick read, the idea of “opinion leader” can be taken in absolute terms, as if they were people entitled to offer advice on any subject to a group of people; their “leadership”, even in a superficial view, would mean directing the way in which others should think about a given subject.

If understood as a social actor endowed with specific characteristics that would make them more capable than the ordinary set of recipients, it would be difficult to carry out an empirical demonstration of their existence: it would be hard to find someone who, due to their qualities or achievements, is heard about any and all subjects. It is possible, of course, to find positions from artists, athletes and celebrities regarding subjects or events of public interest, but it would be difficult to identify them as “opinion leaders” and find a heterogeneous group willing to listen and accept their considerations.

This type of understanding would lead Lazarsfeld and his collaborators’ proposal to a dead end: in the absence of opinion leaders capable of effectively being seen as such, that is, devoid of widely recognized legitimacy, the entire theoretical construction could immediately

collapse: the lack of a leader would undermine the hypothesis of “two steps” and, in a way, would indicate the fragility of the theoretical elaboration.

A careful reading of the books, however, shows a slightly different panorama, especially in terms of a constant concern to limit the notion of “two-step flow” to the context of the research carried out.

Book authors insist that the idea of “opinion leader” cannot be taken as synonymous with the ability of some individuals to lead or modify the opinions and attitudes of everyone else. This interpretation would simply transfer from the media to these individuals an unlimited power of influence that the model seeks to refute: the three works, taken as a whole, seem to point to the impossibility of attributing a broad effect of influence to anyone –the media or opinion leaders.

The issue of theoretical genealogy comes into play here again: Lazarsfeld and his teams do not seem to be interested in the macrosocial aspects of interaction as a generic phenomenon spread throughout society; their concern, as stated by Tarde (1992), is to understand the role of conversation in the formation of opinions. Note the persistence of the word “influence” as a central category of analysis: although they seek to distance themselves from a previous hypothetical model of media influence, Lazarsfeld and his collaborators continue with the notion that social subjects are, or tend to be, according to the situation, “influenced” by a third element in their decision-making process.

Directly, there are no individuals capable of influencing the opinions of others at any time to Lazarsfeld and his teams; the opinion leader is any person to whom, in a given situation, others turn in search of information on a subject.

Opinion leadership exists within groups in which, in moments of conversation about a certain subject, their opinion is taken into account – and even then, not because of their personal characteristics, but because of their engagement, interest and prior knowledge about the topic at hand. Katz and Lazarsfeld (2005 [1955], p.3) mention a “horizontal opinion leadership” to make this contextual, but not absolute, character of the leader evident.

When we ask for someone’s opinion determined to take their views into account (that is, when the request for opinion is not in the context of politeness, but in terms of decision-making), we consider that person as an “opinion leader” on that subject. Their status of influence, in this sense, could be interpreted as a trust bond; this trust relationship and credibility enables someone to “lead the opinion” of others, and this type of connection tends to occur in social interactions delimited by groups.

It is no coincidence that, in the three books, Lazarsfeld and his collaborators are particularly interested in understanding the group ties of the people interviewed: if opinions emerge from conversation, leaders can only be present in interactional dynamics within already existing circuits of communication based on proximity, reciprocity and trust – social groups.

The greatest concern of the theoretical literature about the figure of opinion leaders leaves less space for the relational aspects from which leadership emerges: the group,

especially small groups, in which relationships are characterized by greater proximity and intensity of interactions. Apparently, the perspective of “personal influence” seems to assume that communication can be considered “mass” in origin (the large media corporations, in Lazarsfeld’s time; perhaps it is possible to draw some parallel with the algorithmic resources that disseminate information on a large scale developed by big digital platform companies today), but in the scope of reception the main unit is the group, not the atomized individual who constitutes a mass.

Homogeneity and polarization: interpersonal communication and leadership in groups

A good part of *The People’s Choice, Voting and Personal Influence* is dedicated to the group ties of each person interviewed. Personal relationships, within the context of the groups to which one belongs in daily activities, prove to be fundamental in individuals’ decision-making, especially in the changes that occur over time and verified through repeated interviews.

However, group bonds are not presented in a deterministic way – it would be replacing “society” with “group” as an instance of imposing opinions. Loyalties, emotional aspects, family ties, obligations and professional interests are constitutive elements of groups, and imply not only different degrees of adherence and participation by individuals, but also different importance when choosing a candidate.

The convinced voter of a party, for example, not only makes their decisions in the initial stages of the electoral process but also rarely changes their opinion: their primary group tends to be made up of people who think and vote like them, which guarantees mutual reinforcement of points of view. On the other hand, those who have not yet decided tend to be more susceptible to comments from other people according to the relationship established within a group.

The relevance of the group as one of the fundamental units in individuals’ decision-making is central to understanding the two-step flow in a more fluid way and closer to the perspectives highlighted in the books, especially in *Voting and Personal Influence*. Apparently, to understand opinion leadership it is necessary to keep in mind its episodic nature, limited to a sphere of reciprocity and trust established within a conversation group.

If it is possible to make a contemporary approach, we can look at the concern, in recent elections, with the circulation of information, both true and false, in chat groups on applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram and similar ones. Keeping a chronological and technological distance, some common points can be traced between the dynamics of WhatsApp groups and the perspectives found by Lazarsfeld.

The process generally begins with the existence of groups formed by people with similar interests, activities or ideas – the “family group”, “work group” or some other specific activity. People’s participation in groups is uneven: it would be possible to point out the existence of a generally small number of engaged individuals, who frequently write posts or share information,

followed by a majority of participants more willing to observe or participate occasionally. More engaged participants tend to post information found in other spaces, such as news portals, social networks or other groups they belong to. They are the source of the information that reaches all other participants.

Evidently, an exact comparison is not possible between the monolithic perspective of mass communication, studied in the three books, with the plurality of digital media connections; however, if the observed aspect is the existence of group interactions characterized by differences in engagement and interest in obtaining and interpreting information, it is not very far from the perspective of opinion leadership responsible for taking the lead in the debate regarding a certain subject.

Note, for example, that in discussions about the dissemination of so-called “fake news” the main concern is not usually with its existence in itself, but with its dissemination in chat groups on digital platforms (CALVO; ARUGUETE, 2020).

In the dynamics of small groups, the sharing of information tends to be linked exactly to this homogeneity, which not only reinforces already stabilized points of view, with the constant reiteration of the assumptions on which it is based.

Following an example present in *Personal Influence*, during the election period, the tendency of a Republican Party voter would be to seek out their fellow members to talk to and seek support for their convictions: their primary network of contacts for this purpose would be other voters for the same party. By talking mostly to other Republicans, this voter would see an electoral scenario close to that of his colleagues, built from the sharing of information on the subject – the proposals, the candidates and their attitudes, the speeches and actions of the opponents, the opinions regarding the elections, more or less close positions and so on. This leads to the homogenization observed in the three studies and the progressive stabilization of opinions and points of view, tending to be more aligned with the group.

It is necessary to take into account that no individual belongs to a single group, and conflicts of loyalty, engagement, participation and interest are necessarily part of the individual’s political decision-making process – throughout life, people establish distinct degrees of engagement with different groups, according to their interests and possibilities at each moment.

The three studies highlight the idea of a conflict of interests and connections as a fundamental point in the political decision-making process: in each group there tend to be leaders who seek, as a whole, to put their points of view on the agenda and pursue the agreement of other participants. For the individual, decision-making also means thinking in terms of dealing with their various loyalties and degrees of engagement with these opinion leaders – and with their own actions in this regard, as appropriate.

The “personal influence” in the title of the third book seems to emphasize more the idea of “personal” as the place of opinion formation rather than a unique “influence” exerted from another person, although authors do not rule out this possibility - they even observe it empirically in some cases in *The People’s Choice*.

The counterpoint to this sense of internal homogeneity of groups is a word that, quite familiar to contemporary political vocabulary, causes a surprising effect when it appears for the first time in *Voting*: polarization.

The meaning of the expression is not exactly that used today, which indicates the formation of a radical political dichotomy around two contrasting views on reality. However, the propositions of Lazarsfeld and his teams are close to the idea: the progressive homogenization of opinions in circulation within a group tends to create a proportional scenario of hostility to opposing ideas, defended by other groups. As homogeneous opinions stabilize within a group, individuals will be less willing to put them into debate with defenders of other opinions. Over time, as more people make their final choices, the tendency is for defenders of opposing opinions to move away progressively.

In *Voting*, the authors seem to suggest that, at a certain point, the debates between groups become minimal, with each of the candidates concentrating around them groups that are relatively homogeneous in terms of political choice. Empirical data suggests that polarization tends to reduce the space for debate between groups as the possibilities of influencing the definition or change of candidate become smaller. It would not be difficult to find parallels with the contemporary scenario, especially in the digital media environment, where the exposure of political opinions rarely leads to any effective type of debate or exchange of ideas.

Personal influence and opinion leadership occur in relation to the dynamics of each group: homogeneity and polarization in groups present themselves as relevant factors in the individuals' decision-making processes.

Final remarks

The works of Lazarsfeld and his collaborators have had a wide descent in communication studies, and have attracted a correlate number of criticisms. There is a considerable reinterpretation of the notion of “opinion leader”, which indicates a perhaps unexpected heuristic potential of the theory in the digital media environment – “unexpected” insofar as Lazarsfeld's original ideas were developed in a media scenario in which the cinema and the radio were the dominant media, television was still a novelty and the existence of a global information network or smartphones were close to science fiction.

At the same time, the prestige of the notion of “opinion leader” and “personal influence” as an interpretative category of the digital media environment seems to have left less space for other fundamental concepts of Lazarsfeld and his teams, the limitations of the notion of “leadership” and its context in group relations. The contrast between the theory, as initially presented, and its contemporary actions allow, in epistemological terms, to observe the current readings of the texts and to understand the use of these concepts in recent research.

By offering a different perspective to the notion of “influence”, a kind of foundational trauma of Communication research, these works are situated in a narrative about studies in the area that deserves to be critically reviewed.

Observing these epistemological movements in Communication also allows us to interpret in scale the influence of Lazarsfeld’s propositions in the chronology of Communication Theories, especially by questioning existing narratives, both critical and apologetic.

Developed over a decade and a half, *The People’s Choice, Voting and Personal Influence* present contributions that allow an interpretation of contemporary phenomena, not only in the media scenario, but in society as a whole, a point to take into consideration when reflecting upon the relevance and interpretative potential of a theory.

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Data availability

The author declare that data supporting the research are contained in the article.

Conflict of interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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