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по общественным наукам

# **ЧЕЛОВЕК: ОБРАЗ И СУЩНОСТЬ. ГУМАНИТАРНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ**

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# **HUMAN BEING: IMAGE AND ESSENCE. HUMANITARIAN ASPECTS**

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## ДИСКУРСЫ, ОБРАМЛЯЮЩИЕ ГРАЖДАНСКОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО

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**Рибейро Р., мл.**

### **ТРАДИЦИОННЫЕ МАССМЕДИА И ЛИДЕРЫ МНЕНИЙ. СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ МЕДИА И ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ В ЦЕПИ КОММУНИКАЦИИ<sup>1</sup>**

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*Аннотация.* Представлен анализ использования Интернета в Соединенных Штатах Америки. Оценивается аудитория двух кандидатов в президенты США во время предвыборной кампании 2016 г., организованной в социальных интернет-сетях. Сопоставлению подвергается эффект воздействия коммуникации, опосредованной социальными сетями, особенно на платформе Twitter, и традиционными каналами коммуникации (телевидение, пресса). С опорой на «теорию двух этапов коммуникации» (two-step flow theory), модель, предложенную Е. Кацем и П. Лазарсфельдом, и в соответствии с технологическими эволюциями конца XX в. в статье приводятся результаты эпистемологического анализа современного корпуса текстов лидеров мнений в предвыборной кампании 2016 г. Среди прочего исследуется, как по сравнению с официальными СМИ и официальной позицией государственных органов социальные интернет-сети способствовали позиционированию действующего президента США как лидера мнений во время президентских выборов 2016 г. в США.

*Ключевые слова:* двухступенчатый поток; одноступенчатый поток; стратегия общения; предвыборная кампания; социальные сети; лидеры мнений; традиционные средства массовой информации; публичная информация.

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**Ribeiro R., jr.**

**Traditional mass media and opinion leaders.**

**Social media and the changes in the communications chain**

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*Abstract.* This work presents an analysis of the use of the Internet within the United States society. We present an assessment of the market share of the two US presidential candidates during the 2016 campaign inside a social network. By placing them *vis-à-vis* the main channels of communication in the United States, especially on the Twitter platform, we are showing the influence they enjoy as «opinion leaders» within the American communications chain. To elaborate this study, we conducted an epistemological analysis of the theory of the two stages of communication (the two-step flow), while relying on a contemporary *corpus* which reviews the model advanced by by E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld according to the technological evolutions, which appeared in the end of the 20 th century. This work explores, among other things, how social media helped to position the current United States of America's president as an «opinion leader» in equal conditions of influence inside the communication chain, compared to the «media of opinion» and the «public service media», during the 2016 presidential elections in the United States of America.

*Keywords:* two-steps flow; one-step flow; communication strategy; election campaign; social networks; opinion leaders; traditional mass media; public information.

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*The medium, or process, of our time – electric technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing – you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to «the others». And they're changing dramatically.*

[McLuhan, Fiore, 1967, p. 8]

## **Introduction**

According to the hypothesis formulated by «The Peoples' Choice» studies, concerning the two stages of communication (the two-step flow of communications), P. Lazarsfeld, B. Berelson and H. Gaudet argued that interpersonal relationships have an important

impact on mediating information that comes from the mass media [Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, p. 129]. At the time of those studies, the world of mass media existed in the forms of radio, television, cinema and the press.

From the 1990 s on, according to the new technical and industrial conditions, which favored the expansion of the domestic use of the Internet (World Wide Web), a new convergence has placed «the individual, as such, at the heart of the communications issues» [Josèphe, 2008, p. 44]. As in a new paradigmatic reality, this new convergence will spread around «the heart of the digital revolution» where the expression «social media» [ibidem, p. 43] has appeared.

The Internet's infrastructure has grown considerably since the 1990 s [Brief history..., 1997]. It has inexorably contributed to the growth of social media [Leihan et al., 2015]. In the same way, celular technologies are developing so fast that in less than 15 years, all kinds of information will be available on the touch screen of a smart phone [Le téléphone portable..., 2017]. This developement gave a new dynamic to the public space as it was known during the first studies of «the two stages of communication». According to E. Dacheux and S. Rouquette, «the growth of the Internet seems to renew the issues related to the public space» [Dacheux, Rouquette, 2013, p. 166].

E. Katz argued that «media effects are tempered by selective processes of attention, perception, and memory» [Katz, 1989, p. 79]. His studies concerning the «decision-making process» [Katz, 1957] demonstrate the importance of the «opinion leaders» within the communications chain. With the rise of the Web and social media, «...society, communication technologies and individual communication habits have changed dramatically to affect the way individuals receive and process information» [Bennett, Manheim, 2006].

The question we pose is: once placed inside one of the social media platforms, depending on the number of engagements on their personal network into a social media, would the opinion leaders have more influence on the audience than some traditonal and public service media? To answer this question, we need to frame the «storyboarding» here presented, while highlighting the new platforms – especially those arising from the «digital revolution» of the 1990 s – from the concept of «traditional mass media» and «public service media».

Using the 2016 United States of America's elections as reference we intend, through the analysis of a contemporary corpus on the two-stages theory of communications, to answer the following questions:

has the Internet changed the flow of information within the communications chain? How does the Internet contribute to the democratic representation of social discourse? What place does the Web occupy in the «agenda setting» of representative discourse within democracy? And finally, what is the place of the «opinion leaders» in «public space» of social media *vis-à-vis* the «traditional mass media» and «public service media»?

### **Internet and public space, field of a political game**

Currently, 77 per cent of Americans own a cellphone. Among young people aged 18 to 24, this rate increases to 99 per cent. About 70 per cent of Americans currently use social media, according to Pew Research Center for People & the Press [Record shares..., 2017].

As advanced by P. Josèphe, the rise of the Web since the end of the 20 th century has brought important changes in the chain of communications. It turns out to be a growing space «constant» which is open to all audiences. The nowadays major players in the context of communications, social networks such as Twitter and Facebook have peremptorily changed the objectivity of the message inside the chain of communications. However, what impact would it have on the dynamics of communications? «The irruption of digital media is in the process of profoundly changing the content and the use of communication before our eyes. The multiplication of the offer, the fragmentation of the public, the diversification of the modes of marketing, the multi-equipment and the interactivity are today realities permanently installed in the everyday life of the users» [Josèphe, 2008, p. 44].

According to E. Dacheux and S. Rouquette, as soon as the open nature of the network is preserved, the Web will mix inextricably «information, practices and public discussions», becoming an extension of the public space. According to the authors, «on the Internet, the public space unfolds in various forms, whether for discussion (chat, forums, etc.), or public dissemination of information (sites, blogs, etc)» [Dacheux, Rouquette, 2013, p. 168].

With a penetration of about 89% in the American society [Internet users... – online resource], the Web has changed the way people have access to information and it has had a direct impact on its deci-

sion-making. Twice in a row, social networks have forecast the outcome of United States of America's election campaigns.

In 2012, *Radio France Internationale* (Rfi) announced the omnipresence of Barack Obama, former US president, on the web [Bourdeau, 2012]. Candidate in the 2016 US elections, Donald Trump used the Twitter platform on social networks during this presidential race [Ronfaut, 2016]. Victorious over the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump was the candidate of choice of social media in the United States [ibidem].

The use of that digital platform proved to be a very effective way through which that political leader bypassed the traditional mass media that became quite critical of him latter on [Pour Trump..., 2017]. Followed by about 28 million people on Twitter, the US president holds a singular level of engagement on this network. Such representation would have greatly affected the chances of victory of any candidate during an election campaign and that, in the majority of the elections during the last decade [Boczkowski, 2016]. In such a context, we can assume that the American president first exerted the role of «opinion leader» within the American communications chain. That said, one question has to be answered: do opinion leaders have more influence in the communications chain than «traditional mass media» and «public service media» over the social networks?

## **Two concepts, one framework**

To answer this question, we must first delineate the concept of «traditional mass media» as well as the concept of «opinion leaders». In this sense, we have to analyse «The end of mass communication?» as proposed by S. Chaffe and M. Metzger [Chaffe, Metzger, 2001]. They explain that «the developments in the information's technology and computation over the last two decades have blurred the boundaries between the forms of communications around which the academic field of communications has been developed» [ibidem, p. 365]. This premise remains valid yet, even if it is moved in time. In their analysis, the authors propose that «the vulgarized vision of the mass media was, at that time, the portrait of a set of media institutions» [ibidem, p. 366].

To clarify this analysis, the authors define the media institution concept as the organizations that send media messages through various

communication channels. Based on this approach, we refer to «traditional mass media» as any actor in the communications chain using radio, the press or television – and / or all its variants such as cable television and «public service media» – as the main channels of dissemination to convey their messages. Traditional mass media are at the same time creators and broadcasters (public or private) of their own content.

However, to integrate traditional mass media into social media, we consider the Internet to be a gathering point for these media. During its recent evolution, the Web has experienced a true overlap of all innovations and technologies. It has proportionated as a result the true state of «self-overcoming» [Kakihara, 2014]. The launch of new devices, networks and applications emerged in an astonishing way. Nowadays, the Internet offers television, radio and cinema at the same time and to everybody. By the way, S. Chaffee and M. Metzger mentioned in their 2001 analysis that they were concerned about the end of the mass media. As proposed by them, «although some of these prophecies have not yet achieved their full potential, many will materialize in the next 5 to 10 years» [Chaffee, Metzger, 2001, p. 374]. This is the reason why we corroborate with the authors' thesis. We do it after we have appreciated their analysis concerning the agenda-setting, when they make remarks on a certain dichotomy between the Web and the traditional mass media. The latter would be more and more powerful with time. The Internet, on the other hand, is presented as being designed to be decentralized [ibidem, p. 369]. They argued that «the interactive, or two-way communications' capability, and especially the increased flow of information associated with new technologies could empower people» [ibidem, p. 374]. Certainly, to be able to incorporate this idea – that there is a clear dichotomy between opinion leaders and traditional mass media – we will define the concept of opinion leader as any person, collective of people and political personality, having as much influence as traditional mass media within the communication's chain. «Retweets, replies, comments and mentions impel the spread of information, spread of different ideas, synchronize the collective attention of the public and can ultimately result in exchange trends online on social media» [Zhang et al., 2016, p. 1–2].

Thus, opinion leaders may be prepared rather to broadcast themselves to create their own content. They come to the scene as representatives of a sort of «new discourse» within the communications chain. Bloggers, is defined on the web as «someone who writes a regular re-

cord of [his own] ideas, opinions, or experiences that is put on the internet for other people to read» [Blogger – online resource]. They will not be related to the concept of traditional mass media. They will be related to the concept of opinion leaders, instead. This latter will also include all the «blogosphere», defined as the «records of personal thoughts and opinions on the internet, and the people who write or read them» [Blogosphere – online resource].

This conceptual framework would undoubtedly help us to better understand the issues of opinion leaders within the communications chain. Their presence reveals a new type of social dynamics. This is the way individuals receive information that has changed. But what are the consequences of such a change in the flow of information? Does it enable individuals to break out of the standardized discourse of traditional mass media? Some statistics can help answer these questions.

### **Numbers and message**

According to Pew Research Center for People & the Press [Amid criticism..., 2013], in 2013, 76 per cent of the US Republican voters, when asked, believed that traditional mass media are always trying to cover the mistakes of politicians, 81 per cent of them thought that it tends to favorise one side of politics, 82 per cent felt that the traditional mass media were often influenced by organizations or people in a position of power, 75 per cent of Republican voters found that the speech of traditional mass media was often imprecise, and finally 46 per cent of these voters believed that the traditional mass media hurt democracy.

The interpretation of these data raises a paradoxical issue from which emerges a question: Would it be strange that Donald Trump, Republican candidate in the 2016 US elections, won the race, as an opinion leader? Admittedly, opinion leaders can use «new» communication channels as a source of diverting all kinds of message distortions. These distortions can be bad, inaccurate and damage the image of public men. According to E. Katz, «only the politicians, advertisers and some academics think that broadcasting is a matter of persuasion» [Katz, 1989, p. 84]. Since it is persuasion, why do we limit ourselves to the study of the short term? Critical theorists, who are equally interested in persuasion, but in the long run, were to blame the administrative direction of

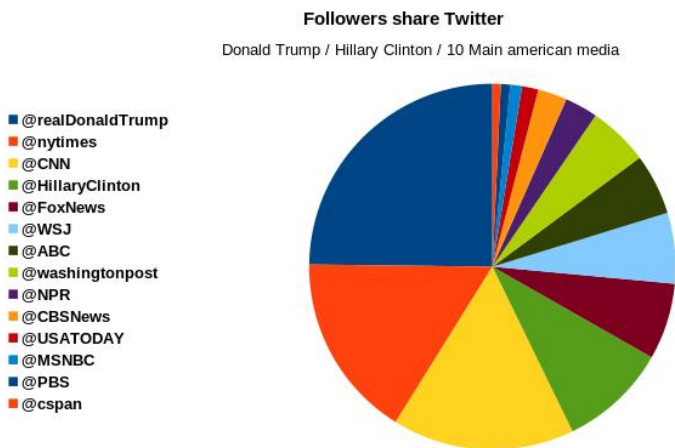
P. Lazarfeld's research. The goal, they said, was to contribute to the sale of goods or voices.

During the American elections campaign, many were surprised by the results of the polls which, on the day of the elections, indicated the victory to Hillary Clinton [Berry, 2016]. These predictions were accompanied by a broad negative coverage of the Republican candidate from mainstream mass media. In his article «For Trump, the media are “in the camp of the opposition”», *La Presse* exposed the accusations published in *Agence France-Presse* whose recently elected President criticized the biased nature of this traditional mass media. According to him, «the media are in the opposition field» [Pour Trump..., 2017]. Thus, we support the thesis that social media bring a new dimension as an average to bypass a biased discourse within the communications chains.

We analysed the extension of Donald Trump's social network on the Twitter platform. This has been done, *vis-à-vis* the top ten mainstream American mass media, as well as his counterpart, Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton. We chose as sample the traditional American mass media followed by the largest number of people on Twitter. When this research was done, the only two mainstream mass media with a larger Twitter network than Donald Trump's were The New York Times and CNN. Nowadays, the analysis of the graph shows that the former Republican candidate, now the United States of America's president has the first largest network on the Twitter platform, followed by The New York Times, CNN and the former Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton. There is no mainstream mass media with a larger Twitter network than Donald Trump's in the United States of America. The result of our analysis is presented in the following graph (see fig.).

To understand the size of his network, we did this research on the Web in 2017. On occasion, we discovered that Twitter is the third largest network among the most visited social networks [Kallas, 2019], according to the website *Dreamgrow*. According to this survey, conducted in March 2017, the platform maintains a stable level of 5,5 per cent of the social network market share, which would be equivalent to an approximate frequency of 198,7 million visits per week, during the March 2017. According to the survey, the platform had 313 million subscribers at that time.





Medium	Twitter account	# Followers	Hyperlink
C-SPAN Radio	@cspan	1989118	<a href="https://twitter.com/cspan">https://twitter.com/cspan</a>
PBS	@PBS	2267970	<a href="https://twitter.com/PBS">https://twitter.com/PBS</a>
MSNBC	@MSNBC	2828421	<a href="https://twitter.com/MSNBC">https://twitter.com/MSNBC</a>
USA Today	@USATODAY	3935365	<a href="https://twitter.com/USATODAY">https://twitter.com/USATODAY</a>
CBS News	@CBSNews	7043948	<a href="https://twitter.com/CBSNews">https://twitter.com/CBSNews</a>
NPR	@NPR	7946160	<a href="https://twitter.com/NPR">https://twitter.com/NPR</a>
Washington Post	@washingtonpost	14550888	<a href="https://twitter.com/washingtonpost">https://twitter.com/washingtonpost</a>
ABC News	@ABC	14735674	<a href="https://twitter.com/ABC">https://twitter.com/ABC</a>
The Wall Street Journal	@WSJ	17095769	<a href="https://twitter.com/WSJ">https://twitter.com/WSJ</a>
Fox News	@FoxNews	18461564	<a href="https://twitter.com/FoxNews">https://twitter.com/FoxNews</a>
Hillary Clinton	@HillaryClinton	26113436	<a href="https://twitter.com/HillaryClinton">https://twitter.com/HillaryClinton</a>
CNN	@CNN	43895251	<a href="https://twitter.com/CNN">https://twitter.com/CNN</a>
The New York Times	@nytimes	44657456	<a href="https://twitter.com/nytimes">https://twitter.com/nytimes</a>
Donald Trump	@realDonaldTrump	67790312	<a href="https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump">https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump</a>
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>273311332</b>	

Fig. Followers share Twitter

Based on these data, we believe that opinion leaders will have the same powers of influencing the crowd as the traditional mass media, within the communications chain due to the extension of their social networks. This is linked to the number of people who follow them on the social network. They will, therefore, be in equal conditions with the

traditional mass media according to the extension of their social networks.

### **The two step flow would be one**

Regarding the two-levels model of communication, a new amplitude is added in terms of scientific aggregate. Resuming the analysis of the corpus, we will find more information about how social media engage the public within the communications chain from social networks.

K. Thorson and Ch. Wells suggest the existence of a sort of «curated flow of information» where the information would be subject to the tutelage of individuals. According to the authors, «people are integrated into the center of personal information networks in multiple and cross-content streams, organized by different actors in different proportions» [Thorson, Wells, 2015, p. 311]. Have the two steps of communication, thanks to the Internet, naturally changed face?

Within the «tutulary flow of communication», this is done directly between the source and the recipient of the message. In this sense, the individual looks have a kind of guardianship over the content. He is able to choose, in accordance to his personal values, which content he wishes to share. As advanced by K. Thorson and Ch. Wells, «the tutulary flow checkup verifies that the personal guardianship over the message does not happen with the individual isolation» [ibidem] inside his social network. Rather, it depends on the flow of other people's content [ibidem, p. 318]. The «tutulary flow of communications» offers a more comprehensive framework *vis-à-vis* the contemporary dynamics of the two-stages theory of communication. In the same sense, S. Choi corroborates with K. Thorson and Ch. Wells. According to him, «the presence of opinion leaders has been revealed, according to the number of views and discussions within their own networks». From a focus group analysis, S. Choi discovered that within the Twitter platform «the chance of a non-opinion leaders exchange between themselves was small, however, they had more propensity to communicate with opinion leaders» [Choi, p. 704]. The study also showed that the opinion leaders had a higher number of publications (posts) than the «non-opinion leaders» had on the platform in question. The author argues that «despite the fact that opinion leaders had demonstrated a greater ease of creating content, the latter was not a determining factor

in distinguishing them from non-opinion leaders. However, the number of messages they shared, contributed with one of his assumptions» [ibidem, p. 706].

## **Conclusion**

The digital revolution commensurate with the Internet has opened space for big changes in the communications chain. Such changes have amplified public space beyond physical scales. The democratic nature of social media has enabled opinion leaders to be in the center of the communication chain. It opened space to a new agenda setting, according to the tutelary nature of communications and it is still established in the information flow. Such a character inexorably contributes to the democratization of the social discourse within the communication chain. It undermines the status quo linked to the traditional mass media. A new objectivity driven by the broad participation of individuals in social media has changed the public space from the digital world.

With the expansion of social media usage, opinion leaders have been placed face-to-face with traditional mass media within the communication chain. For this reason, they may have more influence in some cases than traditional mass media within the information flow. We could notice it in the US last two presidential campaigns. It confirms that the influence of opinion leaders in the communication chain has only increased in recent years.

The current business model, as conceived by the mainstream mass media, seems to be unsuited to the current trends in the information flow. The dependence of the capital of advertisers works as an obstacle to the evolution of the communications model as it was designed. This dependence can be interpreted as a borderline factor that immobilizes the agenda of traditional mass media and undermines their credibility when confronted with public opinion, and the latter begins to give clear signs of fatigue in the face of its perception of the biased character of traditional mass media. It remains explicit in the text, based on the statistics presented.

The traditional polling methods used by mainstream mass media seem outdated in view of the speed and the likelihood that the real-time information is available on social media. The new variables in the col-

lection of data, in particular identified in the corpus, exposed the obsolescence of the methods adopted by the traditional mass media.

Opinion leaders have increased their influence on the political agenda within the communications chain. This certainly changed the balance of power between opinion leaders and traditional mass media. This change helped to relieve the effects of the monopoly of the centralized political discourse «in the hands» of the traditional mass media. This fact opened the space to a sort of counter-discourse in which the words of those who did not feel represented by the traditional mass media began to converge on the agenda of social networks.

Recent studies of the functionalist theory of communication show an evolution of the model proposed by E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld. The two-stage theory of communication has given rise to a sort of tutelary flow of communication. Individualization in the access to information brought forth a model where the communication can have, at the same time, one or several layers. This understanding emerges from the new interpretation of its tutelary character. In this new approach, each individual has complete control over the information received and transmitted in the process of «curation» of the message. In this sense, any individual can be a potential opinion leader in the communications chain since he / she is able to discern between propaganda and information.

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