

*The New Sophistication of Opinion Leadership:
Advancing Models of Influence in British Columbia's Energy Sector*

by

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Abstract

British Columbia is home to rich energy resources including hydroelectricity, fossil fuels, uranium, and renewable power and a population that is highly conscious of environmental sustainability issues. Sustainability is a prominent issue in public debates and the collective consciousness of voters, consumers, academics, business, and the media, with broad participation in that debate. Using interviews with industry opinion leaders, existing research, and evaluating and adapting models of influence from media effects theory, this research examines how organizational opinion leaders in British Columbia's energy sector attempt to assert influence on their audience. The research finds that technological advances necessitate updating existing models of the flows of influence and that opinion leaders have greater influence in the flow of communication than their audience or the media. Such advances have developed in relationship to a more sophisticated public and communications professionals who are increasingly effective at asserting influence on behalf of opinion leaders.

Keywords

British Columbia, media effects, opinion leadership, energy sector, sustainability

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The New Sophistication of Opinion Leadership:

Advancing Models of Influence in British Columbia's Energy Sector

Both traditional forms of mass media and new media in British Columbia frequently include news items and opinion pieces about issues of environmental sustainability. While public debate may still be seeking a consensus about the meaning or importance of sustainability, the issue nonetheless permeates public discussions and consciousness in this province. Public debates about sustainability receive input from a vast array of participants, notably individual members of the public, government, industry, lobby groups, academia, research groups, citizen groups, and both traditional and new media sources. The purpose of this research is to examine how energy sector opinion leaders insert their opinion into public discussions and how they may attempt to influence public opinion. Attention will also be given to the role of the mass media and the audiences that industry opinion leaders attempt to influence, specifically, but not exclusively, the general public. This research will also consider what role the public may play in showing opinion leadership and how they may attempt to influence public debate, and even the industry opinion leaders themselves.

British Columbia has a proud tradition of environmental activism amongst the general public and over a century of industrial harvesting of natural resources, especially timber, minerals, fish, agricultural food products, and energy, such as fossil fuels, hydroelectricity, and uranium. Clashes between environmentalists and industry over logging, fish farming, energy production and extraction, and other issues of environmental sensitivity have been major events driving public awareness in British Columbia.

Ann Marie Major (1993) identifies Earth Day 1970 as the point from which the global environmental movement began its uninterrupted growth, and today issues of

climate change and environmental sustainability continue to be highly salient, not just with environmentalists, but with the general public, especially in British Columbia. Investigating how energy sector opinion leaders attempt to engage the general public on these controversial issues has the potential to add value to all sides of the debate; each may gain understanding of how other major players in the debate attempt to engage the issue and assert influence. Using models of influence developed in media effects theory, this research will look at the communication relationship between industry opinion leaders and their audiences, with special interest in the perspective and leadership of industry opinion leaders in the communication process. Throughout this research, I draw heavily on media effects theory, which is the tradition of scholarship concerned with the causal relationships between media messages and audience thoughts and feelings, especially as those messages influence the audience's opinions or ideas.

Beginning with a review of existing literature on the topic, this research will look at models of influence in media effects theory and offer commentary about the relevance and implications of this research to those theoretical models. This inquiry also reviews relevant published literature to provide an overview of the history of environmental opinion leadership in British Columbia and other jurisdictions, especially to build context for understanding how industry opinion leaders attempt to assert their influence in the public debate today. Through semi-structured interviews, I surveyed industry opinion leaders in British Columbia with the data collected serving as the foundation for advancing the substantive and theoretical aims of this work. The selection of industry opinion leaders includes three senior communications staff and one chief executive officer with major energy sector companies in British Columbia, and one senior communications representative from an energy sector union. Both the literature review and the primary data are coded and divided into general categories for discussion that

constitute the findings of this research.

With a more global perspective, Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright offer the following, which appropriately helps to build context for the issues in this research:

In the past decade, global climate change became a widely accepted social problem.... Awareness of this global threat reinforced public concern about environmental problems and thereby provided environmental activists, scientists, and policy-makers with new momentum in their efforts to promote environmental protection (Dunlap & McCright, 2000, p. 499).

British Columbia matches this description by Dunlap and McCright (2000) and it is in this context that this research attempts to analyze the assertion of influence by opinion leaders in the energy sector.

New technologies and the increasing sophistication of communications professionals and opinion leadership are resulting in new flows of influence, balances of power in the communication relationship, and the need to update historic media effects models to reflect these new phenomena. Today's audience is highly engaged in those new and transformative communications technologies and media that are reshaping older models of the flows of communication. The result of all of these advances is that the mainstream traditional media sources are becoming less influential, audiences are becoming more skeptical and sophisticated, and opinion leaders are becoming more effective and taking a new, more powerful role in the diffusion of influence.

I argue that the historical models of the flow of influence, while important for theoretical and historical context, are no longer reflective of today's communication environment in the diffusion of influence between the media, opinion leaders, and their audiences. Ultimately, the position of this research is that the two-step model developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld needs to be realigned to reverse the positions of influence. Where

Katz and Lazarsfeld placed mass media at the top of the communication hierarchy passing influence down to the audience through opinion leaders, I argue that opinion leaders should be at the top asserting influence on the public both directly and indirectly through the media.

The context for this research offers unique insight into the questions I ask herein because British Columbians as media consumers are at the forefront of new technology, as are the professional communicators and opinion leaders who are engaging that public. The sustainability issue debated in British Columbia's energy sector and in the general public of the province offers an ideal opportunity to explore these new models of influence and advances in technology because the audience here is so keenly aware of and concerned about sustainability issues. Furthermore, the issue of sustainability is more than just a sample political issue; environmental sustainability is the defining issue of a generation and British Columbians have an extremely strong awareness, understanding, and concern about environmental sustainability. Moreover, no industry is more intimately connected to today's sustainability issues than the energy sector. These conditions make British Columbia's energy sector the ideal arena for understanding the new developments in communication theory observed in this research.

Literature Review

Media Effects

Transcending the direct effects models of mass media influence from the early 20th century, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz introduced a critically important model of limited media effects in 1955: the two-step flow of communication (Pooley, 2006). Significant to this research, I define the two-step flow of communication as being the idea that most influence on the opinions of the media audience is from the personal

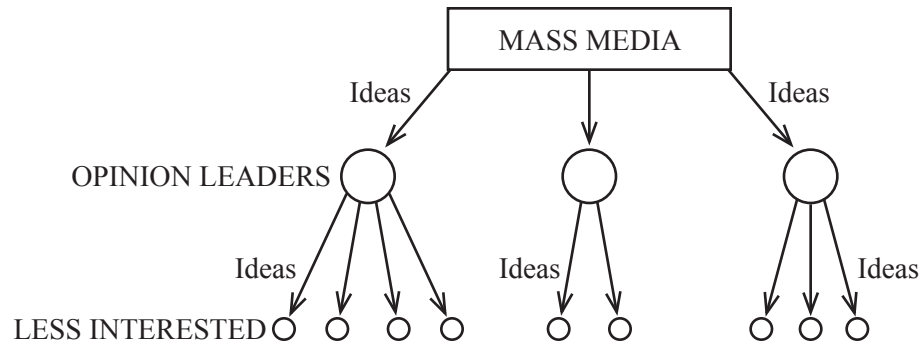


Figure 1. Original Two-Step Hypothesis. From “Interpersonal influence in election campaigns: Two step-flow hypotheses,” by John P. Robinson, 1976, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40, p. 306. Copyright 2001 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

influence of trusted friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances, with the media being more likely to reinforce or sustain the opinions of its audience, rather than change them (See Figure 1). Katz (1957) further updated the two-step model, developing concepts key to this research project, including the mediated nature of mass media influence, the importance of opinion leaders in the process of mediating influence, the importance of mass media, and the connection of media and opinion leaders in the diffusion of influence. That diffusion of influence should be understood to be both the organic and constructed transmission of ideas and influence through society by means of whichever channels of communication may be used (Williams, 2003). Specifically, Katz (1957) argues that the personal influence of opinion leaders weighs more heavily with people than mass media communication, which tends to play a reinforcing role on the audience rather than a persuasive role, and with personal influence being understood as the flow of opinion changing ideas between friends, family, colleagues and other acquaintances (Williams, 2003).

A generation after Lazarsfeld’s research of the 1940 American presidential elections, John P. Robinson (1976) contemplates criticisms of the two-step model and examines those against the 1968 American presidential elections. Robinson’s (1976)

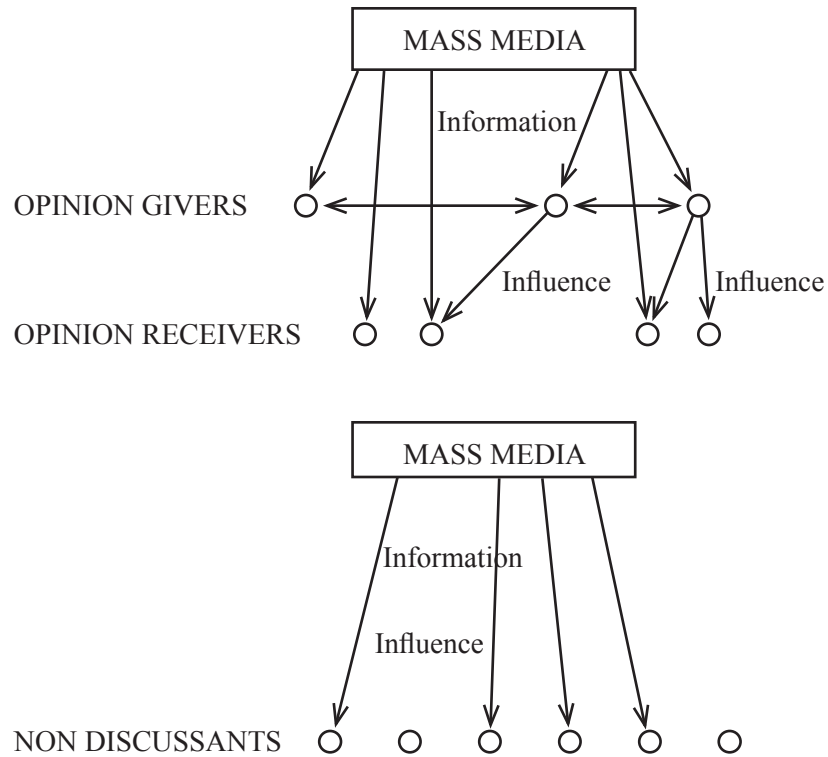


Figure 2. Revised Step-Flow Sequences. From “Interpersonal influence in election campaigns: Two step-flow hypotheses,” by John P. Robinson, 1976, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40, p. 317. Copyright 2001 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

research suggests that there should be six communication linkages in the Lazarsfeld-Katz model, not just the two originally presented. The basis for the expansion is predicated on research findings that the two-step flow model of media influence is not exclusively top down, but rather that opinion leaders and opinion receivers can exchange opinion and influence to each other, amongst themselves, and both up and down the Lazarsfeld-Katz model (Robinson, 1976). Robinson (1976) suggests that, while personal influence is still an important and powerful force, sometimes media influence can be absorbed directly by the opinion receivers without mediation. Further, Robinson (1976) notes that the original two-step model was formulated prior to the popular use of developing media systems, especially television, hinting that advances in technology result in the need to advance models of limited media effects.

Citing Robinson, Mark Levy (1978) examines the exposure to mass media of

both opinion leaders and non-leaders concluding that there are no significant differences in quantity of media consumption, but rather in how that consumption is used by the two different groups. That conclusion is furthered by Alan Rubin (1986) in his writings about media uses and gratifications, which he describes as a media effects theory that marries “functionalism and the psychological perspective” (Rubin, 1986, p. 285). For the purposes of this research, the most important argument of the works by Rubin and by Levy is the conclusion that mass media have less power in the media effects equation than perhaps previously believed, and that the audience has a more active and powerful role in that equation (Rubin, 1986). Albert Bandura (2002) argues for further elucidation of the limited media effects model, writing that notions of the model of media influence being exclusively a filter-down process are flawed. Moreover, Bandura (2002) suggested qualifying the influence of media effects on its audience, noting that people were inclined to seek other sources of verification for information, such as from trusted opinion leaders, particularly if accepting the media generated information would be costly or inconvenient to them.

Throughout this research, I discuss opinion leaders and non-leaders extensively and comment on their roles, function, and power in the flow of communication influence. Various authors and researches conceptualize these roles differently and refer to these groups by a variety of terms, including those I use, but also terms such as “opinion givers” and “opinion receivers” (Robinson, 1976, p. 317). By whatever terms used in existing works, I examine differing concepts used by others, but for the purposes of this research intend opinion leaders to include both individuals and organizations influencing other parties and people through the flows of communication and the diffusion of influence, either deliberately or inadvertently, and through any medium that can be interpreted and identified by those other parties and people. Non-leaders, on the other

hand, are by way of contrast, those people and organizations not engaging others, or who cannot be identified as doing so.

This survey of over half a century of media effects theory scholarship offers several areas of inquiry for this research. Because this research is particularly interested in the perspective of opinion leaders in the process of asserting influence, the three key actors in the two-step flow model (mass media, opinion leaders, and non-leaders) are analyzed in the context of their relevance to opinion leadership. Nonetheless, the role of media in the diffusion of opinion leadership, as well as the possibility of direct effects between opinion leaders and non-leaders, are discussed in the data collection process. This research explores the idea that advances in technology and the sophistication of communications tactics, as described by Robinson (1976), could necessitate parallel advancements of the two-step flow model that may also reflect an increasingly sophisticated audience. As the work of Levy (1978), Rubin (1986), and Bandura (2002) indicates, power balances and hierarchies within the original two-step model may be open to debate, and this research discusses how those power balances and hierarchies might be described in the context of this inquiry.

The Agenda-Setting Role of the Media

While the media may strive for objectivity, impartiality, and balance in the stories they present to their audiences, studies of agenda-setting are more concerned with the impacts the media have by choosing which stories do get presented to the audience and which do not (Cox, 2006). According to Sheldon Gilbert and Maxwell McCombs (1986), in a typical news room over 75% of potential news stories receive no coverage, either because of a perceived lack of merit or due to space limitations (p.4). Regardless of whether or not the media succeed in achieving objectivity and balance in the stories they do present, they have asserted a degree of influence on the audience by choosing which

stories to present, while discarding the majority of them (Cox, 2006). To quote early agenda-setting theory scholar Bernard Cohen (1963), the media cannot be “successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). Major (1993) posits that media coverage might not motivate individual action, but it will stimulate an informed community because of increased discussion in interpersonal networks about the issues presented by the mass media.

Elizabeth Burch and Joseph Harry (2004) offer ideas that expand on the concept of agenda-setting by studying who the press approach for quotes in a case study of four California newspapers. One key finding of the Burch-Harry (2004) research is that, regardless of the media source analysed, quotes were collected unequally from different groups of opinion leaders. Notably in their case study, anti-pesticide activists were quoted far more often than opinion leaders in the agriculture industry or in government (Burch & Harry, 2004). Burch and Harry (2004) suggest that at least one reason for the disproportionate quoting of activists is a predisposition in the media to cover events, which in political communications are usually organized by dissident voices rather than defenders of the status quo. Therefore, challengers of the status quo, such as activists, rather than defenders of the status quo, such as industry, receive greater media attention because the news story depends on the controversy of a challenge to what the audience already believes or expects (Burch & Harry, 2004).

Such conclusions suggest that through its selectivity, the media have an effect on who gets their message heard, by whom, and in which story. Also, those opinion leaders looking to get their message out through the media may be able to do so by engaging the media through processes that play into the media’s preferred format of presenting stories to its audience. This second argument is particularly supported by observations

of opinion leaders attempting to elevate certain news stories in the media's interpretation of importance, or their assessment of what has "newsworthiness" (Beder, 2002; Cox, 2006, p. 175; Dunlap & McCright, 2000; Gilbert & McCombs, 1986; Harrabin, 2000; Kamieniecki & Kraft, 2007).

British Columbians: An Environmentally Aware Public

British Columbians have a history of environmental consciousness and activism dating back decades, particularly from the 1970s onward (Griggs & Kofinas, 1996; Hoberg, 1996). Levels of environmental activism and concern fluctuate, but have included rising levels of tension and can escalate to crisis situations such as the "War in the Woods" of the 1980s (Alper & Salazar, 2001; Hoberg, 1996) and confrontations involving police at Clayoquot Sound in the 1990s (Blake, Guppy & Urmetzer, 1997). Many of the environmental issues in the province have been defined by conflict between competing groups, such as industry, individual citizens, activist groups, local communities, union members, and the government (Adamowicz & Veeman, 1998; Blake, 1996; Blake, Guppy & Urmetzer, 1997; Lertzman, Rayner & Wilson 1996). Citizen awareness has focused on environmental issues including concerns over biodiversity, species endangerment, habitat protection, pollution, logging practices, energy policy, watershed protection, global warming, and ozone layer depletion, with environmental activism steadily increasing (Adamowicz & Veeman, 1998; Blake, Guppy & Urmetzer, 1997; Luckert & Salkie, 1998). Today, those environmental concerns continue to be voiced by citizens and environmental action groups, most recently with protests about private energy development on the environmentally sensitive Upper Pitt River in Pinecone Burke Provincial Park (Kimmet, 2008; Upper Pitt, 2008).

In "Canadian Public Opinion and Environmental Action: Evidence from British Columbia," Donald Blake, Neil Guppy, and Peter Urmetzer (1997) provide a

comprehensive survey of awareness and concern about environmental issues amongst the general public in British Columbia. Although the polling conducted is now more than a decade out of date, the significant trends highlighted in their research show a broad understanding, consciousness, and individual commitment regarding environmental issues amongst the general public. Moreover, current polling by international polling firm Ipsos Reid shows that such trends identified in 1997 by Blake, Guppy, and Urmetzer continue today (Fowlie, 2008). Of particular note in the research by Blake, Guppy, and Urmetzer is that a majority of British Columbians feel responsibility for and individual commitment towards both local and global environmental issues (1997).

Julian Griggs and Gary Kofinas (1996) offer research about the British Columbia Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (BCRTEE) that highlights the significance of environmental and economic issues to BC. Noting increased levels of concern about the environment starting in the 1970s, Griggs and Kofinas (1996) highlight the escalating conflicts relating to environmental issues culminating in the BCRTEE, a central policy initiative of the provincial government in the 1990s. Their research argues that the context for such a major policy initiative as BCRTEE was founded in rapidly growing concerns amongst the general public about environmental issues (Griggs & Kofinas, 1997).

Such a history of environmental awareness, activism, and conflict as found in British Columbia provides an important contextual feature to this research, which is that the researcher can enter the data collection process with an increased expectation of participant fluency in the issues germane to this research. Further, in the communication process, a greater level of environmental consciousness may be expected amongst the general public, as the research cited earlier suggests. Such expectations are met in the findings of this paper, as will be discussed hereinafter.

Other descriptions of environmental publics from Canada and abroad offer further context and understanding for the condition of public opinion and consciousness in British Columbia. In 1993, Major (1993) and James Cantrill (1993) separately characterize public opinion and consciousness with regard to environmental issues in America. In discussing the information bases people use to develop their understanding of environmental issues, Cantrill (1993) writes that environmental publics rely heavily on their interpersonal networks for information and opinion about environmental issues. Notwithstanding the influence of interpersonal networks, however, Cantrill (1993) also notes the important role of media in agenda-setting and framing issues. Major (1993), on the other hand, acknowledges the state of public opinion and consciousness at the time and predicts that environmental issues will increase in prominence in the media and in the public eye. Just as Cantrill (1993) suggests, Major (1993) finds that environmental publics are cross-pressured, that is, they have concurrent conflicting opinions, desires, values or ideology, but she clarifies that the public's opinions do not occupy only one side of a cross-pressured environment-economy dichotomy, but rather both sides of the spectrum simultaneously. Two classic examples of a cross-pressured public on the environment-economy spectrum is the public debate about logging versus wildlife habitat protection and job creation versus industrial pollution. The more salient the public understanding of the environmental issues, the more concerned the public is about those issues generally (Major, 1993).

Christopher Bosso and Deborah Lynn Guber (2007) look at the division of public opinion in America more closely through studies of public polling data. Depending on what organization was commissioning the polling and for what purpose, questions posed to respondents would frame the same issue (petroleum extraction in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) differently (Bosso & Guber, 2007). Sometimes questions

would be asked using language that was sympathetic to environmental awareness and sometimes using language sympathetic to the energy industry, either choice being used deliberately to elicit a preferred response to the poll (Bosso & Guber, 2007). Because the questions were framed with loaded language that played to the insecurities of a cross-pressured public, the results fluctuated wildly and yielded contradictory indications of public opinion (Bosso & Guber, 2007). Robert Worcester (2000) made several observations about environmental consciousness in Britain, including that the British public experienced the same cross-pressured feelings between environmental concerns and economic issues, and also between personal consumption choices and the environmental consequences of those choices. One thing that does appear increasingly true from the research is that the more recent the public opinion polling, the more salient environmental issues are with the public (Bosso & Guber, 2007; Cantrill, 1993; Major, 1993; Worcester, 2000), specifically in British Columbia (Fowle, 2008).

Environmental Opinion Leadership

For the purposes of this research, the literature review focuses on opinion leadership in public debate and largely, though not entirely, excludes research about opinion leadership in consumer habits, government policy development, or opinion leadership by government officials. There is a considerable portfolio of existing research on the flows of communication and influence in consumer behaviour, but these studies seldom have any political discussion or consideration of broad public debate on a given issue, making them less appropriate as case studies for this research. Government policy development and opinion leadership by government officials, while important and sometimes interesting to this research, is not included in my focus on opinion leadership by energy sector leaders. Because more of the existing research in this field examines the influence and role of the media or the public in the flow of communication and the

diffusion of influence, I want this research to pay particular attention to the role of the opinion leader. This focus is not to exclude consideration of other participants in the flow of communication, but rather to concentrate this research where it can add the most value to the field. This section is particularly interested in examples of opinion leadership in the energy and environment debates, and descriptions of the process of opinion leadership in that forum.

Sheldon Kamieniecki and Michael Kraft (2007) describe the flow of influence on environment and energy issues in America from corporations through the media to the public for the purpose of policy change, but make an important qualification about the ability of corporations to be effective. Specifically, Kamieniecki and Kraft (2007) write that corporate “political strategies become less tenable as scientific consensus grows and media coverage becomes extensive, thus raising the saliency of the issues” (p. 333). Their argument posits that opinion leadership is more effective when the target audience has a lower awareness or understanding of the environmental consequences of a particular issue (Kamieniecki & Kraft, 2007). Earlier in the same text, Bosso and Guber (2007) argue that for corporate opinion leadership to influence their target audience, they must first make an effort to shape public mood by way of framing public issues to their favour. For example, public support in polls for drilling for oil in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge jumped significantly if the issue was put into the context of energy security and reducing American reliance on oil from the Middle East (Bosso & Guber, 2007). Bosso and Guber (2007) posit that the corporate desire to avoid controversy and their felt need to try to mould public opinion demonstrates that corporate activity is at least partly constrained by public opinion: both parties can exert some, though not necessarily proportionate or equal amounts of influence on the other. This loop of influence suggests that there are significant feedback mechanisms in the flow of influence

and that historic models of the two-step flow of influence may need to be updated to reflect these feedback mechanisms.

Another key concept elucidated in the work by Bosso and Guber (2007) is the role and presence of professional communicators in the process of asserting opinion leadership on behalf of corporations. Interestingly, Major (1993) predicted in a 1993 publication that the introduction of professional communicators would be necessary for opinion leaders so that they could engage an increasingly sophisticated public. Sharon Beder (2002), Robert Cox (2006), Bosso and Guber (2007), and Kamieniecki and Kraft (2007) all observe the trend that reaffirms Major's (1993) prediction. According to Beder (2002), some corporations are falling into the position of having to choose between earning a good reputation and constructing one and are discovering that hiring communications professionals to artificially project good corporate reputations can be the far less expensive option. In the case of environmental issues, the term "greenwashing" has been coined to describe organizations that communicate about themselves as being an environmentally responsible and sustainably run organization, but who are in fact doing little or nothing to curb their environmentally hazardous behaviour (Beder, 2002, p. 247; Bosso & Guber, 2007, p. 49; Cox, 2006, p. 377). Such practices highlight the sophistication of opinion leadership by organizations attempting to further their objectives by engaging and influencing public opinion.

While greenwashing may be a growing trend, Beder (2002) notes that it is by no means a new practice. In the 1980s, the Canadian Nuclear Association spent \$6 million on a three-year campaign to directly influence public opinion about the safety and environmental benefits of nuclear energy (Beder, 2002). Cox (2006) also documents examples of greenwashing activities, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, of American companies directly marketing political concepts and ideas, not just products, to the

general public in an effort to engage public opinion directly. In “Business Influence in State-Level Environmental Policy,” Philip Mundo and Barry Rabe (2007) also note efforts by organizations to directly engage public opinion on energy and environmental issues, not just through the mass media.

Another common theme in the literature reviewed is that of opinion leaders working together in alliances or in multiparty interest groups. In *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, Cox (2006) lists six major “voices” in the energy and environment debate: citizen/community groups, environmental groups, scientists and scientific discourse, corporations and business lobbyists, anti-environmental groups, and media and environmental journalists (p. 20). Of immediate interest here, however, are the groups that are using, joining, or creating formal coalitions to lead public opinion: a practice for which there are decades of history.

Non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned about sustainability issues offer an excellent example of such alliances and coalitions (Egri & Herman, 2000; Gooding-Williams, Iyer, & Milne, 1996). By their nature, many, if not most, NGOs are driven by a membership of individual citizens concerned about one or more issues, with the number of organizations growing steadily since the 1970s (Egri & Herman, 2000; Gooding-Williams, Iyer, & Milne, 1996). More than just partnerships of individual citizens, though, Sara Gooding-Williams, Easwar Iyer and George Milne (1996) note the increasing rate at which environmental NGOs are forming alliances and coalitions with each other. And while environmental NGOs forming alliances with each other to achieve a synthesis of objectives may seem intuitive, Gooding-Williams, Iyer and Milne (1996) also look at NGOs that are making alliances with corporations. For the purposes of analyzing opinion leadership, it seems clear that the NGOs work together to amplify their influence on the public debate, but Gooding-Williams, Iyer

and Milne (1996) observe that there is a more complex dynamic in the case of alliances between NGOs and corporations. While motivations expressed in their research vary, businesses seem keen to announce “quick, documentable results from alliance activities” to bolster their public image, while environmental groups are eager to take advantage of the considerable corporate financial resources to demonstrate long-term, trend-changing activities to the public and other business leaders (Gooding-Williams, Iyer, & Milne; 1996, p. 212). In the research by Gooding-Williams, Iyer and Milne (1996), they find that some opinion leaders in NGOs believe that NGO-corporate alliances are just businesses using the credibility of NGOs to greenwash, rather than achieve real progress.

Daniel Egan and David Levy (2003) observe corporations using coalitions to express their opinion, especially in response to government policy, or potential government policy, on issues of environmental protection and climate change. Notably, Egan and Levy (2003) look at the creation of the Global Climate Coalition (GCC) in 1990, an alliance of 40 major, mostly American, producers and users of fossil fuels. The GCC now includes European companies, though the International Chamber of Commerce, very similar to the GCC, also represents many companies in European and OECD countries. Through the GCC, which quickly became “the most prominent voice of industry,” major companies were able to assert opinion leadership without directly attaching their own reputations to their opinions (Egan & Levy, 2003, p. 815). Beder (2002) notes that the trend of businesses cooperating with each other, either to lobby legislators, engage public opinion, or for other reasons, has been growing in America and around the world, with specific reference to corporations uniting to publicly fight the US Clean Air Act of 1970. Further, Beder (2002) discusses the formation of the Wise Use Movement in the 1980s in America, and later Canada, which was a far broader coalition of loosely connected interests uniting to campaign against a wider variety of

government initiatives, specifically environmental protection policies. The formation of such coalitions continues for the purpose of leading public opinion (which is usually just one part of a campaign to influence government policy), with many coalitions being far more specific in scope, such as Americans for Balanced Energy Choices, an NGO formed and funded by coal and electricity companies (Cox, 2006). Although not mentioned in the research, much of the advertising by Americans for Balanced Energy Choices, as well as other US businesses and lobby groups, is on television syndicated to Canada, thus engaging the Canadian public on the same issues as well.

Because this research deals so heavily with issues of opinion leadership, I feel that clearly defining my interpretation of *leadership* will add value and understanding to the reader. In the context of this research, especially as it pertains to models of influence and the role of opinion leaders, leadership is an act by one person or organization, that is usually but not necessarily deliberate, that encourages or causes others to change their behaviour or opinion to coincide with the act or message communicated by the person or organization.

Method

The research design of this work has been constructed with two concurrent aims: first, to survey existing literature about opinion leadership, media effects, and the history of environmentalism and the energy sector in British Columbia; and second, to gather primary data about these same issues from opinion leaders in British Columbia's energy sector. Topical and analytical support for the work has been gathered from academic books and peer-reviewed journals dating from Katz' and Lazarsfeld's concepts of the two-step model of media effects to the present day, with a heavy preference towards works from the 1990s onward.

Primary data has been collected through semi-structured interviews, both in

person and via telephone, with selected professionals in British Columbia's energy sector. One CEO and four senior communications professionals were selected from five different organizations, which included one independent power producer, one publicly traded electricity company, one publicly traded petroleum company, one Crown corporation, and one union representing workers in the energy sector. These opinion leaders were identified in consultation with persons knowledgeable about British Columbia's energy sector and through interviews with the opinion leaders themselves. Also, in four instances, the interview participants named each others' organizations as industry opinion leaders, which helped to reaffirm that the selection of opinion leaders was reflective of who other opinion leaders saw as being influential in the field. All but one of the interview participants identified themselves or their own organization as being an opinion leader in the field, though that one exception was named as being an influential opinion leader by another interviewee. The aim in selecting the sample has been to survey those people who, on behalf of opinion leading organizations, are actively engaged in attempting to assert influence in the public debate about the issue of sustainability in British Columbia.

Not every interview includes exactly the same set of questions and interviews vary in duration from 31 to 63 minutes. Over the course of the data collection process, interview questions changed and evolved to more deeply investigate trends and concepts emerging from the interviews. The semi-structured nature of the interviews results in unsolicited ideas being brought forward by research participants, which in many cases became valuable data pursued in later interviews. From interview to interview, the list of questions has been modified to follow potentially key concepts raised during previous interviews or in the literature review. Interviews have been transcribed and used as the primary source of data for the research. Because of a respect for the privacy of interview

participants, no interviewees are identified by name herein, nor are any comments attributed to them or their employer organization.

Methodologically, the primary data was used to drive the theoretical notions developed in the research, as recommended by Kathy Charmaz (2006) in *Constructing Grounded Theory*. According to Charmaz (2006), “grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves,” which is exactly what this research seeks to accomplish (p. 2). From those interviews, the data has been coded using aspects of grounded theory, breaking the data into four broad categories: audience, media, opinion leaders, and media effects theory. Attention has been given to commonalities in the data, discrepancies in the data, the relationship between the data and the literature review, and how the research may add to the existing body of knowledge on the topics of opinion leadership and media effects theory. Generalization of the qualitative data makes full use of the interviews, encompasses the diversity of the data, draws inferences from qualitative concerns independent of prevalence, and is assigned meaning and interpretation by the researcher, as suggested by Jane Lewis and Jane Ritchie in *Qualitative Research Practice* (2004, p. 277).

Benefits of this methodology are connected to the objectives, theoretical basis, and inductive nature of the research. Interviewing opinion leaders provides primary data to lead the inquiry and will be supported by topical and theoretical literature. Semi-structured interviews encourage consistency without limiting opportunities to collect unsolicited data that may be constructive. Because of the inductive nature of the research, interviews allow the researcher to posit qualitative conclusions based on the interviews. Past research has demonstrated the feasibility of the proposed methodology and continuing a similar methodology promotes consistency in developing new data in the

field of media effects in communication theory. Grounded theory lends assistance to data gathering techniques, categorization of data, and analysis of data, which has been coded to compare the primary data against the literature review and the theoretical focus of this research (Charmaz, 2006).

Presentation of Findings

Four broad categories of subject matter evolved from the interviews and are represented in this presentation of the data: the audience, the media, opinion leaders, and the media effects model. The audience, the media, and opinion leaders are representative of the three tiers in the Katz-Lazarsfeld model (see Figure 1), with the fourth section, media effects, representing the theoretical framework in which the model was developed. The four broad categories discussed herein offer two key benefits to the format of this research: first, they align with the two-step flow of communication model developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld, and second, they align with the literature review to provide comparison between these findings and the existing research. Discussion in each category is used to highlight commentary about that respective element in the two-step model or on the model itself.

The Audience

Much of the description of the general public of British Columbia found in the literature review corresponds well with comments made by interview participants during data collection. So many people in British Columbia use energy products that there is virtually no distinction in the minds of the interviewed opinion leaders between their target audience and everybody in the province.

As a public, British Columbians are becoming less passive and increasingly sophisticated. Members of the public are actively engaged in pursuing the acquisition of

information about environmental sustainability, both of a local and global focus, through traditional media sources, interpersonal networks, and through new internet-based media sources, such as online media, blogs, internet discussion fora, electronic news wires, shared raw video, and online social media. As noted earlier, Bandura (2002) sees a need to qualify single-cause or simplistic accounts of the consequences of media for an audience as people begin to seek their own verification of media content. Data from the interviews suggests that more and more people are building their own conceptual linkages between issues, opinion leaders, local events, and media content, and adjudicating the quality of information in the context of those competing information sources and the conceptual linkages the audience develops independently.

The assembly of conceptual linkages is not an instantaneous process, either individually or collectively, however. As described in the analysis of the diffusion of opinion leadership by Meenaghan and Turnbull (2001), some people are early adopters in understanding and accepting information and ideas, some people follow shortly after in the “early majority,” and the other half of the population follows over time (p. 8). Moreover, even as the audience is slow to reach a consensus, people take time to assemble linkages individually as well. Data collected suggests that collective consciousness around environmental issues is growing in British Columbia, especially since the convergence of scientific data from the United Nations and the opinion leadership of Al Gore, and other political, business, and cultural leaders. One interviewee described growth in public understanding in sustainability as follows:

I would say about a year and a half ago, there was a real turning point, where the environment and sustainability issues were being talked about, but it went from being a subject matter that was just one of among many subject matters to being the leading subject matter.

Such findings complement the predictions and findings by Major (1993), and show a continuing trend from the research of Blake, Guppy, and Urmetzer (1997) and opinion polling from this year (Fowlie, 2008). While not currently the case, public consciousness may in the future resemble a true social consensus on sustainability issues in British Columbia. Public awareness of sustainability issues today is high enough that when discussing the issues, opinion leaders and the media can assume a certain level of public salience: a term by which I mean that the general public has a noted understanding and awareness of a given concept or issue. That level of salience allows opinion leaders better opportunities to engage the public about energy and sustainability issues.

Both individually and collectively, the public expresses a greater level of concern for environmental issues when they are more aware of them, of the problems associated, and with the public debate surrounding those issues, which reaffirms earlier findings by Major (1993) to the same effect. This finding is bolstered by the research of Bosso and Guber (2007) and the work by Worcester (2000), who note the same consistency of awareness and opinion in America and Britain respectively. Conversely, those people who are not well informed and have little direct, immediate, personal interest on a sustainability issue have shown indifference to those issues, and tend to somewhat dismiss them as being peripheral.

Overall, the concept of the audience in the media effects model is changing and growing towards a more technologically engaged, politically skeptical, and sophisticated group in the flow of communication and influence. The relationship of the audience to the media is changing as more and more individuals change their information gathering habits towards new media and begin contributing to media content on the Internet. Further, the role of the audience in the Katz-Lazarsfeld model needs to be updated to reflect that growing sophistication and engagement, to demonstrate that the flow of

influence is not solely top-down, but that the audience has mechanisms for influencing both the media and opinion leaders in the model, although that influence from the audience may not be as strong as the flows of influence from opinion leaders or media.

The Media

Despite interviewees highlighting evolving technology, audience behaviour, and opinion leader behaviour as dynamic new factors in the flow of communication, which are significant concepts discussed elsewhere in this paper, interviewees also agree that the traditional media outlets continue to play a critically important role in the diffusion of influence on sustainability issues in British Columbia. Interview participants described the media as an industry that identifies and summarizes issues and events for their audience. Further, the media were described as a filter and an agency at least partially responsible for setting the agenda for public debate; these are observations that reinforce the commentary by Cox (2006) and Cohen (1963) and the research by Burch and Harry (2004).

Regardless of any agenda-setting role, interviewees still noted that the media is a follower of opinion leadership and of public opinion as a means to generate stories for the audience and to measure the success of those efforts. Interviewees suggest that issue awareness is partly opinion leader driven, but also note that the media play a significant role in creating awareness around sustainability issues, though interviewees specified that while awareness may be media driven, opinions are not nearly as directly influenced. One interview participant observed that “the media’s role is still very significant. The media continues to drive a lot of the agenda. They will continue to set the agenda.”

Data collected suggested concurrence with the work by Cox (2006) and Gilbert and McCombs (1986), positing that the media plays an influential role just by setting the agenda of which stories are covered and which are not. In contrast with those findings,

however, the data collected also highlights the reluctance of opinion leaders to engage exclusively through the mainstream media for fear that they will miss a large segment of their target audience. Such concerns may hint at a declining ability for the media to play that agenda-setting role if their market is a declining percentage of the total population. Nonetheless, interviewees still felt that engaging the media was an essential way of getting their opinion into the public debate, even though some felt that there were barriers, in some cases, major barriers, to succeeding in that engagement. Despite the frustration expressed by some of the interviewees about the difficulty of influencing the media's content agenda, all felt that the media still took significant cues from opinion leaders about what stories deserved coverage and to what degree.

In addition to the agenda-setting role of the media, data collected also provided congruence with the research by Burch and Harry (2004) suggesting that the media have the power to decide who are and who are not important opinion leaders by deciding who to quote in their stories. None of the interview participants suggest that there is any shortage of media coverage on sustainability issues in British Columbia; in fact, most describe it as the top issue in the media. However, there is a considerable discrepancy between those who feel the media offers them opportunity to inject their opinion into the debate and those who feel that there are significant barriers, even going so far, in one case, as to describe the media as being "hostile" to their organization. Burch and Harry (2004) look at this tension from a third-party perspective and observe a disparity in whom the media interview and whom they quote. Through the media's choices of whom to quote and whom to leave out of stories, the media also influences the ability of opinion leaders to get their message into the public debate and elevate themselves as opinion leaders in the public consciousness.

Mainstream media are partially adapting to the new technologies by publishing

content online, through broadcast e-mail, and by adding reader response sections to their stories. Nonetheless, the popularity of non-traditional media is on the rise, and these transitions need to be reflected in any new model of the flow of influence. Just as Robinson's (1976) update of the Katz-Lazarsfeld model followed an expansion of media sources and technology, so too do these new media sources and formats require recognition in media effects theory. I suggest that the media has become less and less powerful in the diffusion of influence, as did Robinson in 1976, and Lazarsfeld and Katz a generation earlier. As such, I would argue that this series of events and the data from this research suggest that the greater the variety of media formats available, and the more media sources being used by the audience, the weaker the role of the media will be in the diffusion of influence to the general public.

Opinion Leaders

Interview participants all identify opinion leaders as one of the major driving forces on public opinion on sustainability issues in British Columbia. Opinion leadership about sustainability and the energy sector comes not just from the energy sector itself, but from a wide variety of backgrounds, including business, government, religion, non-government organizations, unions, citizen groups, and the legal community: an array of voices echoing the six categories identified by Cox (2006). The findings of this research suggest that not only do opinion leaders exist, but that most accept responsibility for playing a role in engaging public opinion on sustainability issues. Major (1993) predicted a trend towards opinion-leading organizations employing communications professionals to manage their external communications function. All of the opinion leaders interviewed were a part of an organization that did just that, and in one shape or another, all of the organizations engage public opinion as a part of their operating model.

Opinion leaders in British Columbia's energy sector have a complex relationship

to sustainability issues. First, they are representatives of an industry that, both in terms of real science and symbolically in the public consciousness, is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental impacts that aggravate the ecosystem, which, especially in British Columbia, is an ecosystem about which the general public cares very deeply. Therefore, opinion leaders must respond to the public in the context that the public regards the energy sector: as a service provider, as a polluter, as an industry with a higher expectation of behaviour and corporate citizenship, and as a developer of solutions to the environmental problems in British Columbia.

Engaging public opinion is not always a method applied for achieving business objectives. In many cases, as discussed in greater depth in the next section, public opinion is not an end in and of itself, but rather a tool for pressuring another party to take action, often the government. In situations where business objectives can, for whatever set of reasons, be more feasibly met without engaging public opinion, some organizations will focus their engagement at another target, again, usually government. That one interview participant's organization made a transition between engagement strategies towards their current campaign to lead public opinion on energy and sustainability issues after an unfavourable change in government policy is highly indicative of the notion that favourable government policy may impair the motivation for organizations to engage the public. Opinion leaders will be less motivated to engage in public opinion when government policy is favourable to them or if engaging public opinion is an unrealistic method of achieving their objectives.

Such reluctance, however, seems to be the exception more often than the rule, as even those organizations with favourable business conditions, including preferable government policy, wish to maintain a positive image with the public. One method of keeping favour with public opinion is to be responsive to that public opinion, which the

interviewees posit is a part of their business efforts and which the work of Bosso and Guber (2007) illustrates is a part of the feedback loop of influence between audience and opinion leaders. However, an interesting contradiction presents itself in the research in that, despite an ostensible desire to be responsive to the public, opinion leaders want to lead opinion, not follow it. As such, there appears to be a conflict between organizations wishing to continue their preferred business model, but also wishing to be responsive to public opinion, which may well suggest a change in that same business model. The result is that organizations may attempt to project a more responsive public image than in fact exists, which mirrors the arguments by Beder (2002), Cox (2006), and Bosso and Guber (2007) about organizations greenwashing their operations rather than changing them. Despite such attempts, public opinion can be influential in changing business models, if not voluntarily by the organizations, through the legislative force of a responsive government. This tension, however, is far from equilibrium. I do not believe that there is an equality of power between opinion leaders and the audience in the flow of communication on sustainability issues in British Columbia. Rather, organizational opinion leaders have a strong motivation to engage public opinion to advance their organizational goals. Also, organizational opinion leaders have more funds to commit to a well resourced communications program and the ability to acquire tools to be more successful in communicating their message to the audience.

The strategic response to tensions between an organization's preferred operating model and public expectation is just one example of a trend that is very prominent in the data: namely, the advancement of technology and the sophistication of communications professionals in the application of opinion leadership. Subject matter from the interviews provides evidence of the sophistication of communications professionals in the energy sector, with the interviewees offering very complex and sophisticated perspectives on

their techniques. All of the communications specialists describe complex multi-media and multi-step tools available for engaging their primary audiences, and where applicable, secondary audiences, that is supported by a theoretical framework for maximizing their effectiveness. Complex communications planning, theory, observation, measurement, and analysis are all clearly elements these professionals consider in what is an increasingly sophisticated approach to opinion leadership. Ultimately, the process closely follows the measurements of success for a campaign identified by Pablo Briñol, Richard Petty and Joseph Priester (2002): that “the transmitted communications are effective in changing the attitudes of the recipients in the desired direction, and... in turn influence people’s behaviors” (p. 156).

The data demonstrates an inventory of communications tools available to opinion leaders to engage public opinion. In one respect, the opinion leaders are responding to public opinion by following their audience into the media where the audience prefers to obtain information. However, in each specific medium, the communications professionals take a very conscious approach to implementing their opinion leadership strategy, though some are still investigating or developing their approach to engaging new media. One interview described the following approach used in her organization:

First of all, the audience is way more sophisticated than it’s ever been. People... they want to see the stuff. They want to be able to respond to it very quickly, which means... a significant investment developing an online community and social networking tools. I think that that is the most profound change of a modern day campaign. You can’t have a website that looks like a brochure. You really have to have a very sophisticated understanding of social networking, you have to be able to build that infrastructure and it’s, it’s not cheap to do that. So, to develop that online community is something of itself that is very powerful in

disseminating your message.

Despite the fact that engaging traditional media is perhaps the oldest responsibility of communications professionals, interviewees still invested considerable time and energy strategizing about how to best use the media as a tool to achieve their organizational objectives. Both the data from the literature review and the interviews suggest that communications professionals very consciously plan how to build a story that will meet the mainstream media's needs in terms of timelines, visuals, quotes, and actual content that would meet the approval of journalists and their editors. For the energy sector opinion leaders, engaging the media is a tool for communicating with a large number of people in a short period of time and also helps to set the agenda for public debate by raising public awareness of an issue, even if the media coverage itself is unsuccessful in changing public opinion on that issue. As important as successfully engaging the media may be, however, energy sector opinion leaders are aware that they will be unable to reach their entire audience through the mainstream media alone.

The inability of opinion leaders to reach their whole audience through the mainstream media is reflective of the changing nature of the audience and the introduction of new media products to the public domain. Communications professionals are advancing their opinion leadership strategies to engage those new technologies and reach as much of their total audience as possible. Energy sector leaders are inserting opinion directly into the public debate using electronic mail deployment, multi-media websites, weblogs (blogs), video and audio feeds, and through social media that is also partly mediated. Other new media strategies are evolving where opinion leaders effectively loses direct control of their message, but the message is nonetheless perpetuated by other opinion leaders and members of the public through mechanisms such as online discussion groups, social media, and third party blogs. Opinion leaders are

also making use of non-electronic resources in new ways, such as engaging the public with the help of other opinion leaders who may be able to engage their own interpersonal networks to carry the message forward. Further, opinion leaders are integrating their approach into social events, cultural events, and through local businesses. Opinion leaders will also increase circulation of their message by asking members of the public to become active as individuals on a given issue, either by lobbying their elected officials or other opinion leaders, or by becoming a part of an online campaign.

The growing presence of communications professionals in opinion leading organizations and the new sophistication of the opinion leadership strategies cannot be underestimated in their scope or significance and are an important point for continued research of this evolving professional institution. I believe that in the context of the Katz-Lazarsfeld model of influence, opinion leaders, as a means of achieving their organizational goals, have effectively usurped supremacy in the hierarchy from the mass media, notwithstanding the increased presence of feedback mechanisms from the audience. This transition in the power balance in the flows of communication represents a reversal in the two-step flow model reflective of the tremendous amount of intellectual and financial resources committed by organizational opinion leaders to lead public opinion.

The Media Effects Model

While none of the interview participants make specific reference to media effects theory, analysis of some of their comments can be seen to reflect critically on existing models of the two-step flow of influence. Analysis of the data suggests that the model of the flow of influence developed by Lazarsfeld and updated by Katz (1957) may have been overly media-centric. While heavy emphasis may have been placed on the power of opinion leadership in interpersonal networks (Katz, 1957), the two-step flow and later

updates may have underestimated the amount of agency held by opinion leaders in the process of asserting influence, both on the general public and on the media. Further, older models of the flow of influence seemed to disregard the existence of any, even weak, feedback mechanisms in the process.

The data collected through this research reinforces Robinson's (1976) suggestion that opinion leaders, or "opinion givers," as he labels them, do influence each other and also support the findings of Dunlap and McCright (2000) and Cox (2006) that opinion leaders will work in cooperation to achieve common goals. Notably, private sector energy leaders point to their use of industry associations, conferences, and other learning opportunities to exchange expertise about public engagement to further the opinion leadership goals of the industry collectively.

Opinion leaders engage the media for two reasons, described by one interview participant as follows:

You want to convince the media because, in large part, they're the ones who transmit information to the public. They're the ones that explain the information to the public. So, it's important for us to work with the media to make sure that they understand it. But ultimately, it's with the audience in mind. The media in and of itself are not important. They are mostly important because they will then explain the story to their audience.

This observation suggests a direct criticism of the Katz-Lazarsfeld model by suggesting supremacy in the hierarchy of media effects lies more with opinion leaders than with media, who are more important as a channel of communications than as a source of influence. Opinion leaders describe elaborate steps to work with the media, provide them information, and make sure that they understand the opinion leader's message. Despite such direct engagement of the media, however, the opinion leaders acknowledge

that those efforts are ultimately a part of their public engagement and that the media themselves are really only important insofar as they provide a channel of communications for opinion leaders to engage the public. The model of influence is even more complex than just that. In many cases, the public is still not the end audience. Often times, changing public opinion is a mechanism for pressuring government policy, just as is observed by Beder (2002) and Egan and Levy (2003). Opinion leaders will then cite public opinion in an effort to pressure government to legislate policy favourable to the opinion leader.

In the historic model of the flow of influence by Katz and Lazarsfeld, media appear at the top of the model and opinion leaders appear below, relaying media influence to the public at the bottom. The findings of this research suggest a critical realignment of the media effects model, placing opinion leaders at the top asserting their influence both directly on the public, and also indirectly through the media to the same end

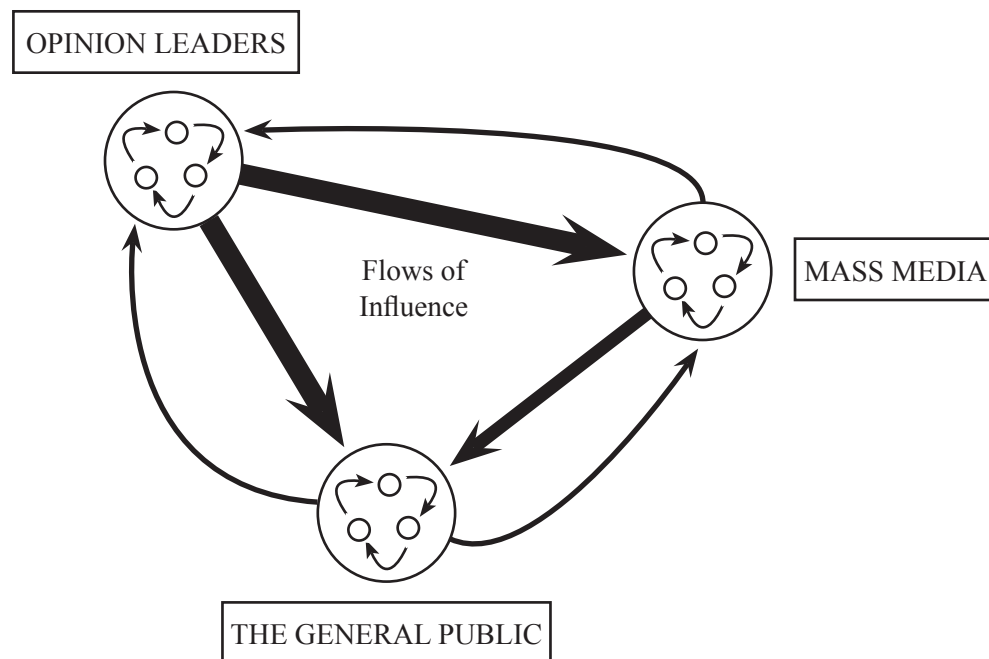


Figure 3. Proposed Two Stream Flow of Influence. Opinion leaders, the mass media, and the general public influence themselves and each other, though the flows of influence are not equal. Opinion leaders are more powerful in the hierarchy, but there are feedback mechanisms between all parties.

audience (see Figure 3). Further, the flow of influence is not strictly top-down; there are meaningful feedback mechanisms that the public can use to influence the behaviour of opinion leaders and the media. Bosso and Guber (2007) note, and interview participants concur, that opinion leaders closely observe public opinion feedback through polling, media monitoring, customer feedback forms and call centres, open houses, and other vehicles for obtaining feedback. That observation of public feedback has two effects: first, they provide opinion leaders with intelligence about the wants and needs of their audience, and second they allow the audience to pressure opinion leaders to meet those needs. That symbiotic relationship of opinion leadership and the audience may be appropriate subject matter for further research to refine understandings of the power and pressures of opinion leaders and the general public.

Advances in technology have resulted in exponentially expanding opportunities for members of the general public to express opinion in a recorded public forum. More traditional fora still exist, such as radio talk shows and letters-to-the-editor, but offer far fewer opportunities for individual expression than blogs, online discussion fora, and social media. Such expansion of opportunities to offer opinion publicly begs the question of where to draw the line between who is an opinion leader and who is a member of the general public offering opinion to the public debate, but not necessarily *leading* opinion. Robert Smith (2001) suggests asking others who they consider to be opinion leaders and then recognizing opinion leadership hierarchies based on who is taking opinion from whom and where in the diffusion of influence. While Smith's suggestion may have value when people identify each other as opinion leaders, how should the media effects model view opinion leadership when the opinion receivers cannot identify who the opinion leader is? Analyzing the data from this research inquiry shows examples of opinion leadership from people who are anonymous, such as with many online discussion fora, or

functionally anonymous, as with letters-to-the-editor and radio talk shows wherein a vast majority of the audience will neither recognize nor remember the name of the letter writer or talk show caller. While the opinions expressed may have the effect of influencing public opinion, these one-time opinion givers cannot be identified by their audience, nor do they have the capacity to measure their impact as an opinion leader. I posit that such people are members of the public who are asserting “*blip opinion leadership*.” Blip opinion leadership can be defined as a minor or brief injection of individual opinion into the public debate on a given issue, especially where the author of the opinion cannot be immediately or easily identified by an audience after the message has been received. These blip opinion leaders generate a single blip on the opinion leadership radar and then disappear, returning to their regular role in the flow of influence as a member of the general public. For all intents and purposes, these people are anonymous members of the audience, not opinion leaders, and are a part of the collective general public in the feedback mechanism. Blip opinions may reflect attitudes common amongst members of the public and aid to influence other members of the public, the media, and opinion leaders. But these blip opinion leaders are not true opinion leaders because of their real or functional anonymity and because they carry little or no status or credibility as opinion leaders with the audience.

Interview participants describe credibility, trust, or legitimacy as being a core requirement for being influential with the public. Organizations invest significant amounts of time and money building trust and credibility as a part of their communications programs. The opinion leaders describe a variety of mechanisms that help to build credibility and trust with the audience, such as directly engaging the public through open houses and providing easy access to information about the organizational business model, commissioning research from respected members of the academic community, or

bringing other opinion leaders into their campaign to provide third party validation, all of which reflects on the caution raised by Bandura (2002) that audiences seek verification of information from opinion leaders. The interviewees observe that the public is skeptical of information and of the motivations of some opinion leaders and will often not be receptive to the opinion leadership when they do not trust the opinion leader or view them as credible. Building trust and credibility becomes a powerful medium through which to transmit information because it allows opinion leaders to compete with and trump other opinions in the public debate that may be contrary to the message being sent.

The public's trust of the opinion leader and the opinion leader's credibility with the audience is so essential that the messenger can become more important to the opinion receiver than the message being sent by the opinion leader. Regardless of the quality of argument, validation of research, third party endorsements, or the outreach efforts of an opinion leader, members of the public will often be more inclined to believe those they trust or find credible than those they do not. This finding may help to explain the original development of the Katz-Lazarsfeld model; people trusted those they knew personally more than the mainstream media, thus creating a two-step flow of influence, which emphasized interpersonal flows of influence over direct flows of influence. Further, this finding may help to explain the growing trend of communications professionals and reputation management programs for protecting an opinion leader's ability to communicate to an audience in an environment of trust, as well as to protect the reputation of the opinion leader with its audience.

Conclusion

The findings of this research are generalized from data collected during interviews with energy sector opinion leaders. The qualitative data is rich in quality and follows on existing literature that lends itself to the arguments and findings of this research. Many

of the arguments and findings of this research can benefit from validation through future study, but they are nevertheless valuable as critical commentary on existing theory, an analysis of opinion leadership on sustainability issues in British Columbia's energy sector, and as a catalyst to open up questions for further investigation.

The foremost result of this research is the conclusion that the Katz-Lazarsfeld two-step flow model of influence is no longer an accurate reflection of today's communication environment. Advances in technology and the sophistication of communications professionals involved in organizational opinion leadership necessitate updating the models of opinion leadership. Lazarsfeld cannot be faulted for developing a model that did not account for the almost universal use of television as a communications medium, nor could Robinson be expected to predict the introduction and expansion of electronic communications. However, Robinson (1976) did note that the model needed to be updated to reflect technological and methodological advances from a generation earlier. So, too, is the case today, as new technologies are replacing television, radio, and print media as sources of information and influence. Audiences are turning their attention to those new media that offer them increased opportunity to engage in a more sophisticated format than ever before. Communications professionals are now a part of the opinion leadership function of more and more organizations and are becoming increasingly effective in engaging public opinion through these new technologies and through innovative use of existing technology. Models of the flows of influence must not be considered static or immobile. Comparing the timeline of the advancement of communications technology, the sophistication of the audience, and opinion leadership against the evolution of models suggested by Lazarsfeld, Katz, Robinson, and now by myself, reveals that the model continues to evolve along with technology and society.

This conclusion posits that historic models of the flow of influence are no longer

adequate to describe the sophistication of the audience, but more importantly, have placed media at the top of the hierarchy of influence, when in fact opinion leaders belong at the top of the model, and there are flows of influence between all parties in the model. The public is not passive in its participation in public debate as simply an audience observing and receiving influence. The public can provide feedback to both opinion leaders and the media, either collectively, through consumer behaviour, voting behaviour, participation in polling and other less socially visible activities, and individually, through *blip* opinion leadership. However, there should be no confusion; this power of influence in the audience is a weaker, secondary, and responsive influence in the flow of communication. While the public may have broad consumer, political, and democratic power, the models of communication influence see opinion leaders more heavily active, invested, and resourced in their efforts to change public opinion than any of the other actors in the media effects model.

Finally, the flow of influence is not an automatic process; in addition to a messenger, a message, a medium, and an audience, several criteria must be met to precipitate the flow of influence from one party to another. The single issue of energy and environmental sustainability is perhaps the most salient issue in the public domain and that salience serves as a catalyst to the flow of influence. Because British Columbia presents an audience unique in its awareness of sustainability issues and relative early adoption of new communications technology, this province presents an excellent case study to demonstrate this point. An absence of salience on an issue could present a barrier to audience receptivity and necessitate a more complex and arduous communications process, including an awareness and education component. In British Columbia, however, the model described is better illustrated and the communications process is more fluid because of the highly aware audience and the widespread use of new communications

technology. Further, public skepticism results in opinion leaders needing to provide a credible opinion from a messenger trusted by the public. Those elements of salience, trust and credibility are perhaps the most important vehicles in the flow of influence, which are both present in any iteration of the two-step model of media effects influence.

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1. *Note.* Figure 1 and Figure 2 from “Interpersonal influence in election campaigns: Two step-flow hypotheses,” by John P. Robinson, 1976, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40, p. 306 and 317. Copyright 2001 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

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