Information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders

Robb Conrad Lauzon

Abstract

Introduction. *This paper explores the information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders for the purpose of better communicating attributes of innovations to this group of individuals. Information-seeking is an important concept for diffusion of innovations theory. This study contributes towards an understanding of information-seeking behaviour in the diffusion of innovations.*
Methods. *Interviews were conducted with nine participants who were recruited largely from their involvement in civic life. Intensive interviews generated hours of interview material that was used by the author for subsequent analysis.*
Analysis. *Critical Discourse Analysis enabled the author to look at the social structures that were revealed in their responses to the interview protocol. These interviews were coded by hand until themes were reduced to their essence.*
Results. *Three technics were identified as aiding opinion leaders in their information seeking endeavours. First, identification of gatekeepers granted opinion leaders access to information. Second, a knowledge of relevant publications afforded them confidence in their dealings with information. Third, sophisticated information-seeking behaviours allow opinion leaders to sift through the useful and less than useful information they come across in their searches.*
Conclusions. *These technics serve the opinion leader in their relationship to all facets of contemporary everyday life.*

Keywords*: information-seeking behaviour, innovation, social capital*

Introduction

Diffusion of innovations is one of the most popular theories in the social sciences and communication studies. Its ability to elucidate the complexities of the adoption of new ideas and technologies has contributed to its longevity. In an era where recalcitrance to novel ideas and technologies (e.g., face masking) seems to be front page news on a reoccurring basis, it could not hurt to understand diffusion of innovations beyond adopter categories and s-curves. This paper explores the information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders for the purpose of better communicating attributes of innovations to this group of individuals. Specifically, this research reveals how opinion leaders uniquely utilise information to remain civically engaged in their local communities. Rogers (2003) offers that the attributes of innovations are comprised of relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. These attributes serve as characteristics that influence the potential adopter regarding the innovation under consideration. A better understanding about opinion leaders' information-seeking behaviours offers insights on how attributes of innovations might be best conveyed to the individuals most likely to spread important innovations and ideas to others (i.e., opinion leaders).

Information-seeking behaviour is a collection of strategies that enable an individual to discover something about the world outside of themselves. Information-seeking behaviour is concerned with users' needs and use of information (Julien, 1996). For example, a child who asks their parent why rain comes from some clouds and not others, is engaged in information-seeking behaviour. Similarly, a college student who is pouring over dusty books in their university's library is also engaged in information-seeking behaviour. Rogers (2003) includes information-seeking behaviour as a key practice of potential adopters which makes this concept important to diffusion studies. Beyond Rogers' use of information-seeking as it relates to communicating an innovation's attributes, other diffusion research has looked at information-seeking behaviour as an innovation in and of itself. For instance, Sunstrom's (2016) qualitative study of women accessing health information reveals that search engines like Google are an important tool for information seeking. This everyday application of information-seeking (see de Certeau 2011) is an area of scholarship that Aspray and Hayes (2011) believe is an important extension for those who study information. In this paper, information-seeking behaviours should be understood as a practice of everyday life as opposed to a tool for weighing the attributes of innovations despite their importance to diffusion of innovations theory.

Additionally, information-seeking behaviours can also be classified as technics. Mumford (1934) defines technics as '*…a translation into appropriate, practical forms of the theoretic truths, implicit or formulated, anticipated or discovered, of science*' (p. 52). Technics can be better understood by turning to Jose Ortega y Gasset (1941) who groups the act of making fire along with other artifice like speech. Whether through the fashioning of an instrument or the creation of a practice, he refers to both as procedures. It is through these procedures that man can '*modify nature*' (Gasset, 1941, p. 94). Gasset (1941) states, '*[in] their entirety these acts constitute technology, which may now be defined as the improvement brought about on nature by man for the satisfaction of his necessities*' (p. 95). Therefore, understanding information-seeking as technics enables the reader to view the needs and uses of information as an attempt to modify the nature presented by the archive. Perhaps most importantly for diffusion research, viewing information-seeking behaviour as technics allows theorists to discuss the communication process in greater detail. Rogers (2003) identifies this shortcoming of existing communication research stating, '*Compared to other aspects of diffusion research, however, there have been relatively few studies of how the social or communication structure affects the diffusion and adoption of innovations in a system*' (p. 25).

Although not technically a category of adopter, opinion leaders are identified as indispensable to the steep adoption rate that can be seen in diffusion of innovation's s-curve. Rogers (2003) explains that once an innovation reaches opinion leaders, who are mostly found among early adopters, the innovation is spread at an exponential rate (e.g., the diffusion s-curve). As mentioned above, understanding the information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders can help encourage the adoption of innovations and ideas. Rogers (2003) believes that 'by focusing communication activities upon opinion leaders in a social system, the change agent can leverage these scarce resources and hasten the

rate of diffusion of an innovation among clients' (p. 388). Researchers looking at the information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders have observed their role in generating media trust (Turcotte et al., 2015). However, the author is unaware of other studies that examine the characteristics of the media channels and sources as this paper.

In this study, opinion leaders are identified by their social ties. Participants in this study listed over a dozen organisations that they participate in outside of their professional affiliations (e.g., Rotary, numerous local churches, League of Women Voters, The Women's Club, Babe Ruth Baseball and other local and regionally specific social organisations). In his influential book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) likens those who are engaged with community organisations, like the ones that participants of this study are involved in, as having a high degree of social capital. Johnson's (2015) review of the application of social capital theory in library and information sciences acknowledges that studies in these fields interested in the societal or community benefits of social capital rely on Putnam's approach. This study conforms to that observation. Some studies view social capital and opinion leadership as distinct with the former being an attribute of those with high social capital (Scheufele and Shah, 2000). In Burt's (1999) research, he identifies the overlap between opinion leaders and those who possess social capital. This brings the reader to Smith (2005) who, writing on the identification of opinion leaders within organisations, has conceded that those with high levels of social capital are, in fact, opinion leaders. In this paper, the author agrees with this classification and regards those participants who are involved with several civic organisations (i.e., participants with a high level of social capital) as opinion leaders. Perhaps a study most closely related to how this paper conceives of social capital is Kang and Kim's (2009) study that makes a connection between the social capital of opinion leaders and innovation adoption amongst teams. Furthermore, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) looking at the application of social capital within organisations, conclude that social capital facilitates the development of intellectual capital. Intellectual capital being '*...the knowledge and knowing capability of a social collectivity, such as an organisation, intellectual community, or professional practice*'. (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; p. 245). It would follow that opinion leaders could potentially reveal a great deal about the interrelation between information-seeking behaviour and the development of social capital through such behaviours.

In the sections that follow, the author will argue that opinion leaders possess a privileged access to information via gatekeepers and relevant publications and possess sophisticated information-seeking behaviours. In designing this study, the researchers sought to answer the following questions:

> Research question 1: What is the relationship between the participants and innovation?

> Research question 2: How does information-seeking behaviour shape this relationship to innovation adoption?

Next, the method that was used to collect qualitative data will be outlined, followed by the author's analysis, and finally, the results will be detailed.

Method

This study was conducted as part of a Mass Media Research Methods course at a large state school in the United States. The author served as the professor and primary investigator tasked with overseeing a real-life research project for students to gain hands-on experience. For sake of continuity, the author will continue to refer to himself as the author when explaining interactions between himself and his students. From the start of the semester, students were presented with the course objective to do research, and the overarching question was how can students drive more users to the department's government transparency website? The students' efforts serve as formative research to help their peers in a future section of Public Communication Campaigns to develop campaigns influenced by Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory to promote the transparency website. Rogers (2003) states, '*formative research is conducted relatively early in a communication campaign in order to create more effective messages*' (p. 86). The data gathered by students in Mass Media Research Methods was anonymized and delivered to Public Communication Campaigns students at the start of the following semester.

Based on their own preferences, students divided themselves between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the project. Because this paper only uses qualitative data, the author will only detail the methods of the students who chose a qualitative approach. However, both groups went through the entire institutional review board process as a team and were responsible for collecting and handling data in a way that conforms with the CITI (collaborative institutional training initiative) program's research, ethics and compliance training.

In preparation for fieldwork, the author prepared an interview protocol and consent form that were approved by the institutional review board. The consent form was compiled in accordance with the university's requirements and contained standard fields that were populated with information specific to the research project (e.g., purpose of study, duration of study, benefits to participants, etc.). Students were expected to study this document so they could explain it to the research participants in plain English. The interview protocol was developed by the author and included four sections of interview questions. The first section was basic demographic information and screening questions. However, the screening questions were not used to disqualify the participants and were only used to help during analysis. Second, questions about innovation adoption and opinion leadership were developed using assumptions presented by Rogers (2003). These questions were crucial for determining opinion leadership among interview participants. Third, the protocol contains questions about information-seeking behaviours. For example, participants were asked to detail their daily media diet and their opinion on the trustworthiness of various media outlets. Finally, questions pertaining to the participants' political interests and civic engagement were included. By and large, these questions were the only questions presented to research participants in the same exact order during each subsequent interview. The only exception to this is the occasional follow-up question that sought clarification. The researchers were permitted to seek clarification when they thought it was appropriate.

For this study, participants were recruited based on their proximity to civic activities. More specifically, researchers attended city meetings (e.g., city commissioner meetings, parks and recreation meetings, etc.) over the course of a few weeks to make public announcements inviting citizens to participate in the study. Luker (2010) refers to this approach to sampling as data outcropping. Essentially, data outcropping operates with a priori knowledge that the sample being sought will not exist evenly throughout the population being studied. In the instance of this study, it is unlikely that the politically engaged individuals of interest to the researchers would be as accessible in other social situations or through probability sampling. At the city meetings, a researcher would make an announcement during the public comment section. This announcement would inform the audience that the students at their local university were conducting a study on the civic engagement of citizens within the city being studied. Potential participants were encouraged to email the students' professor to receive more information and potentially schedule an interview with the researchers. Once the potential participants contacted the author, they were sent a brief introduction to the purpose of the study and provided a link to a sign up for an interview time. Students and the author aggregated their availability and posted those times on a poll hosted by doodle.com.

The students were partially responsible for recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and transcribing the recordings. Their academic understanding of fieldwork was guided by their textbook, *Mass Media Research: an Introduction* authored by Wimmer and Dominick (2013). Wimmer and Dominick refer to the type of interviewing conducted as intensive interviewing. Twelve participants were recruited for interviews, but only nine were able to complete the interview due to scheduling conflicts between the researchers and participants. Five of the interviews were conducted by students, and the remainder were executed by the author. A facility at another college located in the city where participants were recruited was utilised for in-person interviews. (Below, this college is referred to as College A.) Due to fears of COVID-19, two of the interviews were conducted remotely with the researcher at the interview facility while the participant teleconferenced from another location. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to over an hour in length. Students were advised to ask follow-up questions that were not listed on their interview protocol. Eight of the interviews were transcribed by the students prior to the conclusion of the semester. Students utilised these transcripts to form their

own analysis and compose their final paper. These interviews serve as the data for the author's analysis that follows.

Analysis

The data that was collected became part of a discourse analysis that attempted to understand what made this group of opinion leaders' information-seeking behaviours noteworthy. Because of the political nature of the interviews, this type of analysis might be classified as political discourse analysis. In working towards a definition of political discourse analysis, Wilson (2015) offers that any analysis of politics is inherently critical. In that case, perhaps critical discourse analysis is more appropriate. Van Dijk (2015) states, '*Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context*'. (p. 466) Surely, any study of civic engagement is a study of power struggles between citizens. In this sense, the individuals who were recruited to share their experiences and preferences in consuming political information are ultimately weighing in on these power struggles in some way, shape, or form. Van Dijk (2015) provides a list of characteristics that are central to critical discourse analysis. Of those listed, two guide this analysis: (1) a focus on social problems and political issues instead of discourse structures and (2) an effort to explain discourse in the context of social interaction and structure (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 467).

Coding was conducted by hand over the course of several weeks. Luker (2010) advises researchers to produce a reference copy and a coding copy. Instead of using photocopies, a series of digital files were produced to organise the codes as the information was reduced. A number of major themes emerged as a result of the coding: land use, gatekeepers, independent media, social capital, etc. After these themes had been broken out and assigned their own files, the author went through and read the excerpts that populated each theme's file. From here, more granular themes emerged that related to the research questions. For example, a closer look at the mention of gatekeepers revealed that these individuals were gaining exclusive or privileged access that is not afforded to most citizens. After this type of access to gatekeepers was mentioned a few times, the author broke this theme out into its own file. Luker (2010) states, '*when you hear the same thing from people all over the country who don't know one another, you can be reasonably sure that you are tapping into something that is reliably social and not individua*l'. (p. 167) Although this study did not cover an area as large as the country, this principle could also be applied to individuals from different social groups within the same community. From here, the author was able to break out yet another level of themes that differentiated between strategies of information seeking and privileged access to information. From the data, two major themes emerged that relate to the research questions originally posed: privileged access to information and sophisticated information-seeking strategies.

Results

Participants in this study spoke at great length about their thoughts and feelings regarding the state of politics in Sunshine Town. Sunshine Town is the fictional name of a very real city at the centre of this study. To prioritise the argument above, the details of the colourful politics of Sunshine Town have been confined to the results section. The transparency website mentioned above is entirely focused on the data of Sunshine Town's municipal government. The resulting study was made possible by the vocal constituents of Sunshine Town. Two major themes concerning information-seeking emerged from the interviews that were gathered.

Privileged access to information

Out of the nine participants who were interviewed, six responded to questions about their information-seeking behaviours with answers that indicate a privileged access to information. This privileged access to information is composed of a privileged access to gatekeepers of information and an extensive knowledge on the type of documents that city governments publish. This type of access entails personal communications with government officials and people with first-hand knowledge of

issues of concern (e.g., land development issues). This privileged access is supposedly afforded every American citizen, and yet the remaining responses hint that a psychic barrier exists between government officials and their constituents. Although this privileged access to information is, for the most part, available to most that request it, it is uncertain why citizens do not ask more of their officials. Studies regarding communication with political constituents have largely investigated the dissemination of information rather than the exchange of information between constituents and government officials (Robinson, Vatrapu, Medina, 2010; Shogan, 2010; Taylor and Kent, 2004). It is possible that this is a cultural difference between an American libertarian approach to communication with constituents (i.e., a relationship where individuals are expected to guard their own access to and literacy of civic data) and countries that are explicit about their expectations that government officials actively keep open communication channels (Auel and Umit, 2018). For example, a paternalistic concern for citizen's access to information is not unusual in a country like Canada but not typical of the relationship between an American and his or her government. The author, who is also American, has never been contacted by national, state, or local representatives to share information regarding matters of civic importance. Below, I will detail two distinct motivations for employing a privileged access to information.

First, information is sought for matters pertaining to an individual's profession. For example, a few of the participants of the study either were current or former government officials. Others worked closely with city government in their respective fields (e.g., journalism). One participant recalls that she uses her existing connections with city staff to fulfil her information needs. She states:

> Because I have direct contact with them, I do that. For instance, if it is a question about [the city event venue], I would go and say Hi [Claudette], [Claudette] is someone that I deal with and we have an organisation ... we meet like once a month. But I'll ask [Claudette] like **What are your latest policies on masks and stuff?** So honestly, I am not like your typical guy that goes through the commissioners but the average do.

In this instance, existing relationships with city officials shape the information-seeking behaviours of opinion leaders. These initial interactions seem to serve as a standing invitation to constituents to reach out for information relating to other issues of concern.

In another instance, former elected officials are introduced to city publications while they are serving and continue to use these sources for their own personal matters. One participant conveys that she regularly received *packets* of information from the city to help her in her official capacity as an elected official. She states that she continues to search out these packets when seeking information even after her tenure ended.

In another example, a participant highlights just how savvy one could get when seeking information. He recalls:

> I have researched one political issue, for example, was single member districts. I reached out to professors at [University A] and at [College A], and I had a researcher go in and research some about what other cities do. And that was [Mary Maryland]. What is the name of her? Darn. I should tell you because it's pretty cool. It's based in California. [Mary Maryland] Library. They are generally issue specific. They go and do some research, and they did some research for me on the single member districts, but that's very sporadic, and it's if I have something very specific and usually more general than strictly the city.

In this example, the participant was not only able to locate information to help him make better decisions, but he was also able to leverage others to compile information for him. All these examples reveal that there is a privileged access to information through gatekeepers or city representatives entrusted with information where information is sought and through familiarity with government publications.

Second, privileged access to information is utilised for individual civic matters unrelated to one's occupation. In these examples, participants detailed their knowledge of who the gatekeepers were and where city publications could be obtained. When asked where she would locate information on local issues of importance, one participant confidently stated:

> *I would go to the people that were... that were trying to make it happen. In the city [...] we have a city manager [Rudy Day] is his name. It's not unusual for me to text him or find out something from him about what's going on. The city manager controls a lot.*

In another instance, a participant remarked, '*I'm plugged in to the local community because of my friendships. I have so many people that are from different walks of life that give me updates on their sphere of influence and I get it first-hand*'. These examples are exemplary in how they demonstrate the participant's confidence in their own civic literacy.

One of the most common information-seeking behaviours reported involved watching archived footage from city meetings. This behaviour was reported in response to a question about how participants would learn more about issues within their city. It is worth noting the discrepancy between perceptions of the availability of archived materials on the city's websites from different participants. Some participants are satisfied with the level of access to archived material and have stated,'*Anything you need is right there for you to peruse*'.While others desire more thorough documentation making observations like, '*I watch the recordings or review the minutes even though they are not very expansive or accurate*'.

Although motivations for accessing information differ between participants, their ability to identify gatekeepers and relevant publications characterises this type of information-seeking behaviour as privileged. What distinguishes these citizens from their neighbours is their ability to navigate the bureaucratic organisation where this information is housed. It seems the common denominator between all the participants who have reported a privileged access to information is their proximity to government. Whether they have held positions in government or have had to work closely with government, they have developed information-seeking behaviours that continue to serve them in their personal lives.

Sophisticated information-seeking strategies

Although similar in their goal, sophisticated information-seeking strategies differ from privileged access to information in the process involved. Whereas privileged access to information requires knowledge of gatekeepers and existing publications, sophisticated information-seeking strategies entail a series of mental operations that help the user decide which information is most appropriate for the questions the user is asking. Popularly, these strategies might be roughly grouped under the titles critical thinking or information literacy. These strategies serve as checklists that information seekers use to make sense of the information they encounter in their searches. These strategies can be broken into two types: augmented and mental software.

First, augmented sophisticated information-seeking strategies rely on the use of tools that assist the information seeker to answer their questions. For example, one participant shared their use of Duck Duck Go, an alternative search engine, because she believes that the information she receives there is *unbiased*. Another participant mentioned using Florida's Sunshine Law and going through the state to obtain access to information. In Florida, the Sunshine Law allows any citizen to request public information at their own cost. In one interview, a participant mentioned utilising Florida's Municode library (https://library.municode.com/FL). Municode is a software that municipalities can use to help them publish their codes for citizens to easily access. All these tools assist information seekers acquire the most relevant and transparent information for their purposes.

Second, information-seeking strategies are probably easiest to understand as a mental software that most information seekers unconsciously employ. The author has labelled the strategies reported by the

participants of this study as sophisticated because of the evident interior deliberation that went into articulating these complex rules for selecting and rejecting information. One participant remarks:

> *We have a publication in [Sunshine Town] called the [Sunshine Gazette], and it's a very jaded document. And when I read it, I get mad because it's almost always people who are not required to put their name down. I don't pay any attention to anonymous sources. For me, if somebody sent me a letter when I was on the commission, and they didn't sign their name, I just ignored it.*

The rules don't end with anonymous sources. Another participant is wary of former politicians who use their access to former constituents to continue to assert influence. He states:

> *We have some [former] city council members that are still actively involved in blogging and email former voters. There's one guy in particular named [Stan Mann]. He used to be a city council member. He's not on the counsel now, but he's notorious in my opinion for regularly, on issues that are before [Sunshine Town] city government, and because he has a name and he has the voter rolls he just blasts emails [in] capitalised letters **don't vote for whatever.** You're not a city council member, dude! But he's got a megaphone [...] I just shake my head and I say that's why we need [a transparency initiative]. Somehow, he has the [Sunshine Town] voter [roll]. I don't know if he has all registered voters. Frankly I don't know if that's something that any of us can access, but I know he blasts emails to [Sunshine Town] voters with his thoughts of about where the city should go. Dude, you sat on the board for years and now you're off and I don't want to hear from you because you're just, you have an axe to grind about something. There is probably an opt-out and I should hit it.*

In this example, the participant identifies an issue with undue influence because of issues of access to an audience he does not feel the author has earned. Along with anonymous authorship, undeserved audience becomes a metric that information seekers use to select their information.

Sophisticated information-seeking strategies shape the selection of information that citizens utilise for making decisions about issues of importance to them. Although not as explicitly articulated as the examples previously provided, every participant hinted at the complexity that exists while seeking information. For instance, one participant acknowledged this process without being able to define it stating, '*It's kind of hard to sift through. People just take things at surface level. And kind of what they see scroll across their screens*'. It is not simply recognizing the existence of having to sift through the information deluge, citizens must also be able to articulate these strategies to be able to classify them as sophisticated.

Conclusion

As detailed above, the information-seeking behaviours of the opinion leaders interviewed demonstrate that a rich constellation of technics guides individuals in their everyday civic lives. The recognition of gatekeepers of information situates the opinion leader in a place primed for the exchange of new ideas. A knowledge of relevant publications and their location enables opinion leaders to retrieve civic information with ease. If an individual is not aware they have access to a record of the inner workings on their city government, such as meeting minutes, they will be less likely to utilise such information. Lastly, sophisticated information-seeking filtering systems, whether augmented by a search engine or mental attitudes that guide information selection, serve opinion leaders as they sift through the information glut that often overwhelms citizens of the 21st century. This sophistication figuratively enables the citizen to separate the wheat from the chaff. These technics serve the opinion leader in their relationship to all facets of contemporary everyday life. Commerce and government are inextricably dependent on the exchange of information (e.g., data and information drive entire industries that market products to citizens, and documents fuel the bureaucracies of contemporary nation states). Because of this, it is understandable why opinion leaders and those with high levels of social capital would demonstrate such information-seeking behaviours given the resources required to make even the smallest decisions currently.

Lastly, this study serves as a small offering towards understanding the procedures used by information seekers when participating in democracy. The changing landscape of news distribution has proved to be a formidable barrier for achieving an informed electorate in recent years. More broadly, the behaviours reported by participants might be generalised to other areas of public life. As mentioned above, these behaviours are an important yet under-explored area for diffusion scholars. Knowledge of gatekeepers is not unique to government nor is the knowledge of specialised information (e.g., trade publications, *Consumer Reports*, etc.). Additionally, sophisticated information-seeking procedures certainly transcend political information. Hopefully, studies like this one help to strengthen the interdisciplinary connections between information sciences and diffusion of innovations' scholarship in the years to come.

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