Opinion Leadership as a Predictor of Political Information Behavior in Japan

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For a long time, the traditional media (e.g., newspapers and television) have served as the mainstream political media. However, this situation has undergone a gradual change in recent years. While newspapers and television still play a crucial role in political coverage, the Internet in general and social media in particular have become important sources of political information for Japanese citizens. Thus, the Internet has great potential to change political information behavior.[1]

Despite the rapid diffusion of the Internet and the heightened attention on the impact of social media regarding politics, only a few studies have examined the relationship between Internet use and political information behavior (e.g., Takeshita, Saito, & Inaba, in press). In particular, no research has addressed political information behavior from the perspective of opinion leadership.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) introduced the concept of opinion leadership more than 60 years ago; and interest in this concept has re-emerged in recent years (Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Weimann, 1994).[2] Recent research has highlighted the importance of opinion leadership even in the Internet age. Shah and Scheufele (2006) contend that "the growth of the Internet as a mass medium provides opinion leaders with a new tool in their efforts to learn about issues of interest" (p. 5). Political opinion leaders now have a wider range of media options to explore social issues. Accordingly, this study examines whether this classical concept is valid in explaining the patterns of individuals' information behavior in a new media environment.

In the now-classic book, *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) formulated their renowned two-step flow communication hypothesis: "ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (p. 151). This hypothesis indicates that opinion leaders are directly influenced by the mass media, but followers are more susceptible to opinion leaders than to the media. While past research has not

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1. However, Japan lags behind other industrial countries in the new forms of political participation, for several reasons. For example, the Public Offices Election Law currently bans the updating of web pages that carry candidates' opinions and the sending of e-mail newsletters during election campaigns, although the debate over lifting the ban on Internet use as a means of conducting election campaigns has gained momentum.
2. In a standard mass communication textbook, opinion leaders are defined as "people recognized by their peers as having some special competence in a particular subject. People turn to opinion leaders for advice about a specific topic, but usually do not seek them out for their opinions on a range of issues" (Lowery and DeFleur, 1988, p. 174). Similarly, Wright (1986), in his popular mass communication textbook, defines an opinion leader as "someone who, *through day-to-day personal contacts and communication,* influences someone else's opinions and decisions on some matter and seems to do this fairly regularly or for many people, or both" (p. 89).

necessarily demonstrated the susceptibility of opinion leaders to the mass media, it has confirmed that opinion leaders tend to engage in interpersonal communication on familiar topics more actively and to expose themselves to the media in order to obtain information about those topics more eagerly than their followers (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Thus, political opinion leaders are regarded as active communicators and active news consumers who have expertise on and knowledge of politics.

Using the concept of communicatory utility, defined as "the anticipated usefulness of information for future informal interaction with family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances" (Atkin, 1972, p. 188), Atkin explained why opinion leaders actively seek information from the media. When anticipating conversation with family members or peers about a certain topic in the near future, individuals are motivated to seek relevant information from the media. Opinion leaders may seek media information due to this motivation (or reason). According to Shah and Scheufele (2006), opinion leaders "as influential members of their communities may encourage surveillance and seeking of hard news content" (p. 6). Thus, it follows that opinion leadership may be an important predictor of individuals' levels of information behavior.

Obviously, the concept of opinion leadership was introduced before the advent of the Internet. Thus, the question is whether this concept is still useful in the Internet age to explain individuals' information behavior. If so, do opinion leaders both seek information from the media and convey messages or transmit information via the Internet (particularly, social media)? In this study, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: Who actively uses the Internet to gather political information?

RQ2: Compared with demographics and level of political interest, is the level of opinion leadership a better predictor of political information-sending behavior via social media?

In order to answer these research questions, we conducted two online surveys. Study 1 was conducted soon after the 2010 Upper House election; Study 2 was conducted soon after the 2011 Tokyo gubernatorial election. After briefly reporting the results of Study 1, this extended abstract focuses mainly on Study 2.

Study 1

Method

The sample for the online survey was drawn from Internet users who had registered on the respondent directory of a marketing research firm. Six hundred respondents who lived in the Greater Tokyo Area (one metropolis, three prefectures) answered the questionnaire online between July 16 and July 21, 2010.

Results

Following Robinson (1976), we divided the respondents into three categories: political opinion leaders (24.0%), opinion receivers (32.7%), and non-discussants (41.2%).[3] There was no significant difference with regard to gender, age, or education. As for media exposure, political opinion leaders tended to watch news and information programs on television and to read newspapers for a longer time. However, no significant difference was observed in terms of the amount of the Internet use among the three categories.

Responses to the question regarding the medium from which respondents usually obtained information about politics (multiple choice) indicated that television news was the most chosen political information source for all three categories (opinion leaders 82.6%, opinion receivers 85.2%, and non-discussants 68.0%). Newspapers were the second most chosen information source, and news sites on the Internet ranked third (Table 1).

The study also indicated that political opinion leaders were more likely than non-leaders to rely on the Internet to obtain information about politics. For example, 13.9% of the opinion leaders chose websites of political parties or politicians as media for information about politics, while the corresponding figures for the non-leaders were much smaller (4.6% of the opinion receivers and 2.0% of the non-discussants; $\chi^2 = 24.24$, $p < .001$). Similarly, 12.5% of the opinion leaders said that they used large-scale bulletin boards to acquire political information, but only 6.6% of the opinion receivers and 3.2% of the non-discussants chose this medium ($\chi^2 = 12.58$, $p < .01$).

Less than 10% of the respondents used social media such as SNS or video hosting services to obtain political information, although the political opinion leaders were more likely to use these media than the non-leaders. In addition, the opinion leaders utilized a larger number of information sources than the non-leaders (3.83 sources on average for the opinion leaders, 2.89 for the opinion receivers, and 2.05 for the non-discussants; $F(2, 584) = 57.44$, $p < .001$). This relationship held true even after controlling for demographics and other relevant variables.

Study 2

Method

3. Using the 1968 election study of the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan, Robinson (1976) attempted to divide respondents into three categories: opinion givers (32%), who were considered opinion leaders; opinion receivers (17%), who were regarded as the less active section of the population; and the inactive/non-discussants (51%). Similarly, using two questions that were asked in the 1966 election study, Kingdon (1970) offered a fourfold typology: activists (10.0%), talkers (12.4%), passive leaders (6.9%), and non-leaders (70.7%).

The sample for the online survey was drawn from Internet users who had registered on the respondent directory of the same marketing research firm as in Study 1. Six hundred respondents who lived in the Tokyo Metropolis answered the questionnaire online between April 15 and April 20, 2011.[4]

Opinion leadership: In this study, opinion leadership was assessed on a five-point Likert scale originally created for this study that was modeled after Solomon's (1996) opinion leadership scale. This scale consisted of the following five items with response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): (1) You usually talk to your friends and neighbors about politics; (2) When you talk to your friends and neighbors about politics, you tend to provide a great deal of information; (3) During the past month, you have talked about politics; (4) Compared with your circle of friends, you are more likely to be asked about politics; (5) In talking about politics, you tell your friends about politics rather than your friends telling you. Factor analysis of these five items indicated that they consisted of one dimension; therefore, we combined these five items into a single scale, the opinion leadership scale. The alpha coefficient for this scale was .93.

While the opinion leadership scale score was continuous, some analyses required that respondents be categorized as political opinion leaders, followers, and inactives.

The respondents whose opinion leadership scores were more than one standard deviation above the mean (18 or more) were categorized as political opinion leaders. Those whose opinion leadership scores fell within one standard deviation above or below the mean (7 to 17) were categorized as followers. Those with scores more than one standard deviation below the mean (6 or less) were categorized as inactives.

Political knowledge: In Study 2, we used three 4-point scale items to measure respondents' political knowledge. The first item asked about TPP; the second one asked about *nejire kokkai* (the divided Diet or twisted Diet, which means the two houses of the Diet are controlled by different parties); and the third one asked about *ippyo no kakusa* (disparity in the relative weight of one vote). Factor analysis of these three items indicated that they consisted of one dimension; therefore, we combined these three items into one scale, political knowledge. The alpha coefficient for this scale was .79.

Social media use: In this study, we asked the respondents whether and how frequently they engaged in the following activities on the Internet regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident and the 2011 Tokyo gubernatorial election: (1) updating one's own blogs, (2) posting comments on SNSs, (3) tweeting via the Twitter website, (4) posting comments on large-scale

4. The 17th unified regional elections took place in April 2011.

bulletin boards, and (5) resending e-mails from their acquaintances (this item was asked about only the Fukushima nuclear accident). For subsequent analyses, these items were factor-analyzed and combined into scales: the active social media use scale for the Fukushima nuclear accident (α = .82) and the active social media use scale for the 2011 Tokyo gubernatorial election (α = .84).

Interest in politics. Considering the extent of the respondents' interest in politics is important in examining political information behavior. As Shah and Scheufele (2006) point out, "the relationships between opinion leadership and news consumption are mediated through other variables, most notably interest in politics" (p. 4). Past research has confirmed that political interest urges information-seeking via the media (Weimann, 1994). In this study, the respondents indicated the level of their interest in politics in general by using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all interested) to 5 (very interested).

Political orientation. The respondents' political orientations may be related to political information behavior. Thus, political orientation was included as a control variable. The respondents were asked to indicate their self-designated political orientation using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (conservative) to 5 (liberal).

Results

Table 2 summarizes differences among the three categories in terms of demographics, amount of media exposure, political orientation, political knowledge, and level of political interest. In agreement with previous findings, the results of this study indicate that opinion leaders were more likely to watch television news and read newspapers. However, political inactives tended to use the Internet via PC for a longer time. Political opinion leaders also had stronger interest in politics, had more political knowledge, and used a larger number of sources to acquire information about the Fukushima nuclear accident (or disaster). No significant difference was found in terms of political orientation.

As mentioned above, the respondents were asked whether they used social media to send messages or transmit information regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident and the 2011 Tokyo gubernatorial election. Results indicated that relatively few respondents actively used social media to convey information (Table 3). However, the opinion leaders updated their own blogs, posted comments on SNSs or large-scale bulletin boards, tweeted via Twitter, and resent e-mails from their acquaintances more frequently than followers and inactives.

We further conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The predictor variables included gender, age, level of education, self-designated political orientation,

level of interest in politics, political opinion leadership, and amount of media exposure (total television viewing, newspaper reading, television news viewing, and Internet use via PCs). The dependent variables were the scores on each of the three scales. In the first step, we entered the demographic variables (age, gender, and education) and self-designated political orientation. In the second step, we added the amount of media exposure, level of interest in politics, and opinion leadership scale score. Table 4 summarizes the results of the multiple regression analyses.

The results indicate that age ($\beta = -.176$, $p < .001$), political orientation ($\beta = -.098$, $p < .05$), amount of Internet use via PCs ($\beta = .090$, $p < .001$), interest in politics ($\beta = .098$, $p < .05$), and opinion leadership ($\beta = .176$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant predictor variables for the active social media use scale score regarding the Fukushima nuclear accident. The younger respondents, those who considered themselves conservative, those with more interest in politics, and those with higher opinion leadership scale scores were more likely to send messages via social media on the Fukushima nuclear accident. The most important point here is that, even controlling for several relevant variables, opinion leadership (along with age) was the strongest predictor of active social media use.

Regarding the amount of social media use in the 2011 Tokyo gubernatorial election, age ($\beta = -.209$, $p < .001$), political orientation ($\beta = -.099$, $p < .05$), amount of Internet use via PCs ($\beta = .137$, $p < .001$), and opinion leadership ($\beta = .183$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant predictor variables. The opinion leadership scale score was one of the strongest predictors, and interest in politics was not significantly associated with this scale score.

Gender ($\beta = .275$, $p < .001$), age ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$), education ($\beta = .186$, $p < .001$), interest in politics ($\beta = .116$, $p < .01$), and opinion leadership ($\beta = .298$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant predictor variables for the scale score of political knowledge. In addition to the above two scale scores on active social media use, the opinion leadership scale score was also the strongest predictor of political knowledge.

Discussion

The findings indicate that, as far as political information-seeking is concerned, Japanese voters, including opinion leaders, used the Internet as a supplement to traditional news media. Similar to the results of both classical and more recent studies, the results here indicate an overlapping pattern of media use. The opinion leaders were the most active consumers of the Internet, of newspapers, and of television news.

The results also indicate that opinion leadership is an important predictor variable for

level of active social media use and political knowledge. This holds true even after controlling for interest in politics, which has been considered a mediating variable between opinion leadership and news consumption. In addition, our data indicates that political opinion leadership predicts information-sending behavior better than political interest does. Overall, this study confirms the value of the opinion leadership concept in explaining individuals' information behavior in the Internet age.

Communication researchers have thus far provided several concepts to predict individuals' information behavior, such as need for orientation (Weaver, 1980) and civic duty to keep informed (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001). Future research must take into account these related variables and examine the relative predictive power of opinion leadership on political information behavior.

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Table 1. Sources of political information-gathering (multiple choice)

	Opinion leaders %	**Opinion receivers %**	**Inactives %**	
Television news	82.6	85.2	68.0	χ^2=21.45, p <.001
Newspaper articles	66.0	56.1	39.3	χ^2=28.54, p <.001
News sites	59.0	45.4	38.1	χ^2=16.13, p <.001
TV Information programs	38.9	36.7	30.4	χ^2=3.52, n.s.
Communication with family members	29.2	19.9	6.9	χ^2=34.65, p <.001
Communication with friends	28.5	15.8	6.1	χ^2=36.38, p <.001
Magazines	17.4	7.7	2.8	χ^2=26.11, p <.001
Websites of political parties or politicians	13.9	4.6	2.0	χ^2=24.24, p <.001
Large bulletin boards	12.5	6.6	3.2	χ^2=12.58, p <.01
Social network services	9.7	4.1	4.0	χ^2=6.75, p <.05
Yahoo! JAPAN politics	9.0	3.1	1.2	χ^2=15.78, p <.001
Websites excepting political parties or politicians	9.0	2.6	1.6	χ^2=15.01, p <.01
Video sharing (e.g., You Tube)	7.6	1.0	1.2	χ^2=17.39, p <.001

Table 2. Comparison of opinion leaders, followers and inactives.

	Opinion leaders n=94	**Followers** n=406	**Inactives** n=100	
Demographics				
Women	45.7%	48.1%	62.6%	χ^2=7.54, p <.05
College graduates	63.8%	56.3%	50.5%	χ^2=3.51, *n.s.*
Over 10 million yen	21.4%	17.1%	9.3%	χ^2=4.80, p <.10
	M (SD)	**M (SD)**	**M (SD)**	
Age	46.48 (13.2)	44.52 (14.2)	39.35 (13.1)	F =7.42, p <.05
Amount of exposure				
Television viewing	187.46 (130.2)	206.92(138.1)	228.99(169.6)	F =2.07, n.s.
Television news	47.44_a (49.6)	38.51_a (38.5)	25.85_b (33.0)	F =7.40, p <.01
Newspapers	44.69_a (50.6)	33.59_a (43.5)	19.90_b (31.7)	F =8.16, p <.01
Internet via PC	161.56 (132.6)	167.57 (140.0)	203.97 (179.4)	F =2.81, p <.10
Internet via cellphone	25.94 (53.5)	21.58 (58.6)	34.95 (83.0)	F =1.32, n.s.
Political orientation	3.00 (1.2)	3.06 (1.0)	3.16 (0.9)	F =0.67, n.s.
Interest in politics	3.79_a (1.4)	3.11_b (1.4)	2.99_c (1.4)	F=10.12, p <.001
Political Knowledge	10.08_a (1.9)	8.65_a (2.0)	7.39_b (2.3)	F =43.70, p <.001
Information source	3.97_a (1.6)	3.56_a (1.5)	2.82_b (1.3)	F=15.19, p <.001

Note: df=2,597 for ANOVA. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at p <.05 in the post-hoc test (Dunnett)