The strategic opinion leader: Personal influence and political networks in a hybrid media system.

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Abstract

Opinion leaders are important political players who bridge the gap between the political elite and the general public. Traditionally opinion leaders use social pressure and social support via interpersonal communication to personally influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates (who make up the general public). However, in a hybrid media system opinion leaders have access to added channels which mean they can communicate with audiences beyond their everyday associates and/or engage in non-interpersonal interactions, potentially setting the stage for opinion leaders to become more influential since they can access more members of the general public. Conversely, since the ability of opinion leaders to influence others traditionally relies on strong social bonds, even if audiences are accessible for information transfer, the lack of social connection could mean influence does not flow. As such, opinion leaders' channel choice in a hybrid media system is potentially very important.

To investigate the patterns of channel use as well as motivations for, and impacts of, channel choices by opinion leaders, a two phase mixed-methods study is employed. Phase one includes online social network analysis of the #CDNpoli (Canadian politics) hashtag on Twitter and an online survey. Phase two investigates the communication practices of 21 specific digitally enabled opinion leaders drawn from the #CDNpoli network. Two hour in-depth interviews are paired with visualizations of the participants trace data. Telephone interviews with associates (alters) of the primary interviewee were conducted (N=27). This design is therefore responsive to the multi-channel reality of a hybrid media system and improves upon large scale and single channel studies which are most common in this line of research.

Now strategic and, at times, impersonal, a fundamental shift in how influence is derived challenges theories of social influence and information dissemination. Two types of strategic opinion leaders emerge: enthusiasts and champions. Their strategies contribute to a wider trend - a "just-in-time" informed citizenry - where those who do not opt in to receiving messages from the political elite only get information at the last possible minute, such as during a scandal or an election. Future research and communication strategy must be sensitive to the varied aims and tactics of digitally enabled opinion leaders as well as the subsequent inconsistent relationship between the uninformed and their political system.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There is a widening gap between those who are politically aware and those who are not (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Individuals interested in politics are able to make use of digital channels of communication to access a wide variety of information while those who are not interested can make use of those same tools to avoid information they dislike and/or to avoid politics all together (Prior, 2007). When the gap between the informed and uninformed grows in a democratic system policy development becomes less responsive to citizen's needs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). People feel disconnected from, and disenchanted by, their political system (OECD, 2011a). This is problematic for democracy as an informed citizenry is a fundamental requirement of a functioning democratic system (Dahl, 2000).

A gap between those who opt-in to politics (thus choosing to attempt to become informed) and those who do not has always existed but the process of opinion leadership has traditionally helped bridge the gap. Political opinion leadership is the process whereby opinion leaders share political information with their associates and thus change their opinions, attitudes and behaviours. Opinion leaders are average citizens found across every social strata but are known for having higher rates of news consumption and for choosing to receive political messages from political elites (such as journalists or politicians) (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders serve

to interpret these elite messages for those members of the wider public who would not otherwise encounter the information and in that way are a crucial link between the informed and uninformed. However the degree to which they serve as that bridge is dependent on the ever-evolving media landscape and the channel choices they make. The role of the opinion leader is further articulated in Chapter 2.

This thesis examines how, why and with what implications digitally enabled opinion leaders access and disseminate political information in order to explain the impact of increased channel choice on the process of opinion leadership in a hybrid media system. In order to understand the process of opinion leadership, which takes place in daily conversations (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Weimann, 1994), the everyday political chat of opinion leaders is examined. Ultimately this thesis articulates the implications of digitally enabled opinion leader's making strategic use of their channels of communication. It is then explained how this contributes to a just-in-time informed citizenry where the gap between those who are aware and those who are not narrows only at the last possible minute before a political decision must be made.

The remainder of this section will provide an introduction to, and definition of, crucial terms. The rest of the chapter will review existing literature related to the ways in which varying political players make use of, and are impacted by, digital channels of communication. Notably, a consideration of how the role of the opinion leader may be changing is missing from the existing literature. Next, this chapter reviews the literature about everyday political chat of citizens before turning to the ways in which some citizens have been making use of digital tools to engage in political communication and contribute to their political system. Finally, the structure of the remainder of this thesis is described.

1.0.1 Terms and context

In this context, to be digitally enabled is to have a sufficient level of access and skill when making use of digital tools for communication. For this study a sample of digitally enabled opinion leaders was pulled from a list of Canadian political Twitter users. Twitter, an online social networking site available free via web-browsers and mobile apps, was selected because of its popularity and common use for sharing news media content (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010).

The hybrid media system, as described by Chadwick (2013), is characterized by high levels of choice in terms of tools and tactics of communication. Various political players borrow tactics and approaches to media use from other kinds of players in order to access and share political information across different channels (Jungherr, 2014). The hybrid media system is described in greater detail in chapter 2.

Everyday political chat is the political communication which occurs among citizens on a daily basis. Everyday political chat is inclusive of conversations about the formal political process, current affairs, as well as informal politics. In this study, political chat related to Canadian politics on Twitter serves as the starting point but for each participant other political issues are considered from international events to provincial elections to pollution in a local area.

Research investigating the political role of average citizens in the digital era is largely focused on election time communications or specific advocacy campaigns but the citizens role extends to everyday settings (Graham, 2015). While an election or other type of campaign may produce a high volume of communications around a specific issue or event, it also misses the daily communications that make up the vast majority of political interactions. Everyday political chat encompasses information sharing and discussion which occurs outside of elections and thus represents a key means by which citizens participate in their political system.

Mundane as it may seem, the everyday political chat of citizens makes up the basis of public opinion for it is within this chat that ideas are shared and issues are

debated (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Brosius & Weimann, 1996). That public opinion, at least in theory, helps guide the decisions made by the political elite, such as journalists and politicians, in their decisions about what issues to focus on or policies to delve into (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). It is within everyday political chat that the general public most consistently encounters opportunities to feel connected to their political system. Everyday political chat is central to consistent democratic dialogue (Dahl, 2000) and to generating a sense of political efficacy for citizens (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). For this reason, this study investigates the political communication of digitally enabled opinion leaders over a two year period in which there was no federal election.

The opinion leader, as an active participant and driver of everyday political chat, is theoretically an important political player. They are in a position to bridge the gap between those who are politically aware and those who are not. Thus, their actions, motivations and contributions to the political system are potentially valuable material when aiming to understand the current media and political system, when developing political communications strategies, and/or when trying to engage citizens in the political process. However, given the introduction of digital tools for political communication it cannot be assumed that the opinion leader as once described continues to exist or play the same role in the same way. As chapter 2 describes, at a minimum, opinion leaders are now faced with new choices about how to get political information, how to share that information and who their audience will be when sharing.

For example, in a mass media environment the opinion leader was restricted to accessing information from the mass mainstream media which was then broadcast over TV, radio or print. The opinion leader could then use interpersonal communication to share information with their everyday associates. In a hybrid media system the opinion leader might access information via broadcast media, via online

social networking sites, or some other channel. They may also use online social networking sites, email, text messaging, etc. to share that information with others who are not necessarily everyday associates (e.g. Twitter followers). The availability of channels for sharing information and engaging in discussion in ways which are not interpersonal and with those who are not everyday associates presents the opportunity for opinion leaders to engage with new and diverse audiences in a way that is fundamentally different.

Indeed, digital tools impact the ways in which many different political players, from journalists to politicians, are engaging in political communications and fulfilling their political roles (Agre, 2002). With a high rate of Internet penetration and given the low population density in Canada (making digital tools of communication particularly valuable), digitally enabled changes in the political system may be particularly relevant in the Canadian context. Internet penetration in Canada is 89% in 2015 (We Are Social, 2015) and 69% of the Canadian population logged on to a social networking site in 2013 (CIRA, 2014). Canada ranks second (behind the UK) in terms of frequency of Internet use at 41.3 hours per month for the average individual (CIRA, 2014). Further, use of Internet-enabled mobile devices (for example smartphones and tablets) is on the rise from 53% in 2012 to 60% in 2013 (Statistics Canada, 2014). In other words, Canadians are making use of the Internet and digital tools at increasing rates.[1]

Relatively few studies have examined the informational and social flows of influence from opinion leaders to the general public. This is perhaps due to the fact that it is difficult to track the social context of political communication. Readily available social media data makes it easy to track the flow of information from one user to the next within a platform. However, it is challenging to track those flows across the multiple channels available in a hybrid media system. It is even more challenging

[1]Appendix A provides a summary of Internet and social media use comparing Canada to the US, UK and Australia for reference.

to glean an understanding of the social context of those communications without actually asking the communicators (a time consuming and resource heavy process). This thesis addresses this gap in the literature by employing a novel mixed-methods approach in order to understand the communication practices of opinion leaders within the context of Canadian politics.

1.1 The digital tools and tactics of political elites

In a hybrid media system political players are presented with new tools for communication and new opportunities for making tactical use of those tools (Chadwick, 2013). Political players of all sorts are making use of tools and tactics of communication in ways that alter their normal practices and sometimes blur the boundaries among players. This section considers two kinds of political elites (politicians and political parties as well was journalists and media outlets) in order to illustrate the ways in which a hybrid media system plays out in the context of Canadian politics. The communication practices and patterns of the political elite are particularly important for opinion leaders since it is those elites who traditionally are the creators of original political content. Changes in how politicians, political parties, journalists and media outlets interact with the public has a potential impact on the opinion leader and their own approach to political communication.

1.1.1 Politicians and political parties

Politicians aim to make policy decisions and lead government. They appeal to voters through a variety of means including via the mainstream mass media and public meetings and increasingly through their own media communications such as email and online social networking profiles. Every major political party in Canada has a website and an email list they distribute updates to regularly. All parties and leaders are present across various social media platforms and the majority of elected

officials and candidates can be found on one or more social media platforms. Most major political parties and their leaders started using websites in the late 1990s and Twitter accounts in 2008. (PoliTwitter, 2015a).[2]

Considering the flow of information from politicians and political parties to the public (in part made up of opinion leaders) there are two major technology enabled shifts preoccupying researchers. First, relationships between political parties and citizens and second, audience targeting.

Party-citizen relationships

The introduction of the Internet and other digital tools has prompted debates about how citizen's and politicians and their parties connect. While digital communication tools have increased, partisan affiliation has decreased in many western democracies (Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003). The Internet could exacerbate this trend because it allows for direct democracy in which a citizen no longer requires a representative (Morrison, Svennevig, & Firmstone, 1999). Others argue that the Internet could allow for an increase in pluralism which leads to niche organizations and efforts based on specific issues (Bimber, 1998; Lievrouw, 2001). This could lead to a need for more parties which can represent a wider variety of choices for the voter (Gibson et al., 2003). Theoretical works examine the potential impact of the Internet and related technologies on the citizen's relationship to their political representatives and parties but the outcome is not certain.

Considering empirical work on the practices of political players, politicians and political parties tend to claim they use social media for public engagement purposes but in practice tend to broadcast messages rather than engage in conversation. For example, Klinger (2013) looks at the tendency for politicians and political parties to at least appear accessible online. In an analysis of websites, Facebook use and Twit-

[2]PoliTwitter.ca is an independent website that tracks and ranks Twitter accounts related to Canadian politics including journalists, media outlets, politicians and political parties.

ter use by the main political parties in Sweden during the 2011 election, researchers found that parties' claims and actions are not in synch. In an earlier study, Bowers-Brown (2003) suggested parties in the UK should focus on building relationships with voters in order to market their parties after an in-depth analysis of political parties in the 2001 UK General Election. He used interviews and content analysis to understand the website creation and strategy for technology use across major parties. In Canada, Small (2011) found that political parties do not use Twitter for conversation or engagement with the general public beyond broadcasting press releases and event updates.

The substantive questions within this line of research are whether or not technology can, and is, used to promote dialogue between citizens and their representatives; what the quality of that interaction is; and, what the consequences of new forms of interaction are and might be. By using social media to present a relatable human face to a political party or politician, citizens, including opinion leaders, might be encouraged to engage more in their political system. Alternatively, the promise of such personal connection when not followed up could lead to increased disillusionment and distrust in the political system. Political parties and politicians, in their outward facing uses of technology, are experimenting with ways to connect with citizens while maintaining the strength and power of their traditional approach.

Notably, literature considering the relationship between the general public and their political representatives is of course much larger than what has been described here. For example, a vast body of literature is dedicated to deliberative democracy and public sphere theory which investigate political participation more broadly.[3] These works tend to focus on the democratic system generally, rather than the relationship between citizens and their representatives specifically, and as such are not a focus of the present study.

[3]For a review see: (Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi & Chadwick, 2009).

Audience targeting becoming more sophisticated

Voter targeting is a second stream of political practice that has come about with the introduction of digital tools and has, as such, been a focus of research. Political parties can decide what messages to send to specific individuals or segments of the population. This means that opinion leaders and other members of the general public may receive tailored communication.

Nielsen (2012) suggests, the Internet is not necessarily revolutionary in terms of its impact on politicians, parties and strategists. His ethnography during the 2008 Presidential election in the US points to incremental shifts in the way digital tools are being used. For example, tools are also being used to digitize records and make them more accessible. Yet this digitization could be perceived as more revolutionary. For example, the extensive use of digital records by political parties in Canada, Australia, the US and UK is documented as Howard and Kreiss (2010, p. 1) explain,

> Parties continually track user behavior on their Web sites and user actions with respect to email messages to 'optimize' applications, steering users to donate money and signup for volunteer activities. Campaigns segment their email communications to supporters based on their demographics and involvement with the campaign.

The ability to micro-target potential voters and donors (Howard & Kreiss, 2010) and a resulting 'culture of testing' (Karpf, 2013) as well as the ability to build relationships with stakeholders (Wigand, 2010) are technology enabled competencies that contribute to successful campaigns, for example Obama's 2008 Presidential win (Harfoush, 2009; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Of significant concern is politicians and political parties making use of data collection and analysis techniques on a large scale in order to reduce the number of resources it takes to win a new vote or gain a new dollar in funding. This tactical use

of technology by politicians and political parties could result in added efficiency but it also reinforces and exacerbates existing divides within the population. A political party will not spend energy and other resources on an individual (with a vote) who is a decided voter for the opposition or who never votes at all. This means that echo chambers wherein people are surrounded by information that confirms their existing beliefs and reinforces existing preferences could increase (Sunstein, 2002).

In sum, there are a range of ways politicians and political parties are making use of digital tools and tactics. When it comes to engaging with the public there are two important trends. First, digital channels, in particular social media, are often branded as able to make politics more personal and more accessible. Second, data collection and analysis techniques are being used to target specific audiences which impact what kinds of people are invited into the political system based on who is likely to be the most valuable as a voter or potential donator.

Politicians are expected to be more accessible, parties are expected to be more inclusive and both make use of data collection and analysis techniques to gain support in the form of votes and donations. Over time this has evolved and will likely continue to, highlighting the hybrid nature of the media system.

1.1.2 Journalists and media outlets

Journalists and more broadly mainstream media outlets report on issues of political importance and hold the government to account. In Canada there is one national broadcaster (CBC/Radio-Canada) which operates television and radio networks in both French and English. There are four other national television networks: CTV and Global are English and TVA and V are French. Most major cities are served by daily newspapers and there are two national papers (Globe and Mail and National Post). The Toronto Star is also widely circulated across the country and Le Devoir is the largest French language newspaper in Canada. A core group of political journalists in Canada are known for being highly active on social media,

in particular Twitter. For example, @Kady is known for live-blogging and live-tweeting Parliamentary Committee Meetings for CBC. Similarly @DavidAkin who is the Parliamentary Bureau Chief for Sun Media is ranked by PoliTwitter (2015b) as the most popular (based on engagement and followers) journalist on Twitter.

Researchers investigating journalism and the news industry point out changes in how journalists do their job, what that job is, how the industry is structured and what expectations news consumers have (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). Of particular importance when considering the opinion leadership process is the availability and quality of news content which opinion leaders can access, share, and possibly contribute to. The practice of journalism generally and the potential for collaborative production specifically are examined below.

The practice of journalism

In Canada and abroad the way journalists make use of digital tools and the impact of that use on their role have been described in detail over that past few decades though social media has only become prominent since 2006 when Twitter became a popular tool for journalists. The new found importance of constant communication, live-blogging, and real-time opinions derived from the ability of a journalist to be constantly connected to their editor and audiences, and rapid dissemination of content are highlighted (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Watts, 2004). Increases in the speed of production have lead some to argue there is a collapse in the traditional twice a day news cycle (Boczkowski, 2009; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000; Lawson-Borders, 2006). For example, Boczkowski and De Santos (2007) show that constant publication of stories online has become the accepted norm in newsrooms. Journalists report increased pressure with rolling deadlines and the need to re-fresh and repackage stories throughout the day (Stanyer, 2009).

In addition to a fluctuating production timeline, the number of platforms available for dissemination of content has increased. Media outlets and journalists are

becoming accustomed to a multimedia environment in which they are expected to produce content for a variety of different platforms. In a study of journalists, Singer (2004) surveyed professionals from four multimedia outlets and found that the majority of reporters were platform agnostic. Convergence of platforms and technology becomes the norm as does the use of non-traditional platforms. For example, in a later work, Singer (2005) found journalists use blogs but impose traditional media logics upon that new platform. There is increased hybridity in the approach to news production taken by journalists and media.

Clearly, the typical 'journalist' uses different tools and tactics to generate content and interact with their audience in a hybrid media system than they did in a mass media environment. These changes in the practice of journalism lead to questions about the quality of content being produced and the political role of the producers. However, shifts in the practices of existing professionals are only one part of the story since the Internet and related tools are also available to non-professionals who may now also produce news content.

Collaborative content production

As is the case for political parties and politicians, journalists and media outlets are also faced with opportunities and challenges related to citizen relationships and audience targeting. For example, television programs now regularly incorporate Twitter hashtags and references to Twitter and Facebook conversations into their content and encourage contributions from viewers. In research examining the use of one such Twitter hashtag Anstead and O'Loughlin (2011) describe a viewertariate which watches, comments on and contributes to the BBC television show "Question Time." The viewertariate is one important example of how citizens connect with journalists and mainstream media outlets.

Further, there is an important blurring of boundaries among journalists and citizens who take on some functions of journalists. As Stanyer (2009, p. 203) notes,

"The professional staff reporter has been joined by the freelancers, compilers, amateur enthusiasts and members of the public: the so-called 'witness reporter' or 'citizen-journalists'." Bruns (2010) similarly describes the Pro-Am or professional amateur who contributes content which at one time, only professionals were able to do. The ability for users to generate content is consistently highlighted as one of the most meaningful changes a ubiquitous Internet and related digital tools have enabled (Bruns, 2012). Since the Internet makes it easy to create and disseminate content, average citizens are now blogging, tweeting, and posting political content. Most often studied in the context of journalism, researchers conceive of citizens and journalists as polar opposites hoping to understand the impact of this new kind of political communication. For example, many have examined whether blogs and social media set political or media agendas (Meraz, 2009; Goode, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

This trend brings up questions about the utility of such collaboration in terms of the quality of content produced and accessible to citizens. It also showcases potential shifts in news media business models. Media outlets are faced with declining subscriber rates and increased demand for consistent content in a variety of niche areas. Traditional business models may no longer be suitable. The impact of social media and other tools on both outward communications (in terms of content produced) and inward decision making processes (related to the running of the news industry) cannot go unnoticed.

The hybrid nature of the media system is evident. Political messages now come from both mainstream media (and other political elites) as well as members of the wider public. As discussed below, citizen journalists make up only one segment of the general public engaging politically, in a hybrid media system.

1.2 The citizen and their everyday political chat

This section reviews the general context of political chat in Canada before explaining in detail the relationships between political chat and public opinion, political chat and informed citizens and the social context of chat.

The Canadian population is 35,749,600 (Statistics Canada, 2015a). There is a federal election every four years as well as provincial elections and municipal elections at varying intervals depending on location. During the 2011 federal election voter-turn out was 61% (Elections Canada, 2012).[4] According to Samara, a non-profit group which conducts research on the Canadian political system, only 37% of Canadians participate in formal political activities outside of elections and only 31% believe politics affects them in their daily life (Hilderman, Anderson, & Loat, 2015). In short, the majority of Canadians are not politically engaged on a consistent basis.

That said, political chat remains an important contributor to the Canadian political system. Broadly, political chat is crucial because it contributes to the development of public opinion (Lippmann, 1946). More specifically, in a democratic system political chat enables an informed citizenry and serves to create a sense of community and shared experiences that increase political efficacy (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; McLeod et al., 1999).

[4]Among OECD countries voter turnout is 70% on average (OECD, 2011b). Voter turnout globally has been on the decline since the 1980s (Lopez Pintor, Gratschew, & Sullivan, n.d.), a trend prevalent in Canada as well as similar western democracies such as the UK and US. In recent elections Canada's 2011 turnout is slightly below the UK average at 65.1% in the 2010 General Election and 66.2% in the 2015 General Election (House of Commons Library, 2015) and on par with American Presidential elections which saw voter turnouts of 63% and 59% in 2008 and 2012 respectively (Fair Vote, 2015).

1.2.1 How everyday political chat contributes to public opinion

Public opinion is a concept that is hard to define and, across literature, is bounded in varying ways. “The term tends to be used in the broader sense as a representation of public consciousness or will, anything acted upon or ex-pressed in public,” Savigny (2002, p. 2) notes but adds that public opinion is sometimes described at different levels. A micro-level look at public opinion considers the process of how individual members of the public form opinions (Savigny, 2002). Macro-level investigations are more concerned with how those individual opinions amalgamate (or do not) into a general opinion that encompasses the views of the majority of the population (Lippmann, 1946). While the process of developing individual opinions is certainly examined in this study, when talking about public opinion the macro-level view is adopted.

Public opinion at this level is manufactured and mediated through communication about political issues. Be it mass messages broadcast by the political elite or interpersonal political chat among social ties, information is shared via political communication. As a result, individuals develop opinions, gain an understanding of the opinions of others and together, make and re-make public opinion (Lippmann, 1946; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Scheufle and Moy (2000) explain, public opinion can be thought of in two ways. It can be the rational outcome of averaging the views of citizens who present opinions. Here public opinion is generated through explicit discussion and a conscious effort of citizens to contribute their opinions. Alternatively, public opinion can be thought of as a way to institutionalize consensus (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihaly, 1991) and a from of social control. Here public opinion is made up of those opinions that are expressed without the risk of social isolation. In the first instance those who contribute to public opinion do so intentionally with the aim of impacting their political system (Scheufle & Moy, 2000). In the second instance the individual’s

contribution to their political system is unintentional.

However, regardless of intent, public opinion is a core connection between the general public and their political system. Though who is included as a member of the *public* is in question when intentionality comes into play, public opinion continues to represent the amalgamation of views of a public (Scheufle & Moy, 2000). Citizens use their perception of public opinion to gauge whether they are being represented and whether the political elite appear to understand them (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). And as Savigny (2002, p. 3) explains "Public opinion is crucial for political elites to mobilize support, not only at election times but also in the wider context of sustaining political authority and legitimacy." Public opinion represents the pulse of the nation and is used for policy development, to attract voters, to attract subscribers (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

Public opinion is measured variously. Polls have been a dominant way to measure public opinion but the introduction of social media has challenged the approach (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015) as discussed in Chapter 7. For now it is sufficient to understand how public opinion is integrated into the political system (in part through everyday political chat) and how related issues, such as informing the citizenry and building a sense of community, play into the democratic process.

1.2.2 How everyday political chat contributes to informing citizens

Beyond public opinion broadly, there are two basic reasons everyday political chat is thought to be important. First, everyday political chat is thought to lead to an informed citizenry (Graham, 2015). Second, everyday political chat is thought to help build a sense of community and shared experience in society (McLeod et al., 1999). Both are considered crucial for maintaining a strong democracy.

As described above, everyday political chat is made up of the political communications of citizens in their daily lives. It may include a discussion of a campaign

or election but it may not. Compared to election time communication, everyday political chat is more general in focus and consistent in frequency. It may include the activities of citizen journalists but one need not be a citizen journalist to engage in political chat. Similarly, online or offline activism constitutes everyday political chat for some but not exclusively.

Activists are highly engaged citizens who challenge policy and politicians. They are studied extensively in the digital era. Research shows they are networked and always connected (W. L. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Dutton, 2009) but also potentially exhibiting signs of "Slactivism" wherein they no longer need to be deeply engaged with the issue at hand. A simple click is enough (Morozov, 2012). In a hybrid media system, they do not need signs or megaphones, they simply need a mouse. Reinforcing the notion that political roles and approaches to communication may change in a hybrid media system, Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagin (2009) note that those seeking to incite collective action now have alternative forms and strategies at their disposal which are less constrained by material resources, expertise, and location - given the affordances of the Internet (2009). Earl and Kimport (2011) agree affordances of the Internet are shifting the repertoire of tools and tactics available to those seeking social and political change.

Everyday political chat which is not necessarily tied to a more formal political role, like reporting or advocating, is a main way in which the general public becomes informed about politics (Fishkin, 1997; Eveland, 2004). This chat typifies the way the vast majority of the public who do not self-select into political information sharing, become politically aware. While there is an expectation that the mainstream media should cover politics and inform the public on the political process (McQuail, 2013), in practice this is inconsistent and citizen-citizen communication plays an important role (Jungherr, 2014). In fact, it is discussion about news that tends to lead to higher news comprehension than simply watching or reading news alone (Robinson & Levy, 1986; S. E. Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Scheufele, 2000).

In work on deliberative democracy, scholars point to political chat, or talk, as crucial for building an informed citizenry that is adequately prepared for democratic participation (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Fishkin, 1997; Graham, 2015). More generally, politically informed people are more likely to be politically knowledgable which in turn increases voter turnout (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). In Canada, those who discuss politics are more likely to participate in other political activities including voting (Hilderman et al., 2015).

Eveland (2004) suggest political chat is effective at informing citizens for three potential reasons. First, chat could simply be an extra channel through which political information is delivered. Second, anticipating a discussion, people may invest extra time investigating and thinking about political issues in advance which means they will have made attempts to access more information and expended more energy processing that information before they even begin to chat or discuss the issue. Third, the act of discussion itself could encourage more information processing (see also: McLeod et al. (1999)). Others too have found that chat and deliberation can lead citizens to connect issues and ideas in new ways (Gastil & Dillard, 1999).

Considering everyday political chat online specifically, research shows that the Internet presents an opportunity for civic learning (Shah, Cho, Eveland, Kwak, et al., 2005). Others point out that, for those already interested in politics, the Internet serves to connect them to more information, more opportunities for engagement, and more opportunities for political chat (Boulianne, 2009; Norris, 2000). Yet, those who are not already interested do not become more engaged or aware, instead they use digital tools to advance whatever other personal interests they have (Hindman, 2008; Boulianne, 2009).

As noted above, the majority of Canadian citizens are not consistently engaged in politics and will be unlikely to seek out political information online or engage in political chat. In theory, opinion leaders should bridge this divide because they

will engage in political chat and access political information which they will then disseminate to their social ties through social pressure and social support.

Beyond informing the public, everyday political chat is thought to be crucial for increasing political efficacy which is linked to political engagement and likelihood of voting (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; McLeod et al., 1999). For example, S. Coleman, Morrison, and Svennevig (2008, p. 785) explain, “our findings to date suggest that political efficacy is formed in large measure through interaction in the immediate setting of the locally experienced world.” This study made use of international survey data and in-depth focus groups. Though interaction in the “locally experienced world” is broader than everyday political chat (for example, including interaction with local politicians), it does point to the importance of one’s everyday associates when it comes to developing a sense of political efficacy. Further, others have found that everyday political chat helps build a sense of community which in turn increases political participation and knowledge (Anderson, 2010).

Put simply, everyday political chat is the main vehicle with which political information is shared, opinions developed and engagement encouraged. From this perspective, Canada, like many other Western democracies, is facing a crisis with extremely low voter turnout, declining political awareness and engagement.

1.2.3 Why social aspects of everyday political chat matter

In contrast to views of political citizenship that prioritize a traditionally informed citizenry and formal political engagement, some scholars offer an alternative perspective.

The ideal informed citizen was once described as generally aware of a broad range of political issues. There were few sources of political information and a *good* citizen took care to inform themselves on a range of issues in order to participate in society. Likewise a feeling of commitment to their society or community also encouraged them to vote and participate in politics in other ways. However, this

notion of citizenship Schudson (1998) argues, is no longer relevant. Citizenship is monitorial now which means citizens contribute, and enact their citizenship, on their own terms. They are consumers who choose what information they would like and the ways in which they would like to participate politically.

This is what Deuze (2008) calls "individualized enactment of citizenship" - a notion of citizenship where participation is conditional, unpredictable and voluntary. Citizens inform themselves according to their own needs and wants. They also participate in groups based on their own needs and wants (Putnam, 2001). This leads them to rely on collective intelligence rather than on the views of the elite. In a hybrid media system there is a plethora of choice for accessing and disseminating information from that collective as well as for engaging politically.

In other words, if we consider a citizenship characterized by individualism, it is possible that traditional notions of being informed and of community involvement are no longer consequential. That is not to say everyday political chat no longer matters. In fact, it may matter even more. Deuze (2008) explains that as individuals are relating differently to each other, we can no longer assume institutions (or political elites) will be able to guide the opinions of citizens. Deuze (2008) draws on what Castells (2009) calls a network society and what Wellman (2002) describes as networked individualism to illustrate a key underlying pattern where people are increasingly connected through diverse networks rather than tight knit and small groups. The ability to connect via a wide network paired with the accessibility of the Internet means that individuals no longer need to rely on institutions as they once did, a claim others have echoed (Dutton, 2009). As such, chat with one's diverse social ties - their network - becomes crucial.

An example of increased reliance on one's social ties in the context of political communication is the ability of citizens to act as gatekeepers, which some call secondary gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Singer, 2014). Mainstream media are sometimes described as gatekeepers of information where they decide what infor-

mation is, and is not, broadcast to the general public. In a hybrid media system citizens can create, curate and share information much more easily than ever before. They can, in essence, become gatekeepers themselves. On a micro-level, one's Facebook friends could be conceived of as gatekeepers of information. They decide what is worth posting and what is not which, in collaboration with Facebook's timeline algorithm, determines what information the user will see (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

The problem is, studies of this kind of gatekeeping rarely focus on the micro-level where the flow of information can be understood in the social context in which it occurs. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) first pointed to the role of average citizens in influencing the political opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their social ties. Their work, for the first time, brought together mass communication theory and group dynamics literature in order to underline the importance of interpersonal communication and social relationships when it comes to disseminating political information. The following chapter examines their work and subsequent studies of opinion leadership. For now the crucial point is that political chat is about more than simply passing a message or not, it is also about the social context of that information flow.

Indeed, others have found remarkable social influence when it comes to political communication in a hybrid media system. For example Margetts, John, Hale, and Yasseri (2015) conducted a series of experiments to determine the impact of having specific social information. For example, by indicating to participants that others had contributed to a collective action online or that others could see their participation (or lack thereof) researchers found that people were more likely to contribute if a sufficient number of others had. Similarly an experiment conducted with 61 million American Facebook users during the 2010 congressional election found that users who were sent mobilization messages were more likely to engage and to vote. Moreover, their friends and their friends of friends were also more likely to partic-

ipate (Bond et al., 2012). These are but two examples of a wide range of studies suggesting the social context of political communication and action is crucial.

It is unfortunate then, that few studies to date have investigated both the informational and social aspects of opinion leadership in a hybrid media system. An environment in which we expect citizen-to-citizen political communication to be central. This thesis makes use of a mixed-methods approach in order to respond to methodological challenges which may have limited past studies.

1.3 Thesis structure

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical underpinnings of the opinion leader as a political player and outlines their political role. The opinion leader in a mass media environment was thought to inform the uninformed and generate political discussion as they interpreted messages from the mainstream media and disseminated them to their everyday associates through interpersonal communication. In this way they contribute to the formation of public opinion and encourage political participation. In a hybrid media system, however, the opinion leader's role is less certain. The availability of new tools and tactics could have important implications for the ability of the opinion leader to influence those they communicate with. The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) and strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) theories are used to highlight the reasons an opinion leader's role as an influencer may not be the same in a hybrid media system. The end of this chapter outlines the three research questions addressed in this thesis and the six sub-questions related to RQ2. These sub-questions focus on understanding what motivates opinion leaders to select certain channels of communication.

Chapter 3 reviews the mixed-methods approach taken. To understand the process of opinion leadership we must look at the communication patterns of opinion leaders in their everyday chat. This chat spans multiple channels and as such a

mixed-methods approach is necessary. Beyond making use of a diversity of channels, digitally enabled opinion leaders could be borrowing tactics such as audience targeting from other political elites. In order to understand this sharing of tactics, channel choice and use must be understood in its social context which means an in-depth study is required.

This research was constructed in two phase. The first incorporates online social network analysis of a sample of the #CDNpoli Twitter hashtag plus an online survey. Phase two is the result of 21 in-depth interviews with opinion leaders plus interviews with some of their social ties (called alters.)

Chapter 4 investigates the patterns of political information access and dissemination about digitally enabled opinion leaders in response to the first research question. Two types of opinion leaders - enthusiasts and champions - emerge. Chapter 5 addresses the second research question and discloses that a variety of factors motivate channel choice. Nevertheless, the consistent underlying factor is social risk taken when talking politics with someone who is not interested. Chapter 6 addresses the final research question making use of interviews with opinion leaders and their alters to explain the impact of the channel choices opinion leaders make. It is shown that the strategic approach of both enthusiasts and champions is contributing to a widening gulf between politically informed and uninformed citizens.

Chapter 7 takes the results reported in the previous three chapters and discusses their potential impact in the context of the wider political system. There are two mechanisms of influence opinion leaders strategically employ. One is the traditional use of social pressure and social support and the other is content-based wherein the opinion leader presents themselves as an expert with high quality content, borrowing strategies from the political elite. The relationship between the opinion leader and the public and the opinion leader and the elite is examined. The potential of a just-in-time informed citizenry is presented as a consequence of the strategic use of communication channels opinion leaders take. Finally the chapter concludes with

a review of methodological lessons, limitations and suggested directions for future research.

Chapter 2

Theorizing opinion leadership: From a mass media environment to the hybrid media system

The opinion leader is as an important political player who uses social pressure and social support to change the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates. In this chapter the role of the opinion leader is considered in the context in which it was first developed: the mass media environment. Use of personal influence by opinion leaders involves sharing information and facts gleaned from the mass mainstream media and generating discussion with those who are unlikely to otherwise encounter the information. These activities then lead to opinion formation and increased political engagement among the general public. The opinion leader uses their social placement in order to personalize and contextualize their communications, thus making themselves influential to their message recipient.

Enabled by increasingly pervasive digital tools, new sources of information, new channels to choose from, and new receivers/audiences to access, the opinion leader is currently faced with a hybrid media system. In contrast, in a mass media environment the only source of information was mass mainstream media via broadcast

channels such as television, radio and print. Their only opportunities for sharing information or engaging in discussion was via interpersonal communication, such as face-to-face encounters and phone conversations with their everyday associates.

Though some researchers have studied political opinion leadership in the context of a hybrid media system and/or wide availability of digital tools, few have adequately combined consideration of both the informational and social aspects of opinion leadership. This is a critical weakness since the new choices available to opinion leaders avail wider audiences. There is the potential for opinion leaders' influence to have a much wider reach, providing more novel information to others. Conversely, the ability to influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of associates may be in jeopardy. The use of social pressure and social support given personal knowledge of their social relations, is brought into question when the person(s) the opinion leader is communicating with is not an everyday associate.

It therefore cannot be assumed that the mechanism by which opinion leaders once contributed to the political system remains intact. The abundance of choice an opinion leader is faced with in a hybrid media system could impact the communication process and fundamentally shift the form of an opinion leader's influence. To address the gap in the research, an investigation of digitally enabled opinion leaders' patterns of political communication, motivations for channel choice, and the effects of those choices on the political messaging process is called for. In an effort to map and explain the process of opinion leadership in a hybrid media system, research questions and hypotheses are discussed. The final section focuses on the factors likely to influence the opinion leaders' channel choices including media properties, social setting, and opinion leaders' relationships to their associates and audiences.

2.1 Media effects and the emergence of the opinion leader

Political communications research first found popularity in the era of media effects studies. They emerged during the First and Second World Wars (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; O'Malley, 2002). Though the intellectual roots of political communication studies can be traced back to the earlier works of sociology, psychology, political science and economics, the rise of "mass society" prompted focused work which considered the effects of mass media by integrating these various perspectives (W. L. Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). The proliferation of propaganda via tools of broadcast/mass media such as television, radio and print media further prompted questions about the effects of such political messaging (e.g. Lasswell (1948)). Chaffee and Metzger (2001, p. 366) note mass communication was seen as a societal problem since, "along with mass production came the possibility for mass persuasion." They go on to explain, "by World War II, the idea that single individuals or companies could bend the entire world to their will using mass communication became a widespread fear." Some feared the potential success of Nazi propaganda during the Second World War, others sought to capitalize on broadcast media in order to promote their own political agendas and/or sell products.

Driven by curiosity surrounding the implications of increased broadcast media use, political, and policy factors, researchers began to examine the flow of political messages from political elites, through media, to the general public. Researchers were interested in questions concerning media's impact on its viewers and the potential political ramifications of such effects. It was assumed that strong democracies required a flow of political information from elites to the public and that an informed public was crucial (Dahl, 2000). That said, a public informed by opposition propaganda was a concern for political leaders.

The early media effects hypothesis was that the mass mainstream media had

a direct effect on the general public (McQuail, 1992). The "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" model suggested mass mainstream media sent political messages out and the general public paid attention to those messages which altered their opinions, attitudes and behaviours. The effects were immediately evident (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011).

Figure 2.1 outlines the general resulting model wherein messages from political elites were packaged and broadcast by the mass mainstream media. In a single step those messages were then received by the general public.

Figure 2.1: Direct effects: One step flow

The mainstream media includes large institutional outlets as well as individual journalists, editors and other professionals who create content. While the mainstream media might extend beyond the realm of politics and current affairs, this study focuses primarily on the news media function of the mainstream media. Notably, studies of media effects sometimes refer to the "mass media," "broadcast media" or "traditional media" when describing this same group of content producers and disseminators. While these terms are often used in similar ways they are not perfectly synonymous. Mainstream media is a more precise term to describe the individuals and institutions, independent of the tools or channels they use. "Mass," "broadcast" and "traditional" all imply the use of specific media tools or forms of communication. Though the mainstream media did grow out of and rely primarily on these tools (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Lippmann, 1946), the mainstream media's function as a political player is more usefully conceptualized as distinct from their tools and channels. Mainstream media, in the context of news and current affairs,

constitute the dominant senders of political messages in a media system. They are contrasted to alternative media which do not enjoy as wide a reach among the populous (Chomsky, 1997). Untangling the media content creators from the media tools themselves allows for a flexible approach necessary to appreciate the evolving nature of media and political systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Members of the mainstream media were, and continue to be, considered political elites because they play a privileged political role. They hold status in society as information providers and as watchdogs over the government (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Dahl, 2000; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990). Other political elites include politicians, governmental political players such as ethics commissioners and other political players. They hold a position of institutional power. The general public, conversely, consist of any non-elite and include politically engaged citizens as well as those who pay little attention to politics.

As the field matured, researchers responded to direct effects studies by investigating the mechanisms by which different political players and the general public exchanged information and influenced each other. One important stream of research is what Neuman and Guggenheim (2011) call "social context theories." These theories posit that the social context in which media consumption takes place influences the outcome of that consumption.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) pioneered the social context arena with the introduction of the two-step flow which they describe as a "minimal effects" model. The model brought to the fore the interpersonal context of communication. The two-step flow suggests the process of political messaging is not a single direct step from the message sender to the general public, but rather, social relationships among members of the general public impact the way messages are interpreted and thus mitigate the persuasive power of the mass mainstream media.

Figure 2.2 highlights the two-step flow model as it was first articulated. It includes the familiar sender of the message (mass mainstream media) and the general

public as well as a newer component - the opinion leader. This model became a dominant paradigm within media sociology in the 1970's (Gitlin, 1978) and was a foundational theme in both diffusion of innovations and marketing research (Burt, 1999).

Figure 2.2: Indirect effects: Two-step flow

The following sub-sections examine the two-step flow process in detail. First, basic definitions for the opinion leader and general public are provided. Next, the specific mechanism by which opinion leaders are able to influence the general public is explained. Details about why and when individuals act as opinion leaders is then reviewed. Finally, attempts to refine the model are discussed highlighting importance of a core underlying concept found across divergent studies.

2.1.1 Opinion leaders and the public in a minimal effects model

The opinion leader, sometimes called an influential (Merton, 1957) is an intervening variable in the political messaging process. Opinion leaders pay more attention to the mass mainstream media than most other members of the general public (Summers, 1970). They are seen as highly knowledgable on the topics for which they are an opinion leader and for having higher rates of political engagement and participation than the general public (Keller & Berry, 2003; Robinson, 1976; Black, 1982). Through social pressure and social support, opinion leaders influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates (Weimann, 1994;

Hellevik & Bjorklund, 1991). This use of social pressure and social support is, in essence, personal influence (this will be examined in the following sub-section).

The conceptualization of the general public was slightly different in studies of opinion leadership as compared to direct effect studies (McQuail, 1992). In direct effects studies the general public is typically thought of as an homogenous mass with no differentiation between those who are, and are not, interested in politics. When opinion leaders intervene, however, there are two ways to approach defining the general public. First, one might conceive of opinion leaders as members of the general public who interact with other members of the general public (their everyday associates/followers). This view is consistent with the previous direct effects models with only two main types of people - the elite and the public. This view does highlight the important differences among members of the public. It may be that opinion leaders are distinct from the general public. This view considers opinion leaders as important political players but does not deny the heterogeneity of the general public. The general public in this instance is made up of many individuals who may or may not be "everyday associates" of a given opinion leader. For the purposes of this thesis the second view of the general public is employed.

Opinion leaders access information from the political elite and then disseminate that information to the general public. Through their information dissemination they inform their associates who are by definition, on average less informed than the opinion leader (if not largely uninformed). Beyond sharing facts they also generate political discussion. Opinion leaders are at once a delivery conduit for information and an interpreter of that information in order to make it socially relevant.

As a delivery conduit for information, the opinion leader takes factual messages from the mass mainstream media and provides it to a wider public which are not themselves regular members of the mainstream media's audience (Weimann, 1994; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). The opinion leader's main contribution here is completing the work of collecting information from the mass mainstream media and sending

what they deem worthy on to their everyday associates who would not otherwise receive that information. The opinion leader in the mass media era personalized and/or contextualized messages in order to exert personal influence which is what Lin (1973) calls the "evaluation stage" of communication. Opinion leaders capitalize on their personal knowledge of, and historical interaction with, the individual they are influencing to transmit messages which are pertinent to them.

The opinion leader also interprets messages and uses their social relationships to influence the actual opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates beyond simply providing information (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). As the opinion leader works to convince their everyday associates they generate political discussion among members of the general public which, at least in theory, contributes to the development of public opinion (Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Due to their political interest, knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, opinion leaders make links across messages, and/or provide their own personal opinion as they share information (Chan & Misra, 1990; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). In this sense, the contribution of an opinion leader is seen in their addition of information to the original political message they were transmitting.

The opinion leader's role in disseminating information is thus informational and social. They access and disseminate specific facts and ideas (informational) but also interpret that information (social).

2.1.2 The opinion leader's mechanism of influence

Opinion leaders use social pressure and social support to personally influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates. That is to say, opinion leaders rely on the fact that individuals tend to feel compelled to follow social norms and be accepted by their social connections (Glock & Nicosia, 1964). This is what Van Eck, Jager, and Leeflang (2011) call normative influence wherein an opinion leader represents a certain social ideal that their associates respect. More

specifically the mechanism works because there is a social bond between the opinion leader and their associates such that the associates are compelled to conform to the expectations of the opinion leader (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

However, personal influence also includes a second type of influence, Van Eck et al. (2011) claim. Informational influence is when the opinion leader is successful in influencing their everyday associates because they have transmitted useful and accurate factual information. The associate then takes the opinion leader's information as representative of reality (Van Eck et al., 2011). Here the opinion leader is informationally influential because they are knowledgable.

While these types of influence are presented as distinct, in practice their separation is not entirely possible (Van Eck et al., 2011). As such, others have suggested that to understand the influence of an opinion leader it is most useful to consider the components of personal influence as they relate to individuals (leaders). For example, in a review of opinion leadership research Katz (1957) authoritatively summarized the three main components of an opinion leader's personal influence: The ability of an opinion leader to personify certain values of a group (who one is), their competence (what one knows) and their strategic social location (whom one knows). These components explain what makes an opinion leader influential and why they are able to employ social support and pressure (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Opinion leaders are seen as a social role models of sorts. Associates of the opinion leader are influenced in part because they want to be like the influencer (A. L. Coleman & Marsh, 1955). The opinion leader is also seen as knowledgeable and informed (Van Eck et al., 2011). The opinion leader's close friends and family make up the bulk of everyday associates. This is not to minimize the importance of interaction with those outside the set of strong social relations (Weimann, 1994). Research suggests, for example, that men who work out of the home (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and people who participate in organizations (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) are more likely to be seen as opinion leaders because they engage with a larger set

of associates.

Notably, while knowledge is important it is normally important in relative terms (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). That is, there is not an absolute level of knowledge that is sufficient to be deemed an opinion leader. Instead one is an opinion leader when their level of knowledge relative to their associate(s) is high. This suggests that even when considering informational influence there is a social component.

It is also important to highlight the fact that in most traditional opinion leadership researcher personal influence and interpersonal communication are necessarily tied. In order to apply social pressure and social support opinion leaders require interpersonal interaction with their associates under this model.

In short, one's personal influence involves both informational and normative aspects but ultimately the mechanism of influence opinion leaders traditionally use relies on their ability to harness the power of social norms and apply social pressure and social support to their associates. Opinion leaders access information from political elites and use their social standing as knowledgable associates to disseminate political information.

In essence opinion leaders form a bridge between the political elite and the general public. The social relationship between the opinion leader and the receiver of their communications (their everyday associates) is such that the opinion leader can use personal influence to change the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of those associates (Hellevik & Bjorklund, 1991).

2.1.3 Why and when opinion leaders lead

Opinion leaders tend to be asked for advice on political issues more so than non-leaders and they themselves ask for advice less (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Rogers (2003) suggests opinion leaders in a range of domains see themselves as early adopters of innovation and/or at the forefront of trends

and consequently they help guide those trends. Being seen by others as such is a potential driver for the opinion leader's increased awareness and engagement but personal interest in the subject matter for which they are influential is also key. Others have suggested that opinion leadership is fundamentally related to inherent personality characteristics (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) and to one's level of self-assuredness (Chan & Misra, 1990).

Notably, opinion leadership is contextual, meaning individuals tend to exhibit opinion leadership in one area at a given time, but not necessarily in other areas/contexts (Schenk & Döbler, 2001). For this reason opinion leadership studies have tended to focus on specific types of opinion leadership. For example Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) looked separately at public affairs, marketing, fashion and movie-going. Menzel and Katz (1955) looked at the diffusion of new drugs among doctors and many others considered voter decision making during specific election campaigns. Weimann (1994), in a meta-analysis of 100 opinion leader studies, found that opinion leaders have more social ties and are more active in public discourse regardless of domain or interest. More recently this remains true, for example, Bertrandias and Goldsmith (2006) examine opinion leadership within the realm of fashion and Iyengar, Van den Bulte, and Valente (2011) considers product diffusion and point to the importance of experience with a given product for determining leadership ability. Regardless of topic area it is believed the opinion leader plays roughly the same role in providing new information to others and using social pressure and support to influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of others.

Though theorized as a more formal process, it should be noted that opinion leaders are not *necessarily* aware of their political roles (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders do not necessarily set out to influence others in their everyday political chat. Indeed, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) explain that the interpersonal communication between opinion leaders and their social relations is important specifically because it is not perceived as purposive, but rather flexible and

trustworthy. Though personal interests and a desire to share political information drives opinion leaders, the non-strategic and everyday approach to communications between those deemed opinion leaders and their associates enables the personal connection which underscores personal influence. Further, the opinion leader's role in informing the general public and generating the kind of discussion that leads to the formation of public opinion were important tasks in the mass media era and remain theoretically crucial to a functioning democratic system.

2.1.4 Refining the opinion leadership model

Work on opinion leadership initially relied on surveys over the course of a US presidential election (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and then in-depth interviews with purposively selected individuals within a particular community (Schenk & Döbler, 2001). Over decades of research survey and interviews have been the dominant methods used (Weimann, 1994). The goal was to understand where citizens acquired their political information and what the actual process of personal social influence was. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow work novelly combined existing media effects work with work on interpersonal communication and group dynamics. These areas of research were considered distinct as they rely on different technologies and strategies of communication. However, early work on the two-step flow pointed to the importance of understanding when, how, and why these divergent forms of communication intersect. That intersection, in the context of political messaging, was the opinion leader. As noted, an opinion leader is at once an information delivery conduit as well as a social figure exerting social pressure and support on that wider public (they exert personal influence).

Over time researchers refined the two-step flow model by suggesting a more complex multi-step flow or reverse flow (Weimann, 1982; Robinson, 1976). These works suggest the relationship between a non-elite but socially influential citizen and other political players is complex and multifaceted. For example, an opinion leader

may not only receive information from the mainstream media and deliver it to the general public but they may also receive information from other opinion leaders. In a study that combined content analysis of local newspapers and monthly surveys of about 1000 respondents (in total 28 surveys in West Germany and 27 surveys in East Germany), Brosius and Weimann (1996) found evidence to suggest that opinion leaders' information practices conformed to four different models depending on issue and time. Those models include the traditional two-step flow where an opinion leader delivers messages from the elite to the public, a reverse flow where an opinion leader delivers public opinion to the elite, and flows where the opinion leader delivers information to the public or the elite which in turn deliver it to the remaining of the three. Notably this study makes use of a personality scale to identify "early recognizers" which the authors liken to opinion leaders. Further, it is unknown whether there are different types of leaders or whether any given leader may participate in a range of ways. What is instructive in this and other studies, is that opinion leaders can and do use social pressure and social support to influence others, whether they are members of the public or the political elite (for example, by becoming friends with a reporter).

Others have argued the most valuable model of information flow is horizontal, or a multi step flow of information and influence. Menzel and Katz (1955) conducted a study of physicians in a New England town and found that while there were opinion leaders who sought out information from outside sources and who were themselves sources of information for colleagues, these opinion leaders also tended to rely on colleagues. Menzel and Katz (1955) explain that there are more than two steps in the flow and that opinion leaders sometimes also rely on opinion leaders. Despite suggesting changes to the original two-step flow model, the multi step model still relies on the value of interpersonal relations. Key is the continued centrality of social pressure and social support in explaining how these more nuanced flows are carried out in practice.

Expanding upon Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow, others began to work from the notion of the opinion leader to better understand, for example, the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003), word-of-mouth marketing (WOM) (Buttle, 1998) and the development of public political discourse and opinion (Graham, 2015). For Rogers (2003) the opinion leader is an early adopter who learns about new technologies early on and then uses social pressure and support to encourage (or dissuade) their social connections from also adopting the technology or innovations. In WOM, opinion leaders receive messages from companies and organizations and then, through their relationships with others, promote a product or brand (Buttle, 1998). Considering political discourse and opinion formation, opinion leaders are actively engaged and aware of political issues because they pay attention to news media and then debate and discuss what they know with their everyday associates (Graham, 2015). In each of these divergent fields the opinion leader is a non-elite actor who plays an important role in the communication of messages. Opinion leaders are influential for two key reasons: they have access to information from elite actors and they are able to wield social pressure and social support.

Ultimately the notion of the opinion leader in this study focuses on the underlying mechanism of influence that remains common across studies of opinion leaders, in a range of academic fields, over several decades. Specifically, the opinion leader is a non-elite actor who accesses information, in this case political information, from the elite and then disseminates that information to their social relations (opinion leaders may also access it from other sources). Opinion leaders are influential because they make use of social pressure and social support.

Accessing and passing along information and messages from the elite is the fundamental function of an opinion leader. Having interpreted messages from the political elite, opinion leaders then inform the uninformed and generate discussion. Since opinion leaders are by definition more tuned in to political messages from elites they are more informed about those political issues than their everyday associates who

are not opinion leaders. As such, they inform the uninformed. Next, by virtue of sharing political information with their everyday associates they generate some level of political discussion. These specific activities are highlighted to underline that the opinion leader's political communication is complex.

Furthermore, by adding nuance it is possible to better describe and understand the impact and potential political power of opinion leaders. For example, in passing along messages from elites, informing the uninformed and generating discussion, political opinion leaders help shape public opinion. Public opinion[1] develops through political discourse which relies on members of the public actually sharing political information and then discussing it (Lippmann, 1946; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Similarly, political opinion leaders encourage political participation through their communications (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). Again, the opinion leader contributes in a nuanced way. It is not simply because they provide others with information from the political elite that they encourage participation, it is also because they provide a sense of social support for political activities like voting (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

2.2 Opinion leadership in a mass media environment

Opinion leaders connect with two distinct groups, the political elite and the general public. Political opinion leaders specifically pay attention to messages from the mass mainstream media (the dominant message senders among political elites in a mass media environment). Next, opinion leaders re-package that message and send it to their everyday associates (the general public) (Burt, 1999). Opinion

[1]The definition of public opinion is contested and will be re-visited in the Chapter 7. For now this definition of public opinion will suffice: the average opinion of members of the public.

leaders represent a bridge between the political elite and general public who are less interested in politics or consuming political information. The following section considers each relationship in turn, highlighting the specific characteristics of the mass media environment that enabled the opinion leadership process.

2.2.1 Opinion leaders and mainstream media: Accessing political information

The media environment over the course of media effects studies from the 1930s to 1990s was dominated by the mainstream media which controlled technologies of mass communication (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Even other political elites, for example, politicians, relied on exposure from the mainstream media to send their political messages out widely (Lang & Lang, 1980). Events such as town hall meetings, speeches, and other in-person gatherings did exist as opportunities for members of the general public to encounter political information. Even these sources were largely guided by the mass mainstream media when it came to political messages. The mainstream media easily reached beyond the confines of a town hall to connect with other citizens (Lippmann, 1946).

For example, politicians hosted press conferences and activists held rallies in order to draw attention to specific issues they wanted the media of the day to report on. Gaining media attention was the primary strategy of other political elites when attempting to connect with the general public. For some, purchasing advertising space from mainstream media in the newspaper or on television or radio was also an option but researchers tended to maintain a focus on the mainstream media's use of broadcast media rather than these less frequent direct uses by political elites.

The mainstream media is conceptualized as the core political message sender that uses broadcast channels of communication to reach their audience. The market in a mass media environment posed high barriers to entry and so a select few media elites owned the major news outlets (Chomsky, 1997). The tools needed to

broadcast political messages, which included television, radio and print (magazines and newspapers), were expensive. Further, gaining a reputation as a credible and reliable source is time consuming and resource heavy. As such, mainstream media are considered as a group to be tightly controlled, elite, and often homogenous (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Katz, 1957; Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2013).

As a result, W. L. Bennett and Iyengar (2008, p. 717) explain, "[t]he offerings of all news organizations were sufficiently homogenous and standardized to represent an information commons." They go on to explain that in a mass media environment "Americans of all walks of life and political inclination were exposed to the same information."

The case was similar elsewhere. For example, in Canada in 1980 77% of all daily newspapers were owned by one of two companies. Worries over media concentration in Canada prompted two major governmental inquiries in 1970 (the Davey Committee) and again in 1980 (the Kent Royal Commission) (Keshen & MacAskill, 2000). Both found that media concentration in Canada was too high and that, left alone, it would have negative consequences for Canadians and Canadian democracy. It was suggested that new rules be put in place in order to eliminate regional monopolies and prevent companies from growing too large (Jackson, 1999). Although some recommendations were heeded, the concerns over the concentration of media ownership in Canada were not eliminated. As a result, in terms of potential differences, the political content available to citizens was relatively limited in a mass media environment.

The opinion leader, in a mass media environment, seeks out information about politics and chooses to access information via the mass mainstream media. They are more likely to be exposed to political messages from the mainstream media than members of the general public. Notably, the opinion leader's avid consumption of mass mainstream media content is not necessarily the only way they become informed. Professional training and expertise, personal experience, and group

membership are also contributing factors in the mass media environment (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

The opinion leader in the mass media environment considered the messages of the mainstream media given their existing knowledge and then used social pressure and social support to influence their everyday associates.

2.2.2 The opinion leader to the public

Opinion leaders are found across socio-economic categories and, except for increased media use, are average citizens (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Opinion leaders relied on interpersonal or small group communication with their everyday associates, for example by telephone and face-to-face, in order to provide information to, and change opinions of, members of the general public.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), in their justification of the two-step flow hypothesis, point to studies of small groups and interpersonal relations. They argue that social pressure is important for motivating others to expose themselves and be receptive to new information and the influence of media communications. Indeed, informal talk about news among social ties helps people understand that news (Robinson & Levy, 1986; Robinson & Davis, 1990) and interpersonal political talk helps people understand societal issues in their own personal context (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992). In other words, if the information comes from a close social tie, it is more likely to be received in a way that influences opinions and behaviours. That said, opinion leaders, while found in all social groupings tend to influence those within their own group exclusively leading to homogeneity of perspectives shared (Katz, 1957; Weimann, 1982).

The only viable forms of communication for opinion leaders in a mass media environment were interpersonal and small group. Consequently, most members of the general public an opinion leader shared political information with tended to be their everyday associates with whom they shared a relatively strong social connection

(Weimann, 1994, 1991). This suggests they would share many values and beliefs as well as past experiences (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Given their history of interaction the opinion leader was thought to be uniquely placed to best change the opinions of their everyday associates since they could relay information from the mainstream media in a personalized and socially appropriate way.

Other social context theories, such as spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), can be valuable in explaining why opinion leaders are most likely to share political information and engage in political discussion with those they know well/are strongly tied to socially. The spiral of silence explains that people who believe others will feel the same as them are more likely to share their own thoughts and opinions whereas when people do not perceive others as having the same viewpoint, they are unlikely to express their beliefs. This is because individuals are thought to fear social isolation and avoid signalling to others in their social group that they are different (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). This notion is rooted in psychology which queries ways group dynamics and social cues encourage conformity (Milgram, 1961). As such, Noelle-Neumann (1974) suggests that individuals fearing isolation, constantly survey public opinion using what she calls a 'quasi-statistical sense' to determine whether their view is held more widely or not within their social group. She points to the mass media as a crucial source for individuals as they attempt to assess the views of their peers. Individuals generally, and opinion leaders specifically (given their high rates of mass media attention), are unlikely to share their opinions when they believe others in their social group do not share that same opinion.

Notably, some have argued that the micro-climate of the individual is more influential than the mass media when it comes to assessing the views of others. For example, (Oshagan, 1996) conducted an experimental study with 67 university students. Each student was presented with a political issue and information about what the general public thought and what their five closest friends thought about the issue. The study shows that the personal reference group (social ties) is more

influential in guiding one's opinion than the general public. Conversation with social ties also contributes to the process (Kennamer, 1990; Tichenor & Wackman, 1973) and when interpersonal and mass media sources are compared, interpersonal tend to be more influential in determining whether a person will feel comfortable sharing their opinion (Robinson, 1976). Regardless of which factors are most influential when it comes to the development of an individual's opinion, it remains relevant that the mechanism whereby the perception of how others will receive a message impacts one's likelihood of expressing one's opinion.

As such, even in circumstances where opinion leaders might feasibly have access to audiences beyond their own social group/everyday associates - for example, in a public park or coffee shop- those opinion leaders are likely to avoid sharing their views since they have little information about whether the potential recipients will agree. Thus, in a mass media environment, opinion leadership relies on the personal knowledge afforded by relatively strong social bonds.

The audience to which an opinion leader communicates, in a mass media environment, is then very clearly defined. Normally consisting of one or a small group of everyday associates at a time, the recipient(s) of communications are limited and known to the opinion leader. The opinion leader is influential specifically because they know and are known by their audience and because their channel of communication (normally face-to-face) allows for back and forth discussion, feedback, non-verbal cues and personalization. In other words, because the opinion leader is socially connected to their audience, they are able to influence them and thus help bridge the gap between the political elite and those who opt-out of political messaging.

2.3 Opinion leadership in a hybrid media system

This section examines the role of the opinion leader in light of the hybrid media system with its wide availability of digital channels of communication. The opinion leader, though now faced with new choices, is still thought of as an important political player given the ability to transmit messages to the wider public and to drive political discussion and opinion. This demonstrates the necessity of understanding how opinion leaders actually engage in a hybrid media system.

Chadwick (2013) notes that while digital technologies underline the shared uses of different communication tools and tactics across political players, the system has always been hybrid to some extent. “Hybridity,” Chadwick (2013, p. 8) explains, “is about being out of synch with a familiar past and a half-grasped future.” He goes on to point to the specific value of thinking about hybridity in the context of political communication saying, “[h]ybridity alerts us to the unusual things that happen when distinct entities come together to create something new that nevertheless has continuities with the old.” At its core, the argument is that to understand the impact of technologies they must be considered in terms of social interaction.

As is the case in Chadwick’s work, the present study makes use of the term hybrid media system in two ways. First, the introduction of digital technologies has emphasized the hybrid nature of political communications and as such ‘hybrid media system’ is used in contrast to ‘mass media environment.’ Others have used a range of terms to similarly contrast the contemporary media system to that of the past including using terms such as new or digital media environment/system, new or digital media ecology, the digital era and sometimes the information age. These terms tend to reference, broadly, the fact that there are new or newer channels of communication/media available today than in the past. Others have developed more nuanced conceptualizations of the changes and impacts of such technological advances. For example, Jenkins (1983) describes convergence culture as he examines the media practices of the television and film industry and their fan bases. Conver-

gence culture involves a fan-base that, via technology, contributes to the experience of and sometimes even creation of media content. It also involves the use of multiple different media platforms and channels to distribute content for a given brand. For example, Jenkins describes the movie trilogy the Matrix which, to experience in full, the consumer is invited to not only watch the movies but read a series of comics, browse the website and play the video game. While convergence culture as a frame is valuable for understanding the potential for interaction across actors and across media, the term falls short, particularly in the political context. Convergence culture does not map well on to political contexts which are not necessarily brand-specific and do not necessarily maintain a dichotomy between citizen or fan activism and top-down decision making. The hybrid media system, in contrast, considers the varying ways actors and media might overlap but also remains sensitive to diverse and potentially evolving power structures.

Second, conceptualizing the media environment as a hybrid media system highlights the importance of the ways in which communication tools are in fact used by actors, considering the process of political communication holistically. In the hybrid media system a variety of political actors including politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, activists, and average citizens make use of communication tools. The Internet and digital tools are additions to a repertoire of communication channels including the printing press, television, radio, telephone and face-to-face communication. These tools remain unequally accessible to political players and are employed in different ways by different actors. Differences in access and use are often described in terms of media repertoires and media logics suggesting a given set of political players will grow accustomed to using certain tools in certain ways and to using certain tactics to advance their own goals in the political system.

Chadwick (2013, p. 58) describes the hybrid media system as one of flux, contradiction, and mixtures of older and newer media. He notes, “Media and media systems are always in the process of becoming” by which he means to highlight

the fact that what are thought of as old media were once new, and new media will become old as they are integrated into political life and supplemented by new tools. The evolving nature of media systems, which others like Hallin and Mancini (2004) have also described, in terms of the tools and channels of communication is met with evolving logics and tactics of use by various political and media elite as well as members of the wider public. Indeed, calls for new methodological approaches in political communication research echo this view that the media system is changing in a way that requires us to build upon old approaches to address these evolving logics which cross media channels (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, & Powers, 2015; W. L. Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Chadwick (2013) argues that hybridity, particularly considering digital tools, is changing the political communication process. He notes that "[a]udiences have never had access to so much political information through such a variety of news media" (p. 59). Further, audiences are now able, more than ever, to participate in the production of news content and the cycle of political information (Chadwick, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2012). In other words, the hybrid media system of today marks a departure from the political communication process we knew in a mass media environment. For digitally enabled opinion leaders this means they have access to new and varied sources of information (and can in fact contribute to that information), have access to new and varied audiences and have new and varied abilities to know, curate and control those audiences. The following sections examine potential changes to the sourcing and dissemination practices of digitally enabled opinion leaders in a hybrid media system.

2.3.1 Political message senders to the opinion leader

In contrast to the mass media environment, the homogeneity of political messages can no longer be assumed. In a mass media environment the mainstream media were the dominant senders of political information. Even other political elites relied on

the mass mainstream media to send messages to the wider public. In a hybrid media system the mainstream media may maintain a prominent role but the messages they send are now accompanied by other messages on a scale not previously seen. Both traditional political elites and average citizens are now able to create and disseminate their own political messages independent of the mainstream media (Chadwick, 2013; Bruns & Highfield, 2012).

For example, politicians now have their own websites, online social networking profiles (and in some cases platforms), and mass email lists. While these channels of communication might be thought of as parallel to traditional forms of communication such as billboards, community events, and pamphlets, the wide reach and ease of sharing messages from digital rather than traditional channels make them different. Previous channels used to spread messages locally were resource heavy. Digital channels add to the repertoire of tools that a politician has to choose from and make it easier to contribute to an opinion leader's selection of political message sources regardless of locale.

Citizens may also make use of digital tools in order to create and disseminate political information. For example, Stanyer (2009, p. 203) explains that with the introduction of the Internet and other digital tools, "[t]he professional staff reporter has been joined by the freelancers, compilers, amateur enthusiasts and members of the public: the so-called 'witness reporter' or 'citizen-journalists'." In a study of four examples of what Deuze, Bruns, and Neuberger (2007) call "participatory journalism" the authors argue that the news industry is seeing increasing hybridity in terms of who is a producer. Across four different countries the authors demonstrated instances of citizen journalists relying on mainstream media to get their message out and of mainstream media incorporating content created by citizens. Though not generalizable, these case studies point to important ways in which the media system is adapting to increased hybridity afforded by digital channels of communication.

Considering the actors specifically, bloggers and citizen journalists are exten-

sively studied in terms of their role in disseminating political information. Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, and Jeong (2007); Bruns and Highfield (2012) and Couldry (2009), to name a few, show how these players act in similar and dissimilar ways to media professionals. In a hybrid media system shared tactics and tools mean individuals who are not supported by, or part of, an elite institution may present information in ways very similar to those political elites who traditionally held a monopoly on this kind of communication.

This wider availability of information from a variety of sources means people need to discriminate in order to deal with issues of information overload (being exposed to so much information they can no longer make good decisions/perform their task well) (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). The opinion leader traditionally helps in the political message discrimination process by collecting information from sources and sharing those they find pertinent. In a hybrid media system digitally enabled opinion leaders are now faced with a heterogeneous and hybrid set of sources which means they need to make choices about which information to source, share and discuss - decisions they did not need to make in a mass media environment. It is therefore possible that the opinion leader is an even more important political player because they now have to filter content to a larger extent considering, potentially, both the information and source.

Notably, this potential filtering function is similar to what some call secondary gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Singer, 2014). Journalists and other media professionals are thought to be gatekeepers who decide what information is presented to the public and what is not. Secondary gatekeepers access that information which has passed through the media's gate and then use their own knowledge and perspective to further restrict which information passes through their own personal gate (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In this way citizens become active recipients of the news given the availability of digital tools for communication (Singer et al., 2011).

Not only are the sources of political information growing in number and variety,

but the ways in which sources send out that information is also diversifying. Traditionally the mainstream media's channel of communication was broadcast media such as print, television and radio. In a hybrid media system those channels still exist but are supplemented by both digital versions of content and more social sharing of content.

In Canada 79% of all Internet users report looking for news online and half of all Internet users report making use of digital versions of newspapers specifically (about one in four Internet users do so weekly or more frequently) (Zamaria & Fletcher, 2007). Digital versions of mainstream media content largely rely on the traditional logic of broadcast media and thus represent an amplification of the political message (Agre, 2002). Content collected from a digital channel is often more up to date than, for example, a print newspaper which is locked in the night before. Additionally, it may be more convenient for individuals unable to sit and watch TV or listen to the radio because they can catch up while on their daily bus ride using an Internet-connected mobile device, for example.

Beyond these changes in increased channel choice for receiving traditionally broadcast content, there is a more fundamental shift. In a hybrid media system members of the mainstream media such as journalists and editors are also sending out their own political messages via more personal channels (Bruns, 2012). For example, Kady O'Mally is a well known CBC journalist and live-blogger who tweets about her day as she observes from the press gallery, attends committee meetings, eats lunch, and writes articles. She provides her followers facts about what is happening on Parliament Hill, opinions on facts, the social interactions among politicians, quips about her daily life, and she asks and answers questions on Twitter. This serves to provide the public an opportunity to engage with her as a relatable human being, to gain insight into the news making process, and to gain information which might be politically relevant but not deemed worthy enough for a once or twice a day broadcast. Her approach is also reflected in Lasorsa, Lewis, and

Holton's (2012) study of primarily US-based journalists on Twitter. Of course not all journalists make use of Twitter or do so in the same way. This points to the hybridity digital tools facilitate since actors will make use of new tools in varying ways drawing from existing logics and experiences.

Again, digitally enabled opinion leaders are then faced with new choices about where and how to get political information. Potentially, there is more power in the hands of these leaders who need to be increasingly selective when they collect and discriminate during the political messaging process. That said, choices are constrained by technical skill and tool availability which is more varied when considering digital tools than considering traditional channels of communication.

In a mass media environment literacy was the main technical skill required. Currently in Canada the rate is 97% (Hammer, 2012). In a hybrid media system literacy is of course still an important communications skill but ability to use a computer, mobile phone, and specific websites or apps may all come into play.

Further, the availability of channels is changing. In a mass media environment the newspaper was delivered at a certain time, the news was broadcast at a specific hour and the television or radio was available in specific places. Conversely, digital channels like websites and online social networking sites are all available at any time and from any Internet connected device which could be anything from a stationary desktop computer to a mobile phone.

2.3.2 The opinion leader to the public revisited

The introduction of digital communication tools also increased the channels available to opinion leaders for sharing and discussing political information. As is the case when connecting with political elites and accessing messages, when it comes to disseminating information, digitally enabled opinion leaders may make use of a variety of digital channels in addition to the traditional interpersonal channels such as face-to-face and telephone communication. Use of these channels is also constrained

by skill and availability. What is particularly interesting in the hybrid media system is that these tools for accessing and disseminating political information overlap whereas in the mass media environment they were distinct.

On Twitter, for example, political elites and non-elite sign up for the same kind of account, they have the same 140 character word limit and make use of the same user generated hashtags. Regardless of institutional position, the architecture of the channel itself remains the same whether you are an institutional elite member sending a message, an opinion leader sharing facts or sparking discussion, or a follower receiving information. This is fundamentally different from the mass media environment in which certain channels of communication were used for one step in the two-step flow and not the other.

A digitally enabled opinion leader sharing or discussing political information in some online settings may be engaging with a wider range of others potentially including political elites, other opinion leaders, and unknown members of the public in addition to their everyday associates.

Importantly, new channels for disseminating information imply different kinds of communication and audiences. Instead of relying uniquely on interpersonal communication there are now opportunities for what will be called quasi-personal and impersonal communication - each of which brings with it different audiences.

Interpersonal communication relies on one-to-one or one-to-few interactions. The opinion leader shares information or engages in discussion with a limited number of others. Those others are typically known by the opinion leader. Face-to-face and telephone communication are joined by things like instant messaging (e.g. Facebook messenger), emails directed to specific people, and VoIP (e.g. Skype) as potential channels for interpersonal communication. As is the case with mainstream media using their website to broadcast digital content, this can be seen as simply an amplification of the traditional process.

As previously noted, an opinion leader's personal influence traditionally relies

on interpersonal communication which allows the opinion leader to build upon past knowledge of the person they are communicating with and to benefit from feedback from them during the exchange (Mutz, 1992; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Individuals normally engage in interpersonal communication with those with whom they have a sustained relationship, mutual trust and shared norms - their strong ties (Granovetter, 1973).

Weak ties, particularly in the context of political chat, are not, typically the recipients of messages - in part because a lack of personal knowledge makes them risky. Even when a weak tie is accessible through interpersonal means their preferences are unknown meaning that the risk of social isolation by offending or annoying the tie is relatively high. Talking about politics with weak ties is risky, especially when the assumption in most Western democracies including Canada, is that people do not want to hear about politics (Eliasoph, 1998). For example, in a study comparing Americans and Israelis using national survey data, Wyatt, Katz, Levinsohn, and Al-Haj (1996) examined what inhibits and promotes free speech. The authors explain that "respondents attributed their silence to the fear of hurting others more than to the fear of being hurt or disapproved challenges the primacy given these latter concerns by theories of formal and informal repression" (p. 243).

While interpersonal communication was the chief form of communication available to opinion leaders in a mass media environment, and while it was thought to be the main mechanism by which opinion leaders influenced their social relations, this may no longer be the case.

Menzel (1971) described "quasi-mass communication" which he suggests fits between interpersonal communication and the mass, or broadcast, communication common to the mainstream media in a mass media environment. He points to salespeople, street corner orators and election campaigners, to name a few, as examples of those who communicate in a way which is neither fully mass nor interpersonal. For the average citizen or opinion leader, this was not common, but in the context

of a hybrid media system where there are new opportunities to communicate (e.g. blogs), quasi-mass communication is potentially more pervasive.

Thinking more broadly, impersonal communication is defined by interaction with an audience which is not personally known (Mutz, 1998, 1992). As such, mass communication and quasi-mass communication are subsets of impersonal communication. Mutz (1992) contrasts the personal influence reliant on interpersonal communication described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) with impersonal influence which relies on forms of impersonal interaction which include any mediated interaction with anonymous others. Mutz (1992) was speaking primarily about the sense of others one might derive from mass mainstream media and how that can influence opinions. The hybrid media system, however, offers more diverse opportunities for encountering anonymous others, for example, via Twitter or a discussion board.

While impersonal use of channels brings into question the ability of an opinion leader to use social support and social pressure to influence their associates, impersonal channels may actually be a boon to the informational aspect of opinion leadership. That is to say, opinion leaders making use of impersonal channels of communication may connect with those that are not, or only weakly, tied. Granovetter (1973) has shown that weak ties are very adept at providing new information since they are routinely on the margins of different social groups. Weak ties have also been shown to provide access to resources such as wealth, power and prestige (Lin, 1982). They tend to be useful for instrumental purposes (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005), such as gaining access to restricted information. That said, others have found conflicting evidence and suggest that there are times when weak ties are not as valuable for sharing information as predicted (Bian, 1997). For example, Levin and Cross (2004) surveyed employees in three different divisions of companies in the US, UK and Canada. They found that weak ties were valuable for accessing new information but only when they were also trusted.

That said, the digitally enabled opinion leader may borrow from strategies of

broadcast media and use digital channels to disseminate information in an impersonal fashion. Rather than relying on social relationships, an opinion leader may have access to completely unknown audiences, large or small. For example, by contributing to the comment section at the end of an online newspaper article an opinion leader may impersonally provide information or an opinion.

Bimber et al. (2009), in describing some of the effects of the Internet on collective action, place interpersonal and impersonal communication at opposite ends of a continuum. Between interpersonal and impersonal, quasi-personal can be found. Notably, the exact terms vary across studies. For example, Heath and Vasquez (2000, p. 465) describe nonpersonal, quasi-personal and personal communication but the general concepts remain stable. Quasi-personal communication relies on the personal relationship between the message sender and receiver to some degree but it is not necessarily one-to-one, as is interpersonal communication.

Take email for example. A digitally enabled opinion leader may choose to send an email directly to a specific friend or they may choose to send an email to their entire list of contacts. The first is clearly a form of interpersonal communication while the second is quasi-personal. Interpersonal communication benefits from the personal relationship between two communicators. Their knowledge of each other, shared group norms, and past experiences guide their interactions. Sending an email to all existing contacts also relies on some personal knowledge but is less specific. The opinion leader is not broadcasting to a mass and unknown audience, but nor are they engaging in one-to-one or one-to-few communications. Posting something to a non-public Facebook timeline is similarly quasi-personal because only one's Facebook friends will have access to it/be an audience member, and the post will likely be interpreted in the context of the shared relationship between sender and receiver.

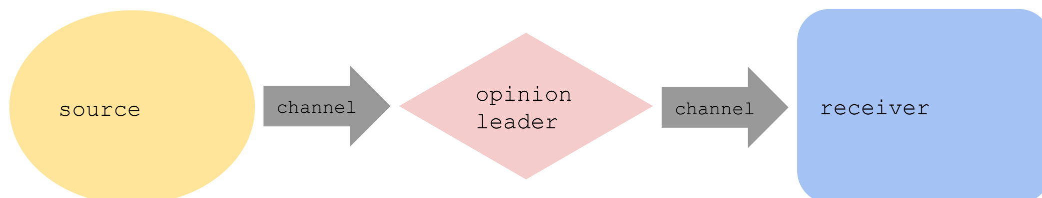
In a hybrid media system opinion leaders have access to a wider array of political information via a wider range of channels. Opinion leaders also have more options

to select from when it comes to sharing and discussing political information both in terms of the channels they use and the audiences they disseminate to. New channels offer both increased choice for interpersonal communication but also make it possible for opinion leaders to engage with different audiences through different kinds of communication. It is unknown whether opinion leadership continues to function in the same way across these different channels and/or when engaging with different kinds of audiences.

2.3.3 Channels in a hybrid media system

In a mass media environment the opinion leader had relatively few sources of political information and a relatively limited audience due to limited channels of communication. This meant that how one carried out the process of opinion leadership - how one influenced others, was relatively straight forward. In a hybrid media system, as Figure 2.3 shows, there are more choices.

Figure 2.3: Opinion leadership in a hybrid media system



The political message may now be sent by a variety of sources and not only the mainstream media. Importantly the source (who) is distinct from the channel (how) upon which it is sent.

A source in this context is the sender of the message. A channel is the medium through which the source sends the message. In a mass media environment it often did not matter if source and channel were conflated. Studies assumed there was little difference in mainstream media's effects on audiences across TV, radio and print given the small number of companies which owned all forms of broadcast

media. In a hybrid media system that may no longer be the case. For example, individual journalists now may have their own Twitter presence and persona that is distinct from the newspaper they write for.

Likewise, the receiver of a message is not the same as the channel which that message was passed along. Opinion leader Andrea, sending a message to follower Deb via Facebook is not necessarily the same as Andrea sending a message to Deb while chatting in a coffee shop. The distinction between the channel and the sender and receiver of a message is important for understanding the political communication process and role of the digitally enabled opinion leader.

Considering the relationships between opinion leaders and both political elites and the general public, the key complicating factor in a hybrid media system is the availability of multiple channels. This availability of multiple channels has the potential to impact the role of the opinion leader both because the media used have varied characteristics (e.g. cost and speed) and because the type of communication (e.g. broadcast, interpersonal, quasi-personal) may be varied. These variances lead to the possibility of opinion leaders accessing new audiences and/or curating their audiences in new ways.

While there is a large body of literature on information seeking, less is known about how, why, and when people choose to share political information across communication channels. General surveys, for example, can be used to understand information seeking and political information access but it is harder to tease out the nuances of political information sharing. A wide variety of tools, uses of tools, and interpretations of personal relationships and audiences make it particularly challenging to untangle the influence of an opinion leader on their associates in a hybrid media system.

Missing from the few studies attempting to assess the political role of opinion leaders in the context of a media system inclusive of digital technologies, is sensitivity to the different kinds of communication now available and the impact on

the mechanisms of influence. For example, Norris and Curtice (2008) use a nationally representative sample of the British population during the 2005 British General Election to investigate the two-step flow in a changed media environment. They were interested in whether or not there was evidence of a two-step flow and opinion leadership comparing offline and online opportunities for opinion sharing. Essentially, those who access information online are more likely than others to talk about the election. They argue this suggests the two-step flow remains a potentially important process because they assume that online sharing of opinions and discussion of the election will remain interpersonal. While a valuable first step, the study is limited in that it does not consider the potential for varied communications in the hybrid media system.

Considering the role of the opinion leader in sharing information and driving political discussion, the kind of communication used and audience reached is very important. Interpersonal communication is thought to be the most effective form of communication for convincing people to support specific policies and to vote (Middleton, 2006; Green & Gerber, 2008). During interpersonal communication, the person attempting to influence can rely on their personal relationship with the other, their knowledge of the other and shared social norms based on group membership, in order to apply social pressure and social support (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; S. Coleman et al., 2008).

Having the option to avoid interpersonal interaction via use of different channels could mean that opinion leaders inadvertently choose to be less influential. Similarly (W. L. Bennett & Manheim, 2006) present evidence of increased social isolation, decreased need for interpersonal influence on the part of members of society and increased message targeting in recent history, leading to a one-step flow of communication.

W. L. Bennett and Manheim (2006) contended that individuals now have access to personalized information more readily and so no longer require the input of an

opinion leader. Yet it is known that opinion leaders traditionally help inform the uninformed - those who do not opt-in to accessing political information directly from elite sources. It is also known that people tend to select information based on personal preferences (Prior, 2007). This ability to bring in new information that is counter to one's established preferences is an opinion leadership role personalization cannot replace. For example, (Pariser, 2011) explains that preference-based algorithms used by companies like Google and Facebook to provide relevant content have the consequence of providing only content similar to what one previously demonstrated as an interest or likely of interest. Of course technological changes could reduce this trend but even without algorithmic support people tend to opt for information that reinforces their existing beliefs and fits within their existing set of preferences. For example, using the National Annenberg Election Survey, Stroud (2008) compared media choice to reported partisan affiliation. He looked at newspapers, political talk radio, cable news and political websites in the United States and coded them as either liberal leaning or conservative leaning. He found that 64% of Republicans selected at least one conservative outlet while only 26% of Democrats did so. Not surprisingly, 76% of Democrats selected at least one liberal outlet while only 43% of Republicans did. This study examines political preference in terms of partisanship but others have shown that media is sometimes selected in order to avoid politics altogether (Prior, 2007; Baum & Kernell, 1999).

Moreover, the claim that the opinion leader's input is no longer required is clearly in contrast to studies such as the Norris and Curtice (2008) investigation that suggests that for many, friends and family remain a significant source of political information during an election. However, further empirical evidence is needed to evaluate these claims.

W. L. Bennett and Manheim (2006) claim that research on social capital - which suggests people are less likely to become members of groups - supports the notion that opportunities for opinion leadership will necessarily be much more limited than

they once were for the majority of the population. Since opinion leadership, as it was first developed in a mass media environment, requires the opinion leader to use their personal connection with their everyday associates in order to be influential, the argument is that without opportunities for face-to-face group interactions there can be no personal influence.

Yet, notions of networked individualism (Wellman, 2002) suggesting people are in fact moving from tight knit social groups to sparser networks of social ties in a digital era offer an alternative option. Rather than rely on one's close personal ties to fulfill social and informational needs, an individual is able to make use of their wider network for specific purposes when needed. While social independence may be greater, interaction with others does not disappear. Instead it becomes more targeted (Wellman, 2002). Dutton's (2009) Fifth Estate Theory and W. L. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action support this view of technology enabling different but still social forms of interaction in the political realm.

Further, opinion leaders may now have access to audiences that are potentially quite varied and may include strong ties, weak ties, anonymous others or some mixture. Weak ties in particular are thought to be important for sharing new ideas and information (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties tend to rely on less personal forms of communication but are able to serve as a bridge between social groups. If opinion leaders choose forms of communication allowing them to connect with wide audiences they may actually be valuable sources of new perspectives and ideas. In their former environment the opinion leader's audience was more limited. That said, even research that argues individuals who border multiple social groups are best placed to serve as opinion leaders has emphasized the crucial importance of interpersonal communication and awareness of the social placement of those they communicate with (Burt, 1999).

Investigating the way information and influence flow as per strength of ties, relationships were examined among a community of 270 persons in Israel (Weimann,

1982). He used a sociometry to gather and assess all the relationships present within the entire community. He found that weak ties, called marginals, were good at delivering information across groups but that they were rarely influential for anyone in the community. This is in contrast to those who maintained many strong ties within the community and therefore were very central. These individuals were both good at delivering information to their ties as well as influencing them. Notably, even a marginal in this community is likely to be much more strongly tied to any other in that community relative to how strongly tied an individual is to the majority of Twitter followers. Nevertheless, the study suggests digitally enabled opinion leaders, depending on their channel choices, may not be able to enact fully the role of traditional opinion leaders.

2.3.4 Summary

In the first section of this chapter the theoretical role of the opinion leader was outlined. It was shown that opinion leaders are traditionally expected to interpret messages from the political elite, inform the uninformed and generate discussion. In doing so they help develop public opinion and contribute to political awareness and engagement of the wider public. Given the changes outlined above, and in the context of a hybrid media system, it can no longer be assumed that opinion leaders are willing and able to interpret political messages for others, inform the uninformed and generate debate. Increased access to information for all could render opinion leaders irrelevant, or it could mean they are even more important due to information overload. Access to wider audiences which can include weak ties could mean opinion leaders are able to spread information further, but they may not be influential. Similarly they may now generate debate (or not) with varying audiences. Together this means that it is uncertain if and how opinion leaders contribute to public opinion and contribute to political awareness and engagement.

Ultimately the introduction of new channels of communication has important

implications for the ways in which opinion leaders can access and disseminate information as well as for the mechanism of influence an opinion leader can make use of. Particularly in terms of disseminating information, a digitally enabled opinion leader may make use of channels of communication which allow them to access new and/or diverse audiences. It is unclear if and how the opinion leader might influence those audiences. Thus, the choices digitally enabled opinion leaders make when it comes to channels for disseminating information could have a significant impact on their ability to perform the role of opinion leader and in turn on their ability to help bridge the gap between those who opt-into politics and those who do not. The value of a clearer understanding of the motivations and choices opinion leaders cannot be overestimated.

2.4 Research questions

The aim of this study is first to understand how digitally enabled opinion leaders are accessing and disseminating political messages in the hybrid media system. Particularly in the context of everyday political communication, this is territory which has not been mapped and so a descriptive analysis is needed.

RQ1 What are the modes of access to and dissemination of political messages by digitally enabled opinion leaders?

Next, it is important to understand the mechanisms which drive channel choice in order to explain the process of personal influence in a hybrid media system.

RQ2 What drives channel choice among digitally enabled opinion leaders when disseminating political information?

This question is broken down into six sub-questions:

RQ2.1 How does the richness/leanness of media channels influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choice?

RQ2.2 How does the social appropriateness of exchanging political messages (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

RQ2.3 How does the political climate influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

RQ2.4 How does one's sense of community (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

RQ2.5 How does the strength of social ties to their audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

RQ2.6 How does knowledge about one's audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

It is possible that channels which offer access to weak ties and/or wide and unknown audiences will be too impersonal and as such opinion leaders in use of those channels will not garner as much influence, compared to using interpersonal channels. Alternatively, access to a larger audience could lead to increased reach of an opinion leader's influence in particular because they are able to deliver newer information. In other words, the increased choice available to opinion leaders has the potential to shift the end result of their political communications. In order to understand whether these opinion leaders are fulfilling the prescribed role of an "opinion leader" in the traditional sense or if they are making choices that shift their political role and/or ability to influence, it is important to assess the effects of these choices on the larger process of communicating political information

RQ3 What are the impacts of the channel choices made by opinion leaders on their political role?

Here the consequence of choice is assessed in relation to the theoretical role of the opinion leader as one who passes along messages from the political elite, informs the uninformed and generates discussion. These three activities are thought to contribute to the formulation of public opinion and encourage political participation generally. The actual goals of digitally enabled opinion leaders are also considered in terms of both whether or not their personal goals are fulfilled and whether or not their goals are in line with the traditional role of opinion leaders. Considering these goals will permit the potential inclusion of alternative measures of effectiveness that were not viable in a mass media environment. In other words, looking at the actual decision making process of opinion leaders in action will help reveal potential intervening variables and develop theory suited to the context of the hybrid media system.

2.5 Explaining channel choice

This section focuses on the six sub-questions related to the second research question *what drives channel choice?* Factors related to the channels themselves such as media properties and media context, factors related to the social setting of a communicative exchange and factors related to the relationship between the opinion leader and their message's receivers are all considered.

How users discriminate among different tools for communication, their channel choice, is related to media-based and social interaction-based factors. Early theories proposed rational choice models of channel choice which claim that users rationally match media to tasks (Webster & Trevino, 1995; Daft & Lengel, 1983). In other words, a person's perception of the utility of a given channel determines their

likelihood of making use of that tool. Social interaction-based models propose an alternative perspective suggesting channel choice is an inherently dynamic and situated process (Webster & Trevino, 1995; Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987). A communicator makes choices about which channels to use given the specific context and locale as well as their personal experiences and history in similar situations and with various tools.

Attempts to incorporate both approaches are promising. For example Jung and Lyytinen (2014) describe an interrogative/adaptive behaviourism approach wherein the user is conceptualized as a highly self-reflexive agent assessing the utility of tools based on their affordances in a given specific situation. In an in-depth analysis of three knowledge workers, Jung and Lyytinen (2014) show the individual considers the media properties of tools and their own effectiveness as a user. They go on to consider what affordances the tools offer and what situational constraints exist - re-examining options if need be.

While social context considers the general norms which may guide tool use and channel choice as well as the specific components related to a communicative situation, missing is an explicit consideration of the user's relationship with the individual(s) they intend to communicate with. Strength of the relationship and knowledge of one's audience are potentially important factors in a user's channel choice process particularly in a hybrid media system where the audience an opinion leader has access to may be varied.

This section reviews literature on channel choice and three broad areas (two-sub questions each) which merit investigation. First, both technical and normative *media properties* are described. Second, the *social setting* surrounding communications is examined first at the societal level and then at the group/community level. Last, *opinion leaders' relationships* are discussed in terms of strength of social ties and knowledge of audiences.

2.5.1 Media properties: Technical and normative characteristics and constraints

Media properties can be divided into two broad categories. First there are technical characteristics and constraints. These include the amount of content that can be sent using a given channel, at one time. Second, normative characteristics and constraints refer to the social norms considered when asking what is an appropriate and accepted use of a given channel?

In a hybrid media system digitally enabled opinion leaders benefit from a vast array of channels/communications tools. In this media system message creators, other opinion leaders, and members of the general public are also all using a variety of tools in their day to day communicative practices. Each channel - be it face-to-face communication, television, Facebook or an online message board - is distinct in its potential uses in terms of speed, ease, personalization and the like.

Media richness theory suggests we can evaluate media based on its ability to reproduce the information being sent (Daft & Lengel, 1983). For example, a phone call can reproduce verbal but not visual cues making it less rich than face-to-face communication which can reproduce both. It is argued that ambiguous and complex tasks require media - which is richer. Similarly, media naturalness theory suggests media are evaluated by potential users based on how similar or dissimilar they are to the most natural form of communication, face-to-face (Kock, 2005). Media which are more similar will be better for complex tasks. While divergent in their theoretical underpinnings, both media richness and media naturalness highlight the user's ability to evaluate the potential utility of a channel given a specific task.

The assessment of which media is most appropriate for accomplishing a given task is thought of in terms to the physical characteristics, or what Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich (2008) call media capabilities. Capabilities include whether or not synchronous or asynchronous communication is possible, the speed of communication, and the location and/or mobility of the media.

That said, many have tested media richness theory and found that physical characteristics of media are not sufficient for explaining media choice. For example, Trevino, Lengel, and Daft (1987) reveal the relevance of the symbolic nature of media providing the example of the lean media of writing being preferred, even during complex tasks because it is perceived to be more formal. Others have gone further and argue the appropriateness of a given media is in fact socially constructed (social influence theory) (Fulk et al., 1987); that physical and social structures of media actually inform each other as appropriate use is negotiated (adaptive structuration theory) (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994); and that media richness theory should be replaced with channel expansion theory so as to include not only physical characteristics but a person's experience using the tool in theories of choice (Carlson & Zmud, 1999).

When it comes to media use, each individual tends to develop a set of habits based on their repertoire of tools and tactics. They become accustomed to seeking and sending information in particular ways and tend to use new technologies based on things like past experience with similar tools and perceptions of tools (LaRose, 2010). That is not to say their decisions are entirely pre-determined but they are guided by past behaviours and experiences (Fulk et al., 1987). In a hybrid media system the repertoire of potential tools and tactics will expand, particularly for those who are digitally enabled. This means the digitally enabled opinion leader will likely have a broad arsenal of tools to choose from when making channel choices.

To examine the impact of media properties on the channel choices of digitally enabled opinion leaders the following sub-question is developed:

RQ2.1 How does the richness/leanness of media channels influence opinion leaders' channel choice?

Richness and leanness of media will be assessed both in terms of the standard

set of characteristics outlined in media richness theory as well as the perspective of the specific opinion leaders who are under investigation.

Notably, the digitally enabled opinion leader's decision making process about channel choice may be guided by a rational choice approach but they will be constrained by the tools available. For example, increased internet accessibility leads to increased online news and information adoption (Nguyen & Western, 2006). Moreover, the particular context of a given situation may be even further restrictive. For example, even if face-to-face communication may be the rational choice, it does not mean it will be available in that moment. Similarly, an emotional response to new information could influence the decision making process for the individual. For example, an individual may be so outraged at a new political scandal they feel compelled to share it immediately. In a hybrid media system there are a range of tools available that could accommodate this desire. The chosen tool(s) would be dependent upon the goal and complexity of the task and availability of channel at that moment.

Moreover, each channel is constrained by technical limitations. For example, the Globe and Mail is a national newspaper in Canada and charges for print or online subscription requiring the user to either be physically in the same place as the paper or to go through the process of logging in online to read and comment on articles. However, Twitter can function as a news aggregator to be accessed via any web-browser or mobile app, free of charge, with or without logging in. For the opinion leader the time and cost of one channel, be it print or an institutional website, might drive one to choose Twitter as an app or social networking website. Similarly, face-to-face communication will only be available when individuals are physically present in the same geographic location and Internet based channels will only be available when an Internet connection is available.

Obviously individual interpretations of utility and the specific goals of different communicative acts are highly contextual and necessitate in-depth and grounded

investigations to explain how digitally enabled opinion leaders choose channels.

Extending arguments about social influence theory (Fulk et al., 1987) and adaptive structuration theory (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), in a hybrid media system the versatility of tools leads to potentially shifting norms of media use. There is increased opportunity for users to shape and re-shape the norms related to use of channels (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014). Digitally enabled opinion leaders are faced with questions of content specific appropriateness. Is a given topic/message appropriate for this channel? Is this channel appropriate for sharing information and/or for discussing issues? Similar questions are then presented considering appropriateness given the wider context - in terms of political climate, for example.

Considering the appropriateness of political communication at the media level, media context - the combination of media affordances and norms - is thought to guide the kinds of communication that happen via a particular media. Users of media define and re-define the acceptable uses of specific tools (Gillespie et al., 2014). While media richness theory suggests it is the inherent properties of tools and their utility for achieving communicative goals, consideration of media context requires one to consider the perception of media at a specific time and place. The situated nature of channels and their potential uses is particularly crucial in a hybrid media system in which digital tools and their uses often change rapidly. Finally, the contentious nature of discussing politics generally (Stromer-Galley, 2002) makes it an area in which it might be expected that the social appropriateness of a channel is of particular importance to the decision maker. Therefore the following sub-question is posed:

RQ2.2 How does social appropriateness (normative properties) influence opinion leaders' channel choices?

2.5.2 Social settings: Political climate and community

Beyond the norms ascribed to specific channels and media uses, channel choice has other social drivers. Both at the societal and community level, the setting in which communications take place can influence the channels an opinion leader selects.

Considering the wider social context, when people feel a point of view is shared widely they are more likely to express that view. This phenomenon is what Noelle-Neumann (1974) described as the “spiral of silence” wherein people refrain from commenting on issues when they believe they hold a minority view. K. Hampton et al. (2014) have considered the spiral of silence given the wide availability of digital tools and online social networking sites. They show support for the theory among the general US population. For example, in their nationally representative survey of US citizens K. Hampton et al. (2014) describe comfort levels and likelihood of sharing information about Edward Snowden and government surveillance[2] across a range of channels. The Snowden study found that when people believe that the general public agrees with their own views, they are more likely to share their opinions. That said, they also found that active social media users are less likely to share their opinions across all channels. One explanation is that social media users have a better sense of the divided state of public opinion.

The Snowden study examines the impact of the spiral of silence on a level of partisanship/specific opinions. However, even at a higher level the impact of the spiral of silence is likely. For example, in a pioneering ethnographic study of three different social groups in the San Francisco area during the 1990s, Eliasoph (1998) found that while people avoid politics an encouraging audience and perceived appropriate setting could promote political chat. People may be more comfortable talking about

[2] In 2013 Edward Snowden provided mainstream media with documents revealing evidence that the US government held Americans’ phone and email records under surveillance. This gained widespread attention across a range of channels from the media and general public, in the United States and internationally.

politics, regardless of partisanship or the specifics of an opinion, when the social setting is perceived to be amenable to those discussions. This occurs, for example, during elections. Potentially, perceptions of the political climate and public opinion are influential for one's channel choice. As such, the following sub-question is asked:

RQ2.3 How does the political climate influence opinion leaders' channel choices?

Here use of channels is considered both in terms of use of the channels normally found in an opinion leader's repertoire and in terms of other channels which could be added during these moments of increased activity in the political system.

Notably, many studies of opinion leadership and political communication focus solely on campaign-time patterns and do not study everyday communication. This is because during campaigns the political climate is thought to be such that even those not normally engaged in political issues are increasingly likely to be exposed to political communications. However, this context where political communications is more pervasive and omnipresent could encourage opinion leaders to communicate in different ways. For example, if a goal of an opinion leader is to provide new information, in a time when political information is abundant they could choose to provide more detail on specific issues. Without understanding everyday political chat we cannot know whether the quality of communications changes.

Though the perception of the societal setting, which is related to the political climate and public opinion, is potentially instructive following work related to the spiral of silence, others have suggested one's reference group may be more telling (Oshagan, 1996). This is because the social group or community an individual feels a part of can help filter and/or compete with messages coming from elsewhere (Oshagan, 1996).

Opinion leaders may or may not feel part of a community which supports their

communications. Relying on similar principles as the spiral of silence theory, feeling part of a community is thought to influence one's political efficacy and willingness to engage politically (S. Coleman et al., 2008) and has also been shown to be a factor in opinion leadership (Shils & Janowitz, 1948). People feel bolstered by their community and encouraged to share information and engage in discussion. Many studies of online social networking sites have also used the principles of community studies to understand why people choose to participate. For example Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) evaluate whether or not Twitter can be thought of as an online community and/or an imagined community. Building off Benedict Anderson's notion of an imagined community wherein an awareness of the presence of others is core, the authors argue Twitter is an imagined community, but then delve deeper into the potential characteristics of Twitter as an online community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) in their work on Sense of Community, posit that a sense of belonging/membership, an ability to influence others, social support and integration and a shared past and emotional connection are the foundational characteristics of community. In this Sense of Community work, social and psychological mechanisms are considered in order to explain how the individual is connected to their community and the implications for participation (Obst & White, 2005). Gruzd et al. (2011) assess the Twitter community of a single user and show, based on the characteristics listed above, that it is both "real and imagined." This small case study has not put to rest the debate as to whether or not most people, using various tools, feel connected to online communities.

That said, the social and psychological draw to being part of a community is generally found to be prevalent. Communities provide a sense of belonging, an ability to influence others, social support and a shared emotional connection (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Considering the hybrid media system, digitally enabled opinion leaders may now select channels which allow them to engage with a particular community be it virtual or in physical space. They are not limited to contact with only

their everyday associates. This leads to the following sub-question:

RQ2.4 How does one's sense of community given a particular channel influence opinion leaders' channel choices?

These two aspects of social setting (societal and community-based) are clearly important in considering what drives the channel choices of digitally enabled opinion leaders. Social setting is particularly relevant in the hybrid media system since opinion leaders may be able to make use of channels of communication that grant them access to increased information about public opinion and to digitally enabled communities.

2.5.3 Opinion leaders' relationships

The relationships an opinion leader has to their associates and/or their wider audience may play an important role in how digitally enabled opinion leaders select their channels of communication. When determining the technical or normative appropriateness of a channel as well as when situating decisions within a given social setting, the audience of one's communication is implicitly relevant. In a hybrid media system the specific relationship between the opinion leader and the receiver(s) of their message is particularly crucial. This is because added channels of communication are allowing digitally enabled opinion leaders to potentially access new, wide and diverse audiences. The strength of social ties between the opinion leader and message receiver as well as the opinion leader's knowledge about their audience are thus considered.

Digitally enabled opinion leaders may choose tools based on how close their social bond with their intended message receiver is. Opinion leaders are thought to influence the political opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their everyday associates which traditionally consisted of primarily strong ties. Strong ties are those

with whom an individual has a trusting and intimate relationship. Often these relationships are maintained over time and involve a complex shared history. Weak ties represent relationships which are more sparse and involve less contact and historical connection (for a detailed comparison of strong and weak ties, see Haythornthwaite (2002), Table 1).

Tie strength influences the qualities of communicative acts (Haythornthwaite, 2002). For example, people tend to discuss important or controversial issues with their strong ties. Further, certain media tend to be preferred for communication with particular others. For example, a Pew study of American teenagers showed that they prefer email for detailed exchanges with "adults" but instant messaging for daily communication with their friends (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton (2001) have also shown that different media tend to be preferred for different tasks but that those varied uses tend to be complementary and used synergistically. Moreover, as discussed, according to rational choice models like media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1983), the goal of different communicative acts has an impact on the channel an opinion leader might choose. In this way tie strength and channel choice are linked.

Haythornthwaite (2002) describes media multiplicity which argues that the stronger the tie, the more media the pair will use to communicate. The use of multiple channels allows strong ties to deepen their relationships and maintain them in the face of adversity such as geographic separation or the need for asynchronicity in communication (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998). Further, strong ties desire more frequent communication and therefore are likely to make use of a wider variety of media (Clark & Brennan, 1991).

Conversely, weak ties are unlikely to be motivated to connect with each other (Haythornthwaite, 2002). For example, in studies of both academic workplace groups and online courses, Haythornthwaite and colleagues have shown that while strong ties make use of multiple media, weak ties tend to rely on a single media,

typically prescribed by some authority and inclusive of most others in the group.

Initiating contact with a weak tie can have significant "social overhead" (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Pickering & King, 1995) but Sproull and Kiesler (1986) explain that computer mediated communication specifically can work to the benefit of weak ties because the social risk of contacting unknown others is reduced. Computer mediated communication can be less immediate and more anonymous. Further, use of the Internet increases the number of weak ties one has (K. N. Hampton, 2003; Kavanaugh, 2002). Moreover, Kim, Kim, Park, and Rice (2007), using an online survey of Korean Internet users, show that text-based computer mediated communication is often used in relationships with weak ties.

Similarly, in a detailed study of channel choice among Israeli youth Mesch (2009) found that the longer two people know each other the less likely they are to use online communication tools and that people who feel closely tied tend to choose face-to-face communication. Other studies have shown that as relationships progress people tend to move from online to offline communication (Mesch & Levanon, 2003; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Given the wide availability of channels of communication that could connect opinion leaders to others with whom their tie strength is varied, the following sub-question is pertinent:

RQ2.5 How does the strength of social ties to their audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

Research considering specific channel use is limited and as such choices among online or offline tools will be examined.

Finally, in a hybrid media system digitally enabled opinion leaders may be able to connect with wider audiences which may be varied and/or unknown. Changes in the media system mean that individuals may now engage in communication that is no longer interpersonal. When communicating to a wider audience, other factors

may then play into the channel choice decision making process. Research into user generated content and their audiences has shown that perceptions of one's audience impacts the nature of their communication practices which can include, but is not limited to, channel choice (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Shao, 2009). A digitally enabled opinion leader may choose to share a particular message via one channel and not another depending on the perceived audience associated with each channel. That audience may be sympathetic to a given topic or not, they may themselves be experts in the area or not, and they may enjoy receiving political information or not. Further complicating things is that audience may in fact be ambiguous or even unknown to the opinion leader (Marwick & boyd, 2011). For example, social media may collapse audiences into a single context (Marwick & boyd, 2011). One's Facebook friends may come from a variety of social groups, each of which maintains different norms for what is appropriate and what is not (Blank, Bolsover, & Dubois, 2014). The relationship the opinion leader has to their audience is then potentially a very important factor in the channel choice equation. Theories of political efficacy and the spiral of silence theory suggest that when an individual knows their audience they will be more comfortable communicating political information and opinions. As such the final sub-question posed is:

RQ2.6 How does knowledge about one's audience influence opinion leaders' channel choices?

In sum, an opinion leader's relationship to the recipients of their messages may play a crucial role in how they choose channels of communication. Since any given opinion leader will have many different relationships to individuals and may connect with multiple audiences, an holistic approach to understanding the digitally enabled opinion leader in their social environment is merited.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter the opinion leader is identified as an important political player who takes messages from the mainstream media and uses their social placement to influence their everyday associates' political opinions, behaviours and attitudes. The personal relationship between the opinion leader and their everyday associates affords them a position as an influencer who is able to exert social pressure and social support in a mass media environment.

Next, this chapter introduced the notion of a hybrid media system and examined the ways in which a changed media environment may impact the role of the opinion leader and their political communication process. The opinion leader is thought to interpret messages from the elite, deliver new information and spark discussion. They facilitate the process of opinion formation and encourage political engagement among their close social relations. In the mass media environment this was accomplished primarily through interpersonal communication. In a hybrid media system the opinion leader is presented with new opportunities for communication via a variety of channels and with a wider range of recipients. The choices digitally enabled opinion leaders are faced with may make it possible for them to reach a larger audience but their ability to influence that audience is uncertain given a lack of interpersonal interaction.

In short, it cannot be assumed that the mechanisms by which opinion leaders once contributed to the political system remain the same. In an effort to understand the channel choices digitally enabled opinion leaders are making and the impact of those choices on their ability to fulfill the role of opinion leader, this chapter introduces three research questions and six sub-questions.

Given changes in the media environment whereby new technologies offer opinion leaders a wide selection of channels to choose from when sharing and discussing political information, an investigation into actual communication processes of opinion leaders across platforms is a necessity. In order to understand the role of politically

engaged citizens, specifically opinion leaders, it is important to understand which channels of communication they use, how, why, and to what end. Media properties, social settings of communication, and opinion leaders' relationships to their associates and audiences are all theoretically plausible contributing variables. In order to adequately assess digitally enabled political opinion leadership and channel choice in a hybrid media system, a mixed-methods study was designed. The following chapter reviews the design and methodology.

Chapter 3

Methods

This chapter first reviews the the sequential mixed-methods design employed in this study. Next, each research question and sub-question are taken in turn and measurement is explained and situated within this design.

Following a comprehensive overview of the methodological approach, a detailed look at the two phases of research is presented. Phase one focuses on generating an understanding of opinion leadership at a broad level. The #CDNpoli Twitter network is investigated and opinion leaders are identified. Phase one relies on descriptive online social network analysis and an online survey. In phase two the focus shifts to understanding the motivations of specific opinion leaders. The 21 Twitter users identified in phase one are considered as individual examples of opinion leaders. Their patterns of communication, motivations for such communication and impact of their choices are examined. Phase two relies primarily on in-depth interviews with opinion leaders and some of their social ties including friends, family and colleagues. Content analysis and social network analysis of opinion leaders' trace data as well as a participant-aided sociogram are integrated both into the interview process and as data sources for analysis outside of the interview. Mixed methods allows for rich detail, an understanding of social context, and a validation of findings. In other words, the use of multiple data sources allows for triangulation or

crystallization wherein multiple perspectives on the process of opinion leadership are provided and assessed in concert. This is essential considering the aim of this thesis is to understand digitally enabled opinion leaders in a hybrid media system which is characterized by abundant channels of communication which potentially allow for unexpected approaches to communication.

3.1 Designing research for the hybrid media system

The following section reviews the sequential-mixed methods design and then details the context of the study.

The notion of a hybrid media system embraces the complexity of political communication and its various participants. High levels of choice, in terms of tools and tactics as well as the blurring of boundaries among uses of tools and kinds of political players, means that in the current hybrid media system notions of purely linear patterns of communication are suspect. While it remains true that a linear two-step flow could be deciphered, the implications of many more individuals making use of tools of communication in a variety of ways renders it imperative that researchers take a more holistic approach when investigating communicative practices. In a hybrid media system the possible outside factors, including other political players, other sources of information, other opportunities for disseminating information and the wider context of particular communicative acts, all underscore the value of richly detailed and multi-perspective work.

Recent research investigating opinion leadership tends to draw attention to the flows of information among users of a single digital platform. Identifying and codifying users, researchers strive to identify influential members of online communities (Gruzd et al., 2011), to identify users who are likely to start cascades of information (Lerman & Ghosh, 2010; Romero, Meeder, & Kleinberg, 2011) and to explain the

different kinds of influencers within networks (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013). Though the sharing of information and traces of communication these works rely on are valuable for describing high level flows which may be equated to some form of influence, they fall short in two important ways when it comes to understanding opinion leadership.

First, in a hybrid media system individuals act across many channels (Chadwick, 2013). Their communications and attempts to influence are rarely reserved to a single channel of communication and indeed channels are often used in concert. For example, someone might post a video to YouTube and then share it on Facebook and Twitter. Different conversations with different audiences may take place on all three platforms. Further, in a hybrid media system it is easy for actors to seamlessly switch from one channel to another (Chadwick, 2013). While a conversation may begin with a link shared via SMS from a mobile phone, it could continue via phone call, VoIP or any number of social media sites (not to mention face-to-face conversation should geographic proximity permit). To encompass the process of personal influence - of an opinion leader impacting the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of others - it is important to consider the many channels of communication the leader makes use of. There is little research about the actual channels and tactics used by opinion leaders in a hybrid media system but it is likely they make use of multiple channels. This highlights the need for a qualitative approach since tracking people across multiple channels is very difficult. In-depth interviews with opinion leaders can provide insight into the decision making process behind complex uses of multiple channels of communication.

Second, while high-level flows of information can be instructive, in terms of who is able to spread messages (Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg, 2009) and what kinds of messages are most shared (Watts & Dodds, 2007), at the level of personal influence more contextually specific data is required. Watts and Dodds (2007) use computational models to assess how likely a given opinion leader is to start a cas-

cade of information and shift opinions on a large scale. While they find that opinion leaders are unlikely to be key to shifting large numbers of opinions (given their specific definition of opinion leader and influence), they conclude that a more important implication of their work is an evident need for explaining who influences whom and how. This kind of investigation requires in-depth and contextual study. Yet existing studies of online influence which rely heavily on quantitative analysis of trace data lack a sensitivity to the reasoning behind, or social setting surrounding, the creation of those traces (Dubois & Ford, 2015; Karpf et al., 2015). While an opinion leader might post to Twitter and be re-tweeted regularly, an analysis of those tweets, even in the context of larger Twitter networks and conversations, is limited. It is unknown why the opinion leader chose to tweet, who they hoped to reach, who they did reach and whether or not the effort had an impact on anyone.

Further, everyday political chat tends to ebb and flow with current affairs and what is popular in the news. It can be challenging to design an up to date and sufficiently inclusive content sampling strategy from a channel such as Twitter. While it is relatively easy to select a hashtag associated with a particular advocacy movement such as #occupy (Thorson et al., 2013), a piece of legislation such as an internet surveillance bill (C30) in Canada (Obar & Shade, 2014) or group of hackers such as Anonymous (G. Coleman, 2013), it is much more challenging to collect "everyday political chat." Since opinion leadership happens on a daily basis and since everyday political chat is the primary concern of this study, a mixed-methods approach which includes rich contextual data is required. A multi-perspective view on the process of personal influence and opinion leadership is acquired through interviews with opinion leaders, digital traces of communication by those opinion leaders and finally, through interviews with the individuals the opinion leader communicates with (called alters).

The inclusion of alter interviews provides access to alternative perspectives on the communication process which helps validate findings, something Katz (1957)

noted is of crucial importance. The alter interviews also allow investigation into the impact of varying communication patterns and channel choices made by opinion leaders. Political communication is a process involving multiple players. By asking both the sender and receiver of messages about those interactions it is possible to access a more complete view of the process and its outcomes. Particularly in the context of assessing the influence of one individual over another, the social desirability of either being seen as politically powerful or as respectful to the ideas and opinions of others impacts the responses opinion leaders are likely to provide. The best way to mitigate this kind of bias is to employ a multi-perspective research design.

Though it is clear that a richly qualitative design incorporating trace data and interviews is necessary for understanding how, why and with what effect opinion leaders communicate, there are two problems larger-scale quantitative approaches can help solve. First, in order to make sure the most appropriate trace data is collected and the most valuable questions are asked during interviews it is helpful to have a general sense of how digitally enabled opinion leaders are communicating. Online social network analysis and content analysis of tweets from a specific hashtag network dedicated to general political chat in Canada (#CDNpoli) illuminates broad patterns and points to places where further investigation is likely to be most fruitful. An online survey asking #CDNpoli users, for example, what other channels they use, is similarly instructive. Second, these quantitative approaches are valuable for identifying a sample of opinion leaders to study in greater detail.

Given the large amount of data required to effectively understand the choices, and effects of choices, of each opinion leader, a relatively small sample of opinion leaders is ideal. Though the goal of this study is not to generalize results to a larger population, it is still important to select participants in a way that is as close to random as possible and eliminate known biases. This is accomplished using social network analysis and content analysis of #CDNpoli participants and tweets, com-

bined with an online survey. Two key phases of investigation are thus sequentially conducted.

3.1.1 Sequential mixed-methods

The study is conducted in two phases with the first aimed at understanding the #CDNpoli context and identifying opinion leaders for phase two. This two-phase approach, is what Creswell and Clark (2007, p. 86) calls an "explanatory sequential design." More specifically, they call it a "participant-selection variant" given that results from phase one are used in part to select participants for phase two.

For this study, phase one relies on more quantitative data, including social network analysis and an online survey. Phase two employs more qualitative methods mixing in-depth interviews with social network analysis and content analysis generating richly detailed and nuanced understandings of each case of opinion leadership. Systematically employing a range of techniques allows each phase of research to benefit from previous phases (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

Digital social research techniques are paired with this early style of opinion leader research (survey and interviews) in order to capitalize on the large amounts of data made available through online social network/Internet use and in order to mitigate some of the shortcomings of past work, such as respondent bias. Purely digital data collection, however, would risk divorcing online and offline experiences entirely which proves less useful since the hybrid media system does not negate nor ignore offline content and communication but rather considers a media environment inclusive of non-mass media.

This mixed-methods approach permits triangulation of perspectives lending to a more credible understanding of each case and higher quality theory development (George & Bennett, 2005; Creswell & Clark, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). The mix of methods used to triangulate in this study also allows the researcher to build on a largely positivist stance which framed early opinion leadership

research, and to establish a sense of the process of personal influence which relies more on a constructivist perspective (George & Bennett, 2005).

In response to the first research question concerning the ways opinion leaders access and disseminate information, a content analysis of #CDNpoli tweets and online survey responses provide broad insights as to which sources and channels are used. In-depth interviews provide detailed accounts of how and when those channels are selected. In response to the second and third research questions looking at why and with what effect opinion leaders choose different channels, an analysis of personal social networks, content posted on social media and interviews with multiple individuals is mixed. This permits a multi-perspective view on the process of personal influence and opinion leadership in terms of channel choice and impacts of those choices.

More generally, by mixing methods this study benefits from a diversity of views, increased breadth and credibility as well as a detailed look at the process of opinion leadership (Bryman, 2012, p. 105-107). The use of different methods in order to respond to different components of inquiry represents valuable expansion (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989) which then allows for the inclusion of multiple perspectives of the opinion leadership process.

In sum, while ample research designed to study information seeking behaviours is available, research targeting how and why individuals choose to share and discuss political information across channels is more scarce. In a hybrid media system characterized by high levels of choice, this lack of focused study is increasingly problematic. To know how these political actors function it is necessary to understand wider patterns of political communication. Only a mixed-methods and actor-centric approach can account for such a wide variety of tools, uses of tools and interpretations of personal relationships and influence. Recent work on channel choice neglects the varied types of communication (interpersonal, quasi-personal, impersonal) that accompany these varied channels and uses of channels. Given the potential impli-

cations for theory development discussed in the previous chapter, a methodological design that is sensitive to the choices actors make on a granular level is crucial.

3.1.2 The Canadian context

The decision to select Canada as the research locale caries both strengths and weaknesses. This study of digitally enabled opinion leadership benefits from a concentrated investigation into the practices of individuals who share a nationality, language[1] and political system. That said, they come from diverse geographic locations and experience local and provincial politics differently. The ability to delimit the study of opinion leadership by country is a critical strength.

As noted, in Canada Internet penetration is considered high and voter turn-out low. High Internet penetration is important because one cannot fully make use of digital tools of communication without consistent Internet access. Since Internet access worldwide is on the rise, studying opinion leadership where the Internet is widely available is most promising for future applicability. Low voter turn-out and political apathy, more generally, is important because it is in the context of a public divided - into those who engage politically and those who do not - that opinion leaders are expected to be most valuable. Further, understanding the process of opinion leadership in a hybrid media system with low voter turn-out could generate solutions to political apathy.

That said, this is a common trend occurring across western democracies including the US and UK. Notably, many more studies of citizen political engagement and information sharing in the digital era have been conducted in these two countries than in Canada (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Bowers-Brown, 2003; Bimber, 2003). Indeed, Chadwick (2013) compares the US and UK but his is just one example of

[1] French language speakers were invited to complete the survey but too few respondents willing to be interviewed were identified and as such none were included in that portion of the research.

many other studies investigating digital era politics in those countries. This points to a gap in the literature. There are factors which could make the practice of political communication in Canada different. For example, Canada's geography is expansive and population density is low which means people may be more reliant on the Internet and related digital tools to communicate. This is both a strength and a weakness. Since the Canadian context is different from others this thesis is able to contribute something new. Yet, this difference also makes it challenging to build on earlier work. Notably, there are important similarities between Canada and other western democracies. Culturally and politically Canada shares similarities with the US, UK, and Australia where many other studies have been conducted. This means that to some extent, this study does build from previous findings

Considering choice among western democracies, it is worth noting that at the time of research Canada was experiencing a stable majority government for the first time in four election cycles and as such there was little threat of an election campaign skewing results as would have been the case in the UK, for example.

Since social media is a large part of what makes the current media system hybrid, it is also valuable to consider uptake of various platforms. Appendix A highlights social media use in Canada across the most popular platforms in comparison to other western democracies (specifically, US, UK and Australia). Each country has about the same percentage of social media users reporting active use of the most popular social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, Instagram and LinkedIn). Twitter is most varied where, in Canada 23% of social media users report being active on Twitter while only 14% are in Australia and 19% in each of the US and UK (We Are Social, 2015).

The focus on digitally enabled opinion leaders, those opinion leaders who are active on at least one social media site (specifically Twitter in this study) is intentionally limited since they are likely to be early adopters. Studying their communication patterns can provide insight into what might be expected, as more individuals

begin to make use of these channels of communication. As described, a wide range of political players in Canada actively make use of the Internet and related digital tools including many of these social networking sites.

The Canadian context of this study provides manageable boundaries, is unique yet comparable to relevant research and allows for investigation into digitally enabled political communication.

3.1.3 Sample size: The Twitter hashtag #CDNpoli

The #CDNpoli Twitter hashtag network is selected as the seed for identifying opinion leaders for a number of key reasons.

A social network is used to select interviewees rather than, for example, through referrals because the former is more easily replicable and there are clearer boundaries to the population. As such, a random sample can be selected within those bounds (sampling frame). For example, White, Castleden, and Gruzd (2014) selected interviewees based on how central those Twitter users were in hashtag networks related to environmental issues in Canada.

An online social network is selected since the core focus of this thesis is on how *digitally enabled* individuals exert personal influence. Some level of technology use is thus a pre-requisite. A base criteria has been set at “has a minimum of one OSN profile” in order to ensure the population is sufficiently digitally enabled.

Twitter, in particular, is selected because it is among the most popular social networking sites in Canada and so the population is wide, not niche (Ipsos, 2011). Further, Twitter is unique in that it is at once a social networking website and a news source (Kwak et al., 2010). The notion of the opinion leader was developed in response to questions about how mass media, often news media, effect people (Weimann, 1994; W. L. Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). This research continues in that vein examining the effects of a hybrid media system on peoples’ strategies for personal influence. Further, it is common on Twitter to incorporate content from other

social media (Lenhart & Fox, 2009). As such, Twitter data is a particularly relevant source and an ideal common element across opinion leaders.

Twitter hashtags 'organize discussion about specific topics or events' (Fitton & Poston, 2009, p. 124) and allow for a replicable approach to sampling political communication. The #CDNpoli hashtag is chosen in particular because it includes a variety of people interested in Canadian politics regardless of partisan leaning and covers a wide range of issues. Indeed, Gruzd and Roy (2014) examined #CDNpoli and found that they could identify clusters of users from each major political party as well as mainstream media and popular bloggers. In other words, it encompasses a range of everyday political chat. This is confirmed by other studies such as a manual content analysis of a week's worth of #CDNpoli tweets in 2010 conducted by Small (2011, p. 872). She notes, "this analysis shows that informing is the primary function of a political hashtag such as #CDNpoli. The value of a political hashtag, or Twitter more broadly, derives from the real-time nature of the information shared."

Of course in selecting Twitter and #CDNpoli any digitally enabled opinion leader who chooses to use another site or other hashtags and not Twitter and #CDNpoli will be excluded. While this is a relevant limitation the issue is balancing scale and replicability with scope and generalizability. Since no other studies of this kind currently exist it has been designed in order to take a small and replicable slice of digitally enabled opinion leaders in order to lay a foundation which future work might build from. Despite care in the selection of #CDNpoli as a seed, it is possible these Twitter users will be unique in their opinion leadership. To some extent, interviews with alters help mitigate this risk but ultimately the context of sampling, as in all studies, must be considered in interpreting results.

3.1.4 Individual opinion leaders

In order to understand how digitally enabled individuals exert personal influence in the realm of politics, 21 individuals deemed to be opinion leaders within the

Canadian political Twittersphere are examined. This approach and sample size is in line with other studies interested in how technology is integrated into social practices, for example in the examination of teleworkers (Haddon, 1998). Information about the opinion leader's social networks, media exposure, and interactions regarding political issues help explain their patterns of information sourcing and dissemination, motivations behind channel choice, and impact on others. With an aim of recruiting about 20 individuals five to six individuals from each of four geographic areas were invited to participate. These four areas were selected in order to ensure there was a wide geographic spread but that there is also sufficient opportunity to compare within certain areas. In total 21 individuals were recruited making it possible to gain a rich and detailed understanding of their communication practices.

Importantly, opinion leaders are not celebrities, politicians, journalists, popular bloggers, or other public figures (Weimann, 1994). These will henceforth be termed 'public influentials.' Public influentials can be thought of as representing one end of a scale with opinion leaders on the opposite end. The scale describes influence in terms of where individuals draw their power. Public influentials are often connected to specific institutions such as political parties or news outlets drawing power to influence from these institutions (Dutton, 2009). Opinion leadership, however, happens independent of institutions. Bloggers occupy a middle ground where they may gain a large following and create a brand, so to speak. They, in essence, become analogous to institution-supported public influentials. This is sticky territory with no certain and clear theoretical nor identifiable cut-off. For the purposes of this study only those cases which are entirely independent of institutions and have no discernible public influence are selected.

Finally, given that opinion leadership is a highly contextualized phenomenon (Schenk & Döbler, 2001) it is important to be able to contextualize the activities and position of these leaders both in their personal networks and within the wider political and social environment. The former is accomplished by snowball sampling

from the opinion leader to those they lead and are, if applicable, lead by (alter interviews). The later is accomplished by selecting participants from a broad but identifiable social/political group (#CDNpoli network).

3.2 Measurement

The following section details the specific ways in which each research question and sub-question is treated. Broadly, while RQ1 and RQ3 set out general areas of concern and then rely on analysis to draw out theory (inductive analysis), RQ2 sets out a series of theoretically driven sub-questions for testing (deductive analysis). That said, in practice the lines between inductive and deductive analysis are not so clear cut with both sides commonly contributing to the examination (Thomas, 2006).

3.2.1 RQ1: What are the modes of access to and dissemination of political messages by digitally enabled opinion leaders?

In order to respond to this question both survey data and interviews are crucial. Survey respondents were asked what sources they rely on for political information providing a broad overview.[2] During interviews both opinion leaders and alters were asked to explain their political information sourcing and sharing routines which adds nuance to the information available through the online survey. This also presents an opportunity for reflection on the reasoning driving these routines.

[2]See Appendix B for a copy of the survey questions and explanation of how each question was developed.

3.2.2 RQ2: What drives channel choice among digitally enabled opinion leaders?

In responding to RQ2 and the six sub-questions it is important to explore the motivations behind channel choice for accessing, disseminating and discussing political information. While self-reported information from opinion leader interviews is the primary source of data contributing to the analysis, alter interview and social network analysis data also contribute to sub-questions.

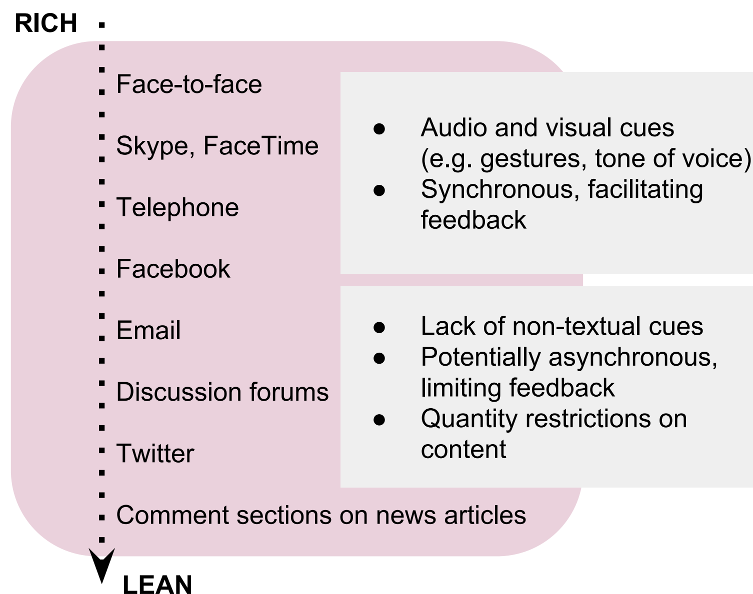
Note that channel choice refers not only to the specific tool/media selected for communicating but also the way in which that channel is used. For example, Facebook is a channel and selecting it over face-to-face communication is a choice but selecting Facebook chat over posting in a Facebook group or on a timeline is also a choice. This example shows that choice can be seen at various levels of granularity.

RQ2.1: How does the richness/leanness of media channels influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choice?

To respond to RQ2.1 it is first necessary to establish operational definitions for rich and lean media. While often discussed as two mutually exclusive categories of media, in reality richness and leanness are two ends of a spectrum which describe the technical affordances of different channels of communication (Daft & Lengel, 1983). Figure 3.1 places media commonly discussed in this study on this scale with face-to-face communication as the richest form of communication and comments sections on news articles as the leanest. This provides a useful guide but it is important to note that the same media can be used in a variety of ways which could mean that for some users a media is perceived and treated as relatively rich while for others it is relatively lean. This underscores the importance of in-depth qualitative interviews for understanding channel choice since the specific strategies and context of channel use by an individual do matter.

Media richness theory suggests rich media will be preferred for complex tasks

Figure 3.1: Media richness



and lean for less complex tasks (Daft & Lengel, 1983). Discussion is considered a complex task because it involves a back and forth, while sharing of facts is not considered complex.

Assessing richness and complexity relies on these conceptual definitions and are informed by self-reported uses of various media during opinion leader interviews.

RQ2.2: How does the social appropriateness of exchanging political messages (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

Preference for one channel over another is self-reported during interviews. Appropriateness refers to what a channel is thought to be *for* and is specific to the perspective of the individual. Again, self-report during interviews is the main method of assessment.

RQ2.3: How does the political setting influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

The political climate, referring to the state of political activity, encompasses whether or not there is an election, a scandal, or some other item causing political unrest or excitement. Political climate is reported by the interviewee as is frequency and type of channel use.

RQ2.4: How does one's sense of community (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

Whether or not one feels a sense of community is self-reported during interviews but because of the complexity of the concept "community" it is assessed in terms of the presence of four characteristics of community. Research on 'Sense of Community' (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) reveals both social and psychological mechanisms leading to four core characteristics: sense of belonging/membership, ability to influence others, social support and integration, and shared past/emotional connection. These characteristics are assessed primarily based on opinion leader interviews, however information gathered during interviews with the alters of the opinion leader (e.g. asking the alter if they can remember changing a political behaviour in response to that opinion leader) is also considered.

RQ2.5: How does the strength of social ties to their audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

Tie strength is assessed through a participant-aided sociogram (explained in detail below) which is conducted at the start of each opinion leader interview. People within the interviewee's social circle are labeled "very close" and are considered strong ties while others are labeled "somewhat close" and are considered weak ties. During the sociogram creation participants provide additional information about each tie and indicate which channels of communication are used and whether or

not they discuss politics. This is the main source of information used to respond to RQ2.5. That said, throughout opinion leader and alter interviews, additional details about channel choice and tie strength is often reported and considered in order to contextualize findings from the sociogram.

RQ2.6: How does knowledge about one's audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

An audience, those who an individual communicates with, is considered known when the opinion leader believes they can describe who they are communicating with regardless of accuracy. Factors indicating knowledge include the ability to list individuals or groups who can access their content, the ability to list individuals or groups who interact with their content (as well as frequency and type of interaction), and mentions to audience curation such as strategic use of hashtags or limiting visibility of posts. Knowledge of an audience is assessed through self-reporting during interviews.

The "audience" is conceptualized as either perceived, potential or actual audience. The audience is self-reported during interviews and refers to those whom the opinion leader believes they are communicating with. When it comes to a larger audience (beyond small groups) self-report assessments are notoriously poor indicators of the actual audience though still offer insight in terms of motivations. The potential audience consists of those who could technically and practically participate in the communications event. For example, the audience of a Facebook post is potentially all Facebook friends of the poster. Online social network graphs inform the assessment of potential audiences. Finally, actual audiences include those who do encounter/participate in the communicative event. To determine the actual audience online social network graphs paired with interviews with opinion leaders and alters are consulted since it is known that only a portion of one's connections on social networking sites are audience members for any given communication (Bakshy

et al., 2015).

3.2.3 RQ3: What are the impacts of the channel choices made by digitally enabled opinion leaders on their political role?

Finally, in responding to RQ3 the goal is to compare the impact of the opinion leader's choices when disseminating political information to the impact prescribed by the two-step flow. In other words, the opinion leader and alter interviews are used to gauge whether or not opinion leaders are in fact influencing the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their associates. Insights drawn from these interviews are considered in the context of the social relationship between the opinion leader and the alter. The sociogram and online social network graphs are also vital data sources for RQ3.

3.3 Phase 1: A broad view of #CDNpoli and sampling opinion leaders

Phase one investigates patterns of information sourcing and dissemination at a broad level considering the digitally enabled communicator who make uses of the #CDNpoli hashtag on Twitter. For this phase data collection and initial analysis took place between May 2013 and March 2014. The aim of this research is twofold. First, to describe patterns of political communication generally, and more specifically to understand who participates in the #CDNpoli network. Second, to sample opinion leaders from that Twitter network for in-depth investigation in phase two. This section first reviews data collection procedures. Each of these two aims of phase one is then described in turn in order to illustrate the analytical approach taken.

3.3.1 Data collection

In order to respond to the aims of phase one, a one month long sample of #CDNpoli was collected and social network analysis was conducted. An online survey was distributed to #CDNpoli users.

From May 14 to June 14, 2013 all tweets containing "#CDNpoli" were collected using the Twitter Stream API. At the end of tweet collection all follower relationships among users in the sample were collected using the Twitter Search API. Table 3.1 describes those tweets. Tweets and relationships were stored in a password protected database.

Table 3.1: #CDNpoli tweets

Tweets	Users	Edges (relationships)	@replies	Users mentioned at least twice
411,138	4,5986	3,369,103	408,053	7,880

This sampling period was selected in order to include uses of #CDNpoli both while the House of Commons was in session and while Members of Parliament were on break in their constituencies. Notably, this sample included a portion of the provincial election campaign in British Columbia, a federal by-election in Newfoundland and breaking news about two stories which became significant (then Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's crack-use video and Senator Duffy's expense scandal). Together this lead to a higher than average amount of traffic with the #CDNpoli hashtag and likely meant more non-regular users were included in the original sample.

Following the collection of this sample an online survey was deployed on Twitter through the #CDNpoli network from July to September 2013. The survey included questions derived from Katz and Lazarsfeld's original opinion leadership work to determine whether the respondent might be considered a "follower," "opinion leader," or "public influential." Other questions probed information about traditional and

social media use as well as demographic variables such as age, gender and location.[3] These questions provide a basic overview of how respondents source and share political information.

From within the #CDNpoli sample the 20 accounts with the highest in-degree (most followers within the sample) were direct messaged or emailed to request that they tweet about the survey. This is based on the assumption that a user's placement in a network affords them a certain kind of communicative power (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997). For example, in order to disseminate the survey, users who were highly central and likely to be able to reach a large number of other nodes within the network were identified. A general understanding of which accounts are most central is also important for understanding power structures more generally. Popular journalists, the leaders of each major political party and well known bloggers were all asked to help spread the survey request. Tweets from a researcher account "@ResearcherLiz" as well as a personal account "@LizDubois" were sent requesting participation.[4] In total 931 individuals completed the 2013 survey, 165 of which had also tweeted using #CDNpoli during the sampling period.

From March to December 2014 a slightly modified version of the survey was deployed via direct request to 251 digitally enabled opinion leaders on Twitter (35% response rate) and 36 associates of opinion leaders (100% response rate).[5] The survey was modified to include questions about social media use.

3.3.2 Describing political communication patterns

First, social network analysis of the #CDNpoli network described above was used to gain a sense of who uses the hashtag and how they relate to each other. Figure

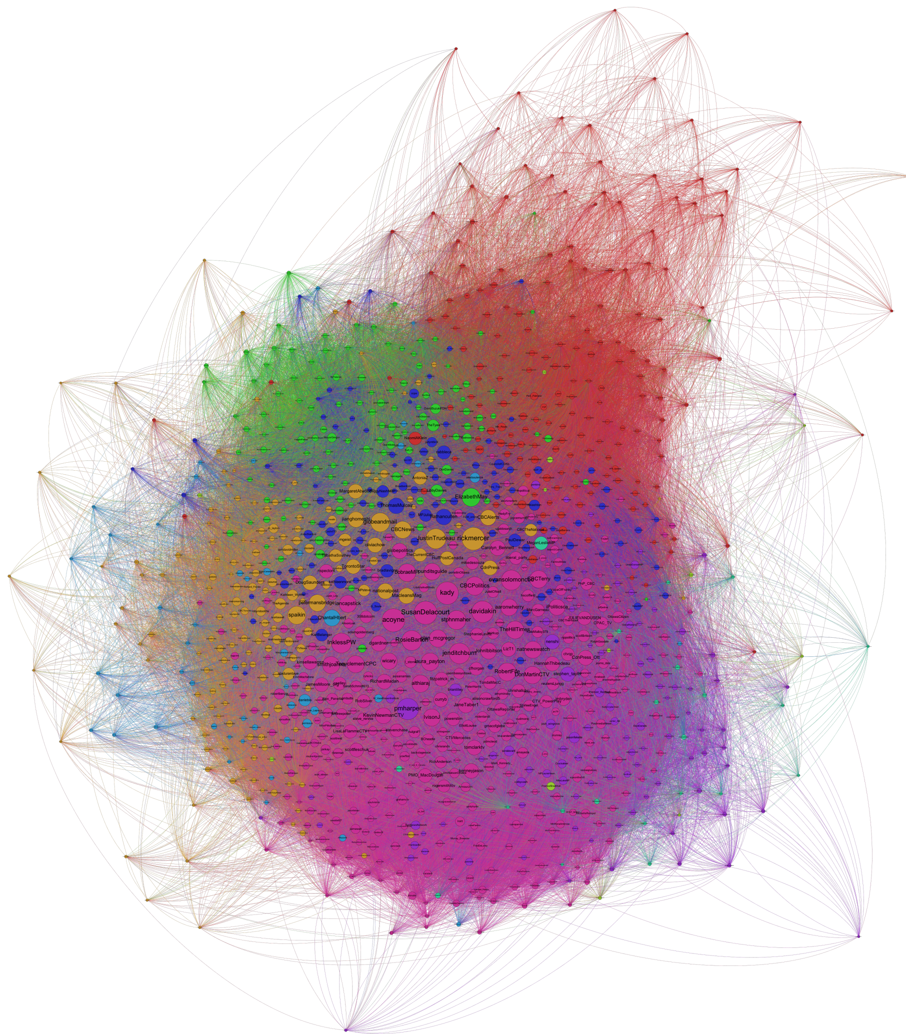
[3]See Appendix B for a complete list of survey questions.
[4]See Appendix C for an example.
[5]See Appendix B for details of modifications.

3.2 is a visualization of that network using the Yifan Hu layout.[6] Each of the 45,986 Twitter accounts which used #CDNpoli within this sample is a node (dot on the graph). Each follower relationship is an edge (line connecting dots). Edges (the lines) tie nodes (the dots) together. The number of shared ties (for example, when two nodes follow a common third node) helps determine where the node is placed on the graph. Being in close proximity on the graph suggests the two nodes are strongly tied, in this case, share many Twitter followers or follow many of the same others. Being far from another node suggests they are either weak or un-tied because they share few or no ties. The nodes are colored by cluster and is another way of representing which nodes are tied to which other nodes. The fact that many nodes are concentrated in one main component (grouping in the centre of the graph) suggests there is a lot of overlap in who follows who - the network is relatively dense. In this context this means that accounts are easily able to share information with others in the network. The larger the node, the more followers within the network that node has. Not surprisingly the majority of large nodes are journalists and politicians.

In order to understand how #CDNpoli works and who plays a role, measures of network centrality are used to gauge which accounts are popular (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010), have the most reach (Wu, Hofman, Watts, & Mason, 2011), and are potentially influential (Bakshy, Hofman, Watts, & Mason, 2011) (reported in the following chapter). The visualization of the network graph illustrates the main single large component and smaller clusters of users outside of that component. Manual investigation of these clusters prompted Twitter searches of accounts not previously known to the researcher. Together with past experience within the Canadian political Twittersphere, this is used to describe what kinds of political players participate in #CDNpoli and which other accounts they relate to.

[6]This layout was selected because it scales well and makes visually apparent social clusters.

Figure 3.2: #CDNpoli network



Finally, the most commonly shared urls and the most common hashtags used in conjunction with #CDNpoli during this sample are used to shed light on the kinds of topics discussed under the broader umbrella of #CDNpoli.

Next, the online survey deployed via #CDNpoli provides information about which sources of political information are most popular, what other social media tools #CDNpoli tweeters use, practices of sharing and discussing political information and demographic characteristics. While this survey is not generalizable, the basic patterns outlined are valuable for understanding the context of #CDNpoli participation.

3.3.3 Sampling opinion leaders from Twitter

Identifying opinion leaders is a continual challenge for two-step flow research. The use of wide scale surveys, formally employed to describe opinion leaders on a basic level - considering both leaders and followers Katz (1957) required the integration of sociometric data and qualitative interviews. This was necessary in order to understand the relational process of influence. With increasing ease of data collection some research relies heavily on social media trace data in lieu of resource heavy interviews (For example, Bakshy et al. (2011), Kwak et al. (2010)). Yet these approaches rarely focus on the kind of opinion leadership and influence Katz and Lazarsfeld describe (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014).

Examples of measuring influence through social media network analysis represent not only an opportunity to reduce the time and resources needed for identifying influentials but also make it possible to define the boundaries of the sample more clearly and to more easily replicate studies. Whereas early two-step flow studies required the researcher to attempt to find everyone in a social network through snowball sampling (either surveys or interviews), using the social media application the sampling frame is pre-determined. That said, those surveys and interviews often probed beyond the list of social ties and thus provided contextual information about those social relationships. This contextual information is particularly important when making use of social media networks in the discussion of influence since not every user, nor even every discipline (Freelon, 2014), ascribes the same meaning

to online actions or traces of those actions, nor do similar types of traces across platforms necessarily mean the same thing (a Facebook friend may not be the same as a Twitter follower or a LinkedIn connection).

For these reasons the weaknesses of convenience and snowball samples are reduced by making use of #CDNpoli as a sampling frame. The challenge regarding the lack of context when using social media trace data is mitigated with an online survey.

Responses from the 2013 online survey for each respondent were compared to that respondent's position in the #CDNpoli network. Manual content analysis of a random sample of #CDNpoli accounts was also conducted in a separate study which used the same collection of tweets as a base (Dubois & Gaffney, 2013) and this too was compared to network placement. In other words, Twitter accounts were classified as being a "follower," "opinion leader" or "public influential" in two ways: by self-report via the survey or by researcher assignment via manual content analysis. In a distinct study Gaffney and I (2014) reviewed the utility of commonly used metrics for identifying influentials and opinion leaders on Twitter. These metrics included indegree centrality (number of followers), eigenvector centrality (assigned score based on number of followers one's followers has), number of time mentioned in the sample and a measure of how closely tied a given node is to others in their immediate cluster. In this study, scores for each were calculated for all nodes in the #CDNpoli sample and each was then compared to the opinion leadership classification in order to determine which metric or combination of metrics approximate the self-report and/or content analysis classification techniques. A two mentions cut-off agreed with both classification techniques between 80% and 90% of the time when differentiating between followers and others. No other metric was as accurate for followers and others and no metric was sufficiently accurate for differentiating between opinion leaders and public influentials. This left 7,880 potential opinion leader accounts.

In order to differentiate between opinion leaders and public influentials as well as to ensure accounts were active over time, further manual content analysis was conducted. In March 2014 a random sample of 1000 of those accounts with at least two mentions were analyzed in order to determine 1. if that account remained actively politically engaged on Twitter and 2. if that account qualified as an individual opinion leader (any public influentials, such as journalists or politicians, as well as any groups or spam bots were eliminated). This served not only to fine tune the classification but also to check that the mention cut-off of two was sufficiently high. Evidently a classification error wherein users who could be classified as opinion leaders but did not receive at least two mentions is plausible and would not have been identified using this approach.

Table 3.2: Manual analysis of 1000 random accounts

Type of account	Number of accounts
Likely opinion leader	559
Media professionals and outlets	117
Politicians and political parties	60
Other organizations	71
Other (e.g. non-political, outside of Canada, bots)	121
Inactive, deleted, suspended or protected	72
Total	1000

As Table 3.2 shows, of the 1000 account sample, 559 were identified as likely opinion leaders. Of those 251 were sent a tweet from @ResearcherLiz requesting they complete the online survey. Those accounts which explicitly stated that they reside in Ottawa[7] or outside of Canada were not invited to participate. For any given location (where location was explicitly stated), once 15 responses from inhabitants

[7]The national capital, Ottawa, was excluded because the political culture is substantially different from the rest of Canada and because preliminary analysis of accounts located in Ottawa were primarily those of political staff and other partisan affiliates. Inclusion of Ottawa would have skewed the sample.

were received no more invitations were sent to users in that location. Opinion leaders for whom location was unknown were sent requests. Once a sufficient number of survey responses were received (a minimum of 6 potential interviewees in each of four distinct locations), no more requests were sent. These rules were implemented in order to reduce the number or requests sent since Twitter restricts the number of tweets one account can send in a short time period and because the goal of the request was to identify potential interviewees.

In total 87 opinion leaders completed the 2014 deployment of the survey. Thirty one were invited for an interview and 21 completed the interview. Initially six opinion leaders from each of four areas were invited to participate in an interview. When someone declined the next person from a randomized list of survey respondents in that area was invited until six spots for each location were full. These four areas were Edmonton, Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver/Victoria. They were selected because they are geographically and politically distinct from one another and because a sufficient number of survey respondents were found in each location.

The #CDNpoli network sample and online survey provide useful descriptive and broad views of how #CDNpoli works, who is involved, and what kind of content is shared but also are crucial for interviewee selection.

3.4 Phase 2: Cases of opinion leadership

The goal of the second phase of research is to add detail and nuance to the findings of phase one, to understand the motivations for choices about channels highlighted in phase one and to understand the impact of those choices on the process of opinion leadership and personal influence. This is done by taking an in-depth look at the practices and context of practices of specific opinion leaders. Treating each of 21 individuals as a case of opinion leadership, phase two makes use of in-depth interviews as the primary method. These interviews include a participant-aided sociogram and

joint analysis of trace data.

Secondary methods include social network analysis and content analysis of the opinion leader's trace data. This trace data included a two week sample of the opinion leader's tweets immediately prior to their interview. A network graph or their mentions was visualized using Netlytic. For those who were also active on other public social media, content was collected if they reported political use at least monthly.[8] For those who were also active on Facebook (which for all opinion leaders interviewed was private or semi-private) a Facebook App was deployed. NameGenWeb[9] was used during the interview process to visualize their Facebook friendship network. No other non-public social network accounts were identified as commonly used for political chat by any opinion leader interviewed and thus none are included.

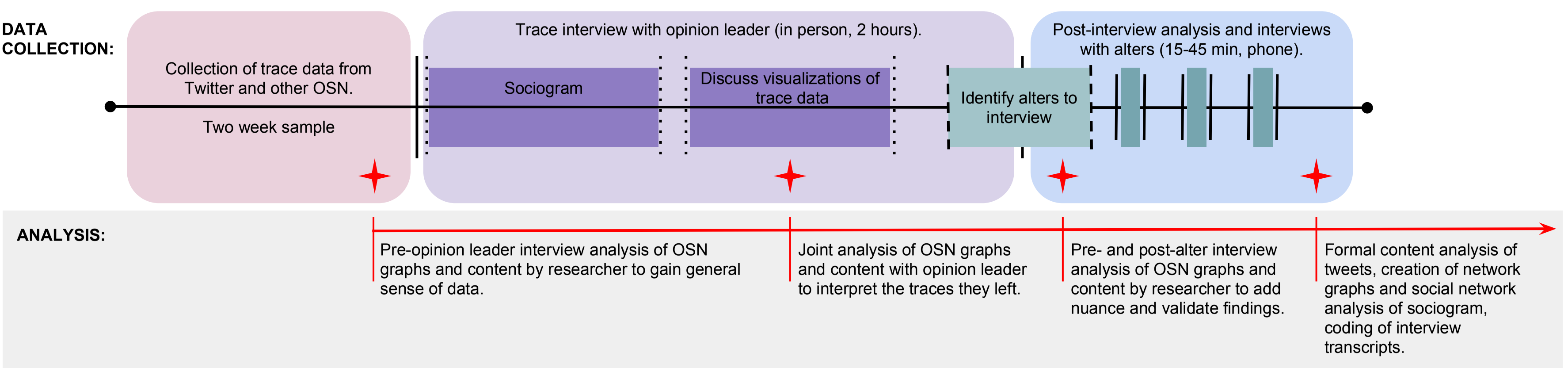
Completing the dataset are telephone interviews with the associates, termed alters, of the opinion leader. Figure 3.3 outlines the data collection and analysis timeline used for each opinion leader. This mixed-methods approach means that multiple perspectives on the opinion leadership process can be uncovered and mechanisms of choice and influence can be teased out.

This section reviews the research process in order to explain the procedures and analytical utility of sociograms, explain the joint interpretation of data visualizations during trace interviews and then discuss alter interviews. A review of how the trace data is integrated with a specific focus on analysis of social network graphs and content analysis completes the section.

[8]This includes: 4 blogs, 2 Instagram accounts, 1 Reddit profile, 1 Tumblr account and 2 YouTube accounts.

[9]NameGenWeb is a Facebook application developed by researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute. Participants were made aware in advance and inclusion was optional.

Figure 3.3: Phase 2: Data collection and analysis general timeline for each opinion leader example



3.4.1 Opinion leader interviews

Opinion leaders were emailed an informed consent form and a link to information about the study.[10] Interviewees were asked to provide links to any public online social networking profiles (optional) and were informed that data from these sites would be collected and used in preparation for a 1.5-2 hour in-person interview.

Interviews were typically held in a meeting room at local universities[11] however one interview was held in the home of a participant and one was held in the meeting room of a residential building, in both cases due to the availability of the participant.

As Figure 3.3 indicates, interviews included multiple steps, each described below.

Sociogram

In each case a participant-aided sociogram is conducted.[12] The participant-aided sociogram was developed by researchers at the University of Toronto for their "Connected Lives" project to understand the implications of communication technologies on social relationships. Described in Hogan, Carrasco, and Wellman (2007), the approach incorporates the co-creation of a visual depiction of a respondent's personal social network during the interview. The approach builds upon the name generator technique for eliciting the social network of an individual, used extensively elsewhere (for example, Burt (1980), Laumann (1973), Wellman (1979)). Notably the approach introduces a potential for respondent bias which much be kept in mind when evaluating findings since people tend to have trouble recalling social interactions, particularly when those interactions are infrequent (Brewer, 2000; Marin, 2004).

To create the sociogram, participants are first asked to list their "very close" ties

[10] See Appendix C for interviewee information materials.

[11] University of Alberta, Dalhousie University, University of Toronto, University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria.

[12] See Appendix H for a visual guide.

and then their "somewhat close" ties. As in Hogan et al. (2007),[13] here they are defined as:

- *Very close:* People with whom you discuss important matters, with whom you regularly keep in touch, or who are there for you when you need help.
- *Somewhat close:* People who are more than casual acquaintances but not very close.

These definitions are written on a piece of paper, explained verbally by the researcher and then left on the table beside the participant so they may return to the definition. In order to list their ties, participants are given a piece of cardboard with two sections (one for each kind of tie). On the left 30 post-it notes of one colour are numbered and on the right 30 post-it notes of another colour are also numbered.[14] The numbers are inconspicuous and used primarily by the researcher to identify specific ties during post-interview analysis. Through free recall, participants listed all ties that fit either definition, starting with very close but often moving back and forth across the lists.

Next participants are asked to categorize each tie by adding number corresponding to their relationship on each tag:

1. Immediate family
2. Other relatives
3. Neighbors
4. People you currently work/go to school with
5. People you only know online
6. People from organizations (bowling, club, church, team)
7. Friends not included above

Whereas they were not considered by Hogan et al. (2007), the specific channels of

[13]Definitions are drawn from Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, and Rainie (2006) and Wellman (1982) (Hogan et al., 2007).
[14]No limit was put on number of ties, an adaptation given suggested changes reported by Hogan et al. (2007).

communication used and whether or not one communicates about politics are both crucial pieces of information. As such participants were asked to mark all those with whom they chat about politics with a brown marker and all those with whom they chat on Twitter with a blue marker. Other colours were assigned for other online social networking channels as appropriate. At this stage participants were presented with a new set of 10 post-it notes of a third colour to be used for any individuals who do not fit into either the very close or somewhat close category but with whom they communicate about politics at least bi-weekly. This third kind of very weak political tie is not present in previous work but emerged as important during initial pilot interviews.

Once all lists are complete, participants are presented with a large piece of paper with a four ring bull's eye drawn on it. They are instructed to imagine that they are in the very middle and that rings represent closeness. They are asked to place all of their ties on this paper, placing those who know each other close together. Participants are free to re-arrange until they are satisfied with the placement of each tag. Finally, participants are asked to identify any clusters of individuals and to draw lines between any individuals who know each other.

Following each interview the sociogram created was converted into a network graph file making it easier to calculate the total number of strong, weak and political ties. Number of channels used to connect with each kind of tie was also considered and comparison across cases made.

Hogan et al. (2007) explain in detail the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities of this approach generally. For this study, the sociogram was important for creating a base layer for comparison to networks of political communication. Twitter, Facebook, email and other forms of communication can each be thought of as distinct networks of communication but in reality they are each only part of a wider set of communications an individual engages in. In order to understand political communication in a hybrid media system it is crucial to be able to situate

political communication in the context of a person's own experiences and actions. Those experiences and actions are rarely unique to one communicative setting or channel. Notably, the process of creating a sociogram with the participant is sometimes challenging even when carefully explained and systematically conducted. For example, there is a burden placed on the interviewee and the process can be time consuming (Hogan et al., 2007).

Continual reflection on the part of the researcher and attempts to ensure the participant understands what is required are necessary in order to address these kinds of challenges. Further, respondent bias and memory issues are common challenges when creating participant-aided sociograms and when using name-generator techniques more broadly (Hogan et al., 2007). People do not always remember everyone within their social circle and certain prompts may work better for some than others. For example, Bernard, Killworth, and Sailer (1980) show that there is limited overlap in the social networks an individual reports and their actual networks. However, others have shown that among those alters an individual interacts with consistently, recall is very good (Freeman, Romney, & Freeman, 1987). This is why combining the participant-aided sociogram with trace data and interviews with alters is crucial. The participant-aided sociogram is useful for understanding the social support relationship among those who consistently interact, as Hogan et al. (2007) attest, and added trace data helps access information about other, likely weaker, social ties.

Interpreting trace data

Next, specific social networking sites were discussed in turn. The specific sites discussed varied depending on the individual's communication practices. Any site used at least weekly to talk about politics was included. Following a trace interview approach (Dubois & Ford, 2015), visualizations of the interviewee's trace data were used as prompts during this portion of the interview. First, the researcher collected

relevant trace data from the social media accounts of the interviewee. Prior to the interview the researcher visualized each. During the interview opinion leaders were presented with visualizations of their Twitter mention network and, where applicable, their Facebook friends network and content from other social media profiles. When content from other social media profiles presented as relevant, examples of posts were used as visual prompts for discussion rather than analysis of any graphs.[15]

A brief explanation of how each graph was created and what the specific layout meant was provided. Opinion leaders were asked to identify any clusters and encouraged to reflect on why those clusters exist. Participants were also asked if they were surprised by anything, if they had anything to add, and if they could explain the context of certain findings, for example: "I see a lot of Facebook friends are not connected to any other friends, why is that?" and "There seems to be a tight group of people mentioning each other on Twitter here, can you remember what that conversation was about? Is that typical?"

Throughout this part of the interview participants often referred back to their sociogram in order to explain the context of certain communicative acts, to compare the clusters and social groups which are evident and to add detail to the sociogram.

Trace interviewing is an actor-centric method useful for enhancing recall, validating trace data-generated results, addressing data joining problems and responding to ethical concerns that have surfaced in the current era of surveillance and big data (Dubois & Ford, 2015). It is well documented that the incorporation of visualizations and creative initiatives to an interview can jog a participant's memory and enhance recall (Rose, 2007; Gauntlett, 2007). This is particularly important in the context of political communication research in a hybrid media system where individuals may not remember exactly when or through what channel they chatted with certain others. The value of data visualizations specifically is compounded by the

[15]See Appendix I for examples.

fact that it is hard to uncover the social context of communication and to interpret the meaning of digital trace data across channels (Welser, Smith, Gleave, & Fisher, 2008). By incorporating visualizations of a person's own traces the researcher is able to ask questions about when and why certain exchanges took place. This serves to provide added nuance and to validate larger data sets. For example, an individual might note, when faced with their tweet history, that someone else also makes use of their account. Similarly, an interviewee has the ability to draw connections across types of trace data and help explain how different types of traces should be interpreted in relation to each other. For example, an individual might explain they re-tweet and share on Facebook in the same way and for the same reasons making it reasonable to interpret them the same way. Alternatively, the interviewee could explain that they use the two types of communication very differently, thus requiring different interpretation. Finally, this points to an important question of ethics which has emerged as researchers collect and interpret trace data (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Baym, 2006). For example, is it ethical to ascribe meaning to traces without an understanding of the context of their creation? Trace interviewing allows the researcher to jointly interpret the meaning of trace data with the individual who left it behind. This approach not only benefits from the insights the individual being interviewed has to offer but also respects their role as a communicator and creator (Bruns & Highfield, 2012) of content.

In a hybrid media system where multiple tools and channels of communication potentially overlap and where use of those tools and channels ebbs and flows, trace interviewing is particularly relevant. The approach allows the researcher to understand the reasoning and decision making behind the production of trace data and offers the data creator (the interviewee) the opportunity to respond to, add to, and explain insights generated from that data. By probing the context of communication and decision making processes leading to communicative acts (which generate trace data), this approach counters some of the critical flaws of recent studies of online so-

cial networks and other "big data" studies of political communication. These studies tend to focus on a specific channel to the exclusion of other channels. These studies are often unable to explain the context of communication or the meaning behind the traces and metrics they used. Freelon (2014) has demonstrated that different disciplines interpret the meaning of the same traces very differently and Dubois and Gaffney (2014) have shown that metrics supposedly assessing the same thing fail to identify the same phenomenon. The use of trace interviews in this study help the researcher understand what communication across a variety of channels actually means.

Identifying alters

Finally, interviewees were asked to supply the names and contact information of 2-6 of their associates/alters with whom they discuss politics in order identify the next round of interviewees. These alters were selected jointly by the interviewee and researcher in order to ensure variety in terms of their sociogram placement, common channels of communication, and relationship when it comes to type and frequency of political chat.

Opinion leader interviews allow for an in-depth investigation into the communicative practices of specific digitally enabled opinion leaders. Richly qualitative, these interviews also integrate trace data and visualizations of that data which promote better contextual understanding of that data as well as more nuanced and specific reflections from the opinion leader.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Following transcription the researcher, using NVivo, conducted coding of each transcript according to a predetermined coding schedule derived from both theory and the experience of conducting all the interviews. New codes were added throughout the process based on emerging issues and topics. Appendix F provides an outline of the final coding schedule. In bold are pre-determined codes, all others emerged through coding. All

interviews were later coded a second time to ensure consistency.

As McCormack (2000) explains, the analysis of interview transcripts requires the researcher to view the transcript through multiple lenses involving: active listening, identifying the narrative process used by the participant, being attentive to language, acknowledging context, and identifying moments where something unexpected occurs. Levy and Hollan (1998), in describing person-centred interviewing, explain the importance of considering what is said, how it is organized, what personal meanings and non-verbal cues such as paralinguistic qualities (e.g. tone of voice) or visual cues (e.g. facial expression and gestures) are noted.

In order to deal with these varied requirements of analysis, the researcher took notes documenting important events and non-verbal cues which are unlikely to come through on a recording. Immediately following each interview a short summary of the session was further documented for use when coding transcripts. Following the first round of coding a summary memo for each transcript is written to include a description of the opinion leader or alter. For opinion leader interviews only, each opinion leader's information sourcing and dissemination patterns were drawn and the visualization used as an analytical tool to help the researcher compare across participants.

3.4.2 Alter interviews

In total, 27 alter interviews were conducted by phone or Skype (audio only). Interviews were conducted between June and December 2014 and lasted between 15 and 45 minutes each. Before starting the interview each alter was asked to review and sign an informed consent statement and to complete the online survey (described above). A semi-structured interview schedule provided the needed flexibility to uncover rationales behind responses (Mishler, 1991) while the structured aspect of interviews will allow for comparison (Bryman, 2012). Interviews consisted of two parts. First, alters were asked about their political information sourcing and sharing

practices generally and second they were asked about their specific relation to the respective opinion leader.[16]

Alter interviews present an opportunity to confirm or challenge the perspective of the opinion leader, thus countering memory failure and self-report bias. Alter interviews also widen the scope of perspectives included for analysis. They shed light on the information sourcing and sharing practices of citizens in their day to day political chat.

As is the case for opinion leader interviews, notes were taken during the interview and a summary written immediately following each interview. The same coding schedule was used when analyzing transcripts with NVivo.

3.4.3 Analyzing and integrating trace data

As Figure 3.3 highlights, the interpretation and analysis of trace data is done at four different points during the case study. First, the Twitter mention network and other public social media content is collected and examined prior to the interview in order to generate a basic understanding of the opinion leader's online presence. Second, that same data with the addition of applicable non-public social media data is jointly interpreted during the trace interview. Third, trace data is re-analyzed by the researcher after the interview in order to correct any errors in the dataset identified during the interview and to prepare for alter interviews. Finally the trace data, interview data and data collected and analyzed in phase one are all considered to respond to all three research questions.

There are two main types of trace data collected and analyzed: online social network graphs and content posted to online social networking sites.

[16] See Appendix E for the interview schedule.

Social network graphs

Social network analysis of personal, or "ego," networks was conducted for each opinion leader interviewed. The analysis of a personal network places the individual, or "ego," at the centre of the network and traces their social ties out. The participant-aided sociogram is one way to elicit a manually generated personal network, in contrast to the NameGenWeb Facebook application which creates a similar network automatically by requesting data about who is friends with whom on Facebook. The Twitter mention network generated using Netlytic uses the same principles of connection but instead of considering friendship as the basis for a tie it considers whether or not one user has mentioned the other. While the visualization of each network is done differently via these tools, the underlying graph structure is the same which could allow for comparison across networks.

The main utility of personal networks in this study is for the identification of clusters of social ties which connect with each other and for the identification of patterns of communication in terms of which channels are used when communicating with different kinds of ties. In other words, analysis of these social networks is largely descriptive.

Twitter and Facebook networks were used primarily to guide interview questions and to inform the sociogram. The sociogram itself was used for additional analytical purposes as described above.

Across all four points of trace data analysis, social network analysis of opinion leaders' personal networks was used to better understand their relationship to those they communicate with and the channels they choose when engaging in political information sharing and discussion.

Content analysis

In addition to the content analysis used during the sampling process (described above), limited manual content analysis is also conducted in order to determine

whether or not content from the online social networking profiles of opinion leaders was political or not and to determine their topics of interest.[17] This analysis is exploratory and aims to inform and guide the subsequent interviews. Following the completion of all opinion leader interviews, subsequent content analysis of tweets posted during the two weeks prior to their interview was conducted.

Mentions of specific other accounts, issues and sharing of mainstream media content is coded and taken as indicators of expertise and awareness. This clerical and more quantitative approach involves counting and categorization (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and permits systematic description allowing for comparison and categorization of opinion leaders (Berelson, 1952). Evidence gathered is taken in conjunction with self-reported evidence generated during interviews.

3.5 Quality and ethics

The quality of qualitative research can be assessed at every stage of the research process, from establishing a worthy topic (Tracy, 2010) which is historically grounded and focused (Baym, 2006), to clearly demonstrating rigour in the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 1998; Tracy, 2010), to presenting findings in a convincing manner (Bryman, 2012). Creswell (p. 203) provides a useful table which summarizes approaches to assessing quality and validity in qualitative research. This table highlights both common themes across perspectives as well as the diverse ways in which one might approach this assessment. Since comparisons have been made in many recent works (for example, Creswell (1998), Tracy (2010), Baym (2006)), this section will not re-hash these debates.

Instead, five of eight "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research (Tracy, 2010) will be used to structure the following section. This framework offers a broad

[17] Appendix G provides the coding schedule used.

view of what aspects of research should be considered when evaluating quality but also provides practical and adequately precise points of focus. The measures of quality others posit can often be easily integrated into this framework. The five criteria this section focuses on are: rich rigour, resonance, credibility, sincerity and ethics. The three criteria not dealt with here are: worthiness of topic, significance of contribution and meaningful coherence.These are better addressed outside the methods chapter.

3.5.1 Rich rigour

Rich rigour means using appropriate theoretical constructs, designing an appropriate approach to sampling, data collection, data analysis and context and ensuring appropriate procedures are in place (Tracy, 2010). Richness requires what Weick (2007, p. 16) describe as "requisite variety." As Tracy (2010, p. 341) explains, "requisite variety, a concept borrowed from cybernetics, refers to the need for a tool or instrument to be at least as complex, flexible, and multifaceted [as that being studied]." Baym (2006) echoes these items in her suggestion that high quality qualitative Internet research must be grounded in theory and data, that data collection and analysis must be rigorous and that one should use multiple strategies to get data. Others refer to thoroughness (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001) which emphasizes the importance of a careful procedural approach.

The detailed account of data collection and analysis presented above demonstrates the richly rigorous approach taken. The mixed-method approach to gathering data describing the ways and reasons opinion leaders source and share political information across channels increases the dependability of results. Dependability, one of four characteristics of natural inquiry which Lincoln and Guba (1985) influentially outlined, replaces traditional notions of consistency or reliability in evaluating research (Seale, 2002).

3.5.2 Resonance

Rather than suggest this study might find a single truth, the methodological approach is designed in order to ensure results can be interpreted in terms of their contextual meaning. Resonance explains the "research's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience" (Tracy, 2010). While the aesthetic approach to presenting work is notably important, it is transferability which is more crucial when considering methods specifically. A second characteristic Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight is transferability, replacing notions of applicability and external validity (Seale, 2002) and emphasizing whether or not a study is designed in such a way that findings can be usefully interpreted across contexts.

For example, by selecting Twitter users from Canada and then explaining the contextual similarities and differences of Twitter and of Canada to other social media and other countries, this study ensures it is clear what findings are transferable and how theory might be built.

3.5.3 Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of a study (Tracy, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy (Golafshani, 2003) all indicate credibility in quantitative work. Through richly rigorous data collection and analysis, qualitative research can be characterized as credible and dependable and to include triangulation (Creswell, 1998). Reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy rely on an assumption that there is a single truth to be found whereas interpretive and naturalistic inquiry make no such assumption. Instead of deciphering some truth, the goal of this kind of qualitative inquiry is to understand the phenomena at hand.

Triangulation of information coming from multiple tools and participants is important for ensuring the phenomena is understood as holistically as possible. In this study, survey responses, social network data, and interviews with multiple individ-

uals all contribute to building an understanding of the particular cases of opinion leadership under investigation. In particular, the inclusion of both interviews with the opinion leader and with their alters allow for a multivocality (Whittemore et al., 2001) which is crucial. One person's experience of a communicative interaction will not be the same as someone else's as humans interpret social settings in the context of their past experiences and relationships. Gaining multiple perspectives on the same event is then very important for ensuring the credibility of results.

3.5.4 Sincerity

Sincerity is related to authenticity and genuineness and is attained through careful self-reflection by the researcher and transparency in procedure and reporting (Tracy, 2010). In all investigations the researcher makes decisions which impact the outcome of the study. From which case to select to which data to focus on to how that data is interpreted and reported, the researcher is deeply influential. In qualitative work such as the present study, the researcher plays a crucial role in managing vast amounts of data and in working with participants to generate new insights. As such, continual reflection on the part of the researcher is crucial. A research diary was used to track and reflect on decisions throughout the research process.

In particular, the process of trace interviewing wherein visualizations of opinion leader's trace data were jointly interpreted by the researcher and participant, exemplifies the value of careful self-reflection. Because this method is new and because participants may have varied visual literacies (Dubois & Ford, 2015), it is paramount that the researcher be aware of downfalls such as how the visualizations are presented and explained, whether or not the participant understands, and what their responses could mean given the specific contextual setting. Given this portion of the project both represents new methodological territory and is central to this study, a pilot study was first conducted and published (Dubois & Ford, 2015).

Beyond self-reflexivity, sincerity also encompasses transparency which is why the

details of methodological procedure and a variety of appendices have been included here.

Replacing traditional concepts of neutrality and objectivity (Seale, 2002), are what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call confirmability. While it is valuable in experimental designs for the researcher to remain neutral and detached from participants, in qualitative work this is not necessarily the case. Researchers dealing with sensitive and personal topics such as political opinions and personal networks must ensure they develop a trusting bond with the participants. By remaining self-reflexive (Tracy, 2010; Baym, 2006) and critical (Whittemore et al., 2001), the researcher can balance and explicate their position as at once an observer and a social connection. Confirmability, then, is a function of careful reflection and transparency/making visible the data collected and analyzed.

3.5.5 Ethics

Tracy (2010) usefully deconstructs the notion of ethical research into four types. First, *procedural ethics* refer to formal processes put in place by an academic institution or some other body. In the case of the present study, a CUREC form was completed and approved. Guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers were also consulted (Ess & AoIR, 2002). Informed consent was received prior to participation in the case of the online survey and all interviews.[18] Privacy, confidentiality and secure treatment of personal data are all addressed in the CUREC form. Further, in the reporting of findings care has been taken to ensure deductive disclosure is not possible, wherein personal details can be linked together to compromise privacy (Sales & Folkman, 2000).

Second, *situational and cultural ethics* relate to those ethical considerations which may not be addressed through standard procedure but are nevertheless rel-

[18]See Appendix D for copies of consent forms.

evant to the case at hand given the context of the research. For example, while all opinion leaders interviewed have public Twitter profiles and tweets, no verbatim (and thus searchable) tweets are included in this study unless explicit permission is granted by the participant. This is because while technically tweets are public, in practice they are time sensitive and often directed at particular others. The situational and cultural context of Twitter means that simple private or public dichotomies imposed by procedural ethical guidelines will not be sufficient for determining what should and should not be included.

The ethics of a particular situation are continually reflected upon. Alter interviews provide a clear example of potentially challenging ethical situations. Alters are aware their associate, the opinion leader, previously discussed their relationship. The researcher must decide when and how much information to share about that past interview, balancing the need to make sure both participants are given enough information to provide further insight but also ensure their privacy is respected. That balance will depend on a variety of situational factors, for example, how much detail the opinion leaders gave alters, prior to the alter interviews.

Relatedly, *relational ethics* "involves an ethical self-consciousness in which researchers are mindful of their character, actions, and consequences on others" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). This third type of ethics relies on the ability of the researcher to be reflexive of their role and relationship to their participants. In the present study, during opinion leader interviews, participants are invited to jointly interpret trace data they themselves left behind while communicating online. This elevates the participant to a role of co-investigator instead of maintaining traditional power dynamics. By balancing the power dynamic, this approach allows participants to be more fully involved and promotes better awareness about what is and is not included in the study.

Further, all interviewees in this study are given the opportunity comment on draft versions of excerpts where they are quoted/their data is used. This not only

increases the quality of findings but is an ethically sound practice which enables the participant to participate in a more meaningful way (González, 2000).

Finally, exit ethics includes the ethics of dissemination of a study. Following each interview participants are provided a brief overview of the researcher's plans moving forward and a full listing of the kinds of publications that may come from the study.

3.6 Conclusion

Understanding the process of personal influence when it comes to everyday political chat in a hybrid media system requires a sequential mixed-methods design. Conducted in two phases, this study addresses the reality of a complex media system which is characterized by high levels of choice in terms of which channels or combinations of channels opinion leaders make use of while communicating political messages. Phase one relies on quantitative data including online social network analysis of #CDNpoli and an online survey disseminated to users of that hashtag. This complements the in-depth qualitative analysis conducted in phase two by providing high level information about sourcing and sharing practices and by identifying specific opinion leaders. Phase two dives deep into the practices of these individual opinion leaders by incorporating in-person interviews, trace data from their online social networking accounts and telephone interviews with alters.

The mixed-methods approach is not only a practically effective response to the complexity of the hybrid media system but is also ethically sound. The incorporation of multiple perspectives as well as continual reflection on the data collection and combination process by the researcher ensures a high quality study that respects the context opinion leaders communicate in.

Chapter 4

Patterns of political information access and dissemination

In a hybrid media system, those who are digitally enabled have access to a wide range of sources, channels and audiences potentially varying their patterns of political communication. Opinion leaders once relied primarily on mainstream media sources via broadcast channels of communication to access political information. These opinion leaders served as a bridge from the political elite to the general public as they relied on face-to-face or other interpersonal channels of communication to disseminate and discuss political issues/information with small audiences of close personal ties. In the hybrid media system new channels provide more options with which to engage others. This chapter examines the patterns of political information access and dissemination digitally enabled opinion leaders exhibit, and responds to the first research question:

RQ1 What are the modes of access to and dissemination of political messages by digitally enabled opinion leaders?

Specifically, phase one of the research highlights the central role played by mainstream media in the political information access and dissemination process of #CDNpoli participants. Phase two then delves into the daily routines of specific opinion leaders showing they often have standard information access routines, but that their information dissemination practices are more dynamic. Finally, two general types of digitally enabled opinion leaders are outlined representing the key findings of the chapter. The chapter highlights the complexity of channel choice for political information dissemination and discussion.

4.1 Phase 1: Patterns of political information access and dissemination

The digitally enabled opinion leaders of #CDNpoli are exposed to information from a wide range of sources and have the ability to send information to a wide audience. These communication patterns can be traced in part through the #CDNpoli network but are not limited to a single platform. Before delving into in-depth analysis of the communication practices of specific opinion leaders it is pertinent to gain an understanding of the wider context of political communication these opinion leaders encounter on a daily basis. This section first examines the #CDNpoli network relying on content and social network analysis to characterize the kind of information and kinds of accounts which make up #CDNpoli. This section goes on to report the findings of the online survey distributed throughout #CDNpoli and illustrate the ways users engage in political communication beyond Twitter.

4.1.1 The #CDNpoli network

In this sample, approximately 4% of accounts are public influentials while 10-11% are likely opinion leaders. As described in the previous chapter, manual content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 accounts which were mentioned at least twice

in the sample was used to differentiate between public influentials, opinion leaders and inactive or spam accounts. The remaining accounts, approximately 85%, are a combination of followers, bots and inactive users.

The vast majority of accounts in the full #CDNpoli sample are not prolific users of the hashtag. Just over half (55%) of accounts that posted a tweet containing the hashtag made only one #CDNpoli tweet and 33% made only 2 tweets. As Table 4.1 shows, followers, defined as those receiving less than two mentions in this sample, posted fewer tweets on average than opinion leaders and public influentials. This is not surprising given that one is more likely to be mentioned if they have previously used the hashtag, for example in the context of a conversation where one user mentions another when they respond to the post of that other.

Table 4.1: Number of tweets made

Type of user	1 tweet	2 tweets	3-10	10+	Avg. Tweets
Followers	64%	32%	3%	1%	2.5
Opinion Leaders or Public Influentials	14%	39%	32%	15%	39.9
All combined	55%	33%	8%	3%	8.9

Similarly, followers tend to have fewer accounts following them (generally and considering only others within the sample, see *indegree*)[1] and tend to be mentioned less often as Table 4.2 summarizes. Opinion leaders and public influentials tend to have higher rates of accounts following them both generally (3,014.2) and within the #CDNpoli sample (278.4) as compared to followers (637.7 and 30.8 respectively). The starkest difference is that opinion leaders and public influentials have about 9 times as many accounts following them within the sample than do followers. Opinion leaders and public influentials have about 5 times as many accounts following them

[1] A rank of importance equal to the number of nodes (other users) with a directed edge (following) pointing toward the given node (user in question).

generally than do followers. The difference highlights the fact that those categorized as opinion leaders and public influentials are not simply popular Twitter users but they are popular within this specific network which focuses on Canadian political chat.

Table 4.2: #CDNpoli users summary

Type of user	Avg. Followers	Avg. Indegree	Avg. Mentions
Followers	637.7	30.8	0.08
Opinion Leaders or Public Influentials	3,014.2	278.4	47.6
All combined	1,045	73.3	8.2

Identifying differences between public influentials and opinion leaders is more challenging on a large scale because they often exhibit similar patterns. That said, examining the most central accounts is useful. Public influentials like journalists, major news outlets, politicians, political parties and other political elites tend to be highly central users. This means that public influentials are among the most followed and re-tweeted accounts in #CDNpoli. Their content is subscribed to by many and the posts they make get re-posted by many of those subscribers which gives the content even greater reach.

Table 4.3 illustrates what kinds of accounts are most central to #CDNpoli based on followers within this sample (*indegree centrality*), *eigenvector centrality*[2] and times *mentioned* by other users. These percentages are based on the top 50 most central accounts according to each measure. The vast majority are political elites and over half of top accounts across all measures of centrality are journalists or media outlets. The only measure for which any non-elite are in the top 50 is *mention count*. These accounts tend to be very frequent posters (2,123 posts in this sample

[2]A score describing importance, the score is higher when a node's connections are in turn highly connected.

on average) and have higher than average follower rates (2,814 accounts on average).

Table 4.3: Centrality in #CDNpoli (Top 50 accounts)

Role	Indegree	Eigenvector	Mentions
Journalist or media outlet	66%	76%	56%
Politician or political party	26%	20%	10%
Other elites (e.g. activist)	8%	4%	6%
Non-elite	0%	0%	28%

Considering the 20 most retweeted posts (tweets), only one was first posted by a non-elite source. Twelve were made by politicians or political parties, seven were made by journalists or media outlets and the single non-elite post was created by an account dedicated to satirical commentary on Canadian politics. The post, since deleted, referred to then Mayor of Toronto Rob Ford and his alleged drug use.

The most re-tweeted post in this sample was a re-tweet of a post first made in November 2012 by the Prime Minister's official Twitter account following an event where singer Justin Bieber was criticized for wearing overalls to meet the Prime Minister (see Figure 4.1). It was a non-elite account which re-invigorated the sharing of this content within the #CDNpoli community but even this user had a much higher than average number of accounts following it at over 9,000.

Figure 4.1: @PMHarper tweet

Stephen Harper
@pmharper

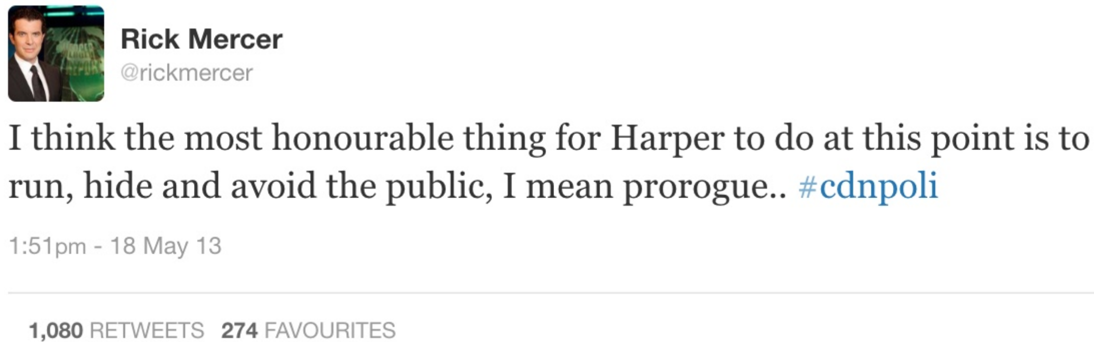
In fairness to @justinbieber, I told him I would be wearing my overalls too. #cdnpoli #beliebers

7:51pm - 24 Nov 12

8,819 RETWEETS 3,680 FAVOURITES

Another frequently re-tweeted post originated with Rick Mercer, a comedian known for commenting on Canadian cultural and political life. He commented on accusations that Senator Mike Duffy and then Chief of Staff for the Prime Minister, Nigel Wright, were involved in a fraud scheme (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: @RickMercer tweet



The makeup of #CDNpoli helps explain what kind of information is likely being accessed and shared by its users. While traditional media and other political elites comprise the most widely accessed content, a lot is shared by opinion leaders and other accounts which are not highly popular. That content may only make it to their smaller audience but it does constitute a large portion of #CDNpoli communication. In considering the actual content of #CDNpoli tweets it is possible to unravel these patterns of communication. The most shared links and most used hashtags shed light on the source and topic area of tweets.

In this sample there were 179,971 instances of urls being included in tweets. While it is common practice to use shortened urls such as bit.ly and ow.ly, an investigation of most common domains remains instructive. Table 4.4 shows the most commonly linked to domains. Considering those domains which are not simply shortened urls, mainstream media dominate. The star.com, which is among the most frequently linked-to urls, is the domain of is the domain of the Toronto Star, the newspaper with the highest circulation in Canada (Newspapers Canada, 2015). Similarly, the national broadcaster (CBC), various television broadcasters, newspa-

pers and traditional media content aggregators make up the majority of most linked domains. YouTube (youtube.com and youtu.be), Wordpress (wp.me) and Facebook (fb.me) are exceptions wherein users link to content from personal blogs or social media sites not necessarily mainstream media content.

LeadNow.ca is the only advocacy group present in this list of most shared links and RollUpTheRedCarpet.ca, run by the New Democratic Party, is the only political party to be heavily linked to. This emphasizes the centrality of mainstream media in the #CDNpoli network.

While national mainstream media sources are undoubtedly most commonly linked to within #CDNpoli, it should be noted that non-national news sources are also linked, with some frequency, as are some blogs. For example, thetyee.ca is a popular political blog and was linked to nearly 700 times. Similarly newspapers with smaller circulations and a more local focus like the Chronicle Herald in Halifax, Calgary Herald and Edmonton Journal had their domains linked to between 400 and 800 times each. This suggests that while the national mainstream media are dominant on average, #CDNpoli users are accessing and disseminating information from a wider variety of sources than the top domains list suggests.

In this sample there are 775,800 instances of hashtags used in addition to #CDNpoli and 20,209 unique hashtags used. The 20 most common hashtags used in coordination with #CDNpoli are depicted in Table 4.5.

With almost twice as many uses as any other tag, #CPC representing the Conservative Party of Canada (the governing party) was dominant. Many of the hashtags most frequently used are tags which have endured over time including #CPC, and those of other political parties in Canada (#NDP, #LPC), tags which are location specific (#USpoli, #Toronto, #CDN) or tags for regular events, for example, Question Period which happens every weekday that the House of Commons is in session (#qp). Others were more specific to events or issues. For example, #Duffy, #senate and #PMHarperMustResign were all related to a scandal which broke during the

Table 4.4: Frequency of domains mentioned

Domain	Description	Frequency of use
bit.ly	url shortener	29,071
ow.ly	url shortener	15,814
thestar.com	mainstream media	6,320
cbc.sh	mainstream media	5,828
huff.to	mainstream media	5,699
cbc.ca	mainstream media	5,443
j.mp	url shortener	4,199
goo.gl	other	4,101
youtube.com	social media	3,951
ctvnews.ca	mainstream media	3,277
soc.li	url shortener	2,948
youtu.be	social media	2,813
rabble.ca	mainstream media	2,677
o.canada.com	mainstream media	2,441
theglobeandmail.com	mainstream media	2,427
natpo.st	mainstream media	2,360
ottawacitizen.com	mainstream media	2,158
shar.es	url shortener	1,883
tinyurl.com	url shortener	1,811
ipolitics.ca	mainstream media	1,745
huffingtonpost.ca	mainstream media	1,717
wp.me	social media	1,693
www2.macleans.ca	mainstream media	1,592
leadnow.ca	advocacy, non-profit etc.	1,496
rolluptheredcarpet.ca	political party	1,422
fb.me	social media	1,312

month this sample was collected.

In this way use of hashtags sheds light on the specific political climate of the sampling period. Among the most tweeted about issues within #CDNpoli are scan-

Table 4.5: Frequency of hashtags used

Hashtag	Description	Frequency
cpc	Conservative Party of Canada	28,784
pmharper-mustre-sign	"Prime Minister Harper must resign"	16,390
topoli	Political tweets relating to Toronto	15,785
onpoli	Political tweets relating to Ontario	12,461
Toronto	Toronto city	10,938
NDP	New Democratic Party	10,826
bcpoli	Political tweets relating to British Columbia	8,282
lpc	Liberal Party of Canada	8,177
Duffy	Senator Mike Duffy (normally related to expense scandal)	8,057
uspoli	Political tweets relating to the United States	7,605
abpoli	Political tweets relating to Alberta	7,352
Harper	Prime Minister Harper	6,574
Canada	Canada	5,627
hw	Used by CBC journalists for the purposes of organizing their tweets	5,370
qp	House of Commons Question Period	5,363
c	Most often intended to refer to a specific piece of legislation, for example "C-30." Hashtags do not include special characters like a dash which leads to single character tags from time to time.	5,003
RobFord	Former Mayor of Toronto Rob Ford (normally related to drug abuse scandal)	4,909
idlenomore	Advocacy campaign, issues related to First Nations people in Canada	4,734
senate	Canadian Senate (normally related to expenses scandal)	4,706
cdn	Canada	4,208

dals which garnered national and even international coverage. More area specific issues for example, by-elections in Newfoundland and a provincial election in British

Columbia occurring in this time period are not evident by examining most frequent hashtags used.

Notably, few hashtags related to campaigns or movements topped the list. The hashtag #IdleNoMore is an exception. #IdleNoMore began in 2012 and aims to raise awareness about, and support for, indigenous people in Canada. Other tags which represent concerted efforts toward advocacy include #NoKXL, #OccupyCanada, or #FreeCBC but these were much less common with a mere 500 or so uses each. This suggests that either no other political campaigns/movements in Canada were being discussed extensively on Twitter during the sampling period, or, more likely, that #CDNpoli is not widely seen as an appropriate or valuable tag to use in conjunction with these other tags. The reasons behind use of different hashtags is investigated in the following chapter but for now the important take-away is that #CDNpoli does seem to ebb and flow with current affairs and major scandal but is not a vehicle for advocacy campaigns.

While #CDNpoli may be dominated by a few core issues and other general tags related to location, the top 20 most used tags only account for about 22% of tags used (170,213). This means that 20,189 different hashtags make up the remaining 78% of instances of hashtag use. Some are used only a handful of times and so are unlikely to have been viewed by many within #CDNpoli however they do contribute to a long and diverse list of topics present within the corpus of #CDNpoli tweets. Users may see #CDNpoli as a place to congregate or an access point to a large audience. Again, while drivers of #CDNpoli are examined in the following chapter, note that those accessing and disseminating messages through #CDNpoli do so from a wide range of perspectives.

Given this analysis, two things are evident: First, #CDNpoli is highly populated with information about the news of the day and current public affairs issues. Second, despite the dominance of mainstream media, #CDNpoli users do expand upon the main focus of that mainstream. This is demonstrated by the integration of local and

periphery sources of news information as exemplified by the most shared domains and by the inclusion of a wide variety of additional hashtags. In other words, #CDNpoli is a hub of political communication which does engage with a wider media system. The online survey disseminated through #CDNpoli is then helpful for expanding upon this and placing #CDNpoli users in their broader context.

4.1.2 The online survey

The online survey was conducted in two waves. Of the 911 respondents of the 2013 wave who completed all 4 opinion leader identification questions, about 10% were identified as public influentials, 67% as opinion leaders and 23% as followers. Not surprisingly, when opinion leaders were targeted with tweets directed to them in the 2014 wave, the proportion of opinion leaders went up to 74% (with 12% public influentials and 14% followers).

In both waves of the survey respondents were asked in an open ended question to list their sources of news and current affairs; 563 chose to respond to this question. On average 5.2 sources were mentioned for 2013 respondents, 6.8 for 2014 respondents and 5.3 when datasets are combined. While 56% of opinion leaders listed more than the average of five, only 45% of followers listed more than five sources. Though opinion leaders do seem to consult more sources than followers the difference is not as stark as might have been expected given that opinion leaders are thought to be above average in their consumption of political information. That said, this survey did not ask how much time each person spent consulting sources and as such it is possible that opinion leaders consult their sources more than followers do.

Table 4.6 shows the top ten most noted sources (listed in survey responses). Of the ten, 9 are mainstream broadcast media and include CBC and BBC in their various forms (radio, television, online), the two national newspapers in Canada

(National Post and Globe and Mail) and the New York Times.[3] The other top mentioned source is National News Watch which is a news aggregator focused on Canadian politics. Of all those who responded only five respondents did not mention any mainstream media sources explicitly.

Table 4.6: Top 10 mentioned sources

Source	Number of times mentioned
CBC	388
National Post	167
BBC	124
Globe and Mail	115
New York Times	94
CTV	93
The Huffington Post	84
Ottawa Citizen	62
National News Watch	62
The Guardian	59

In essence, this shows that #CDNpoli users seek out sources beyond Twitter. This is not surprising since Twitter is often used to share links to other information and has even been characterized as a news medium in terms of the way users broadcast content (Kwak et al., 2010; Small, 2011). Notably, 58 respondents did mention Twitter explicitly. Other social media platforms mentioned include Facebook and Reddit which were listed 14 and 9 times respectively. Other non-traditional sources listed include blogs, National News Watch - which is a non-professional news aggregator - and specific organizations such as think tanks. These findings serve to reinforce the interconnectedness of platforms and channels in the hybrid media system.

[3]While the Huffington Post began as a blog by the time of study it was run as a mainstream media outlet with professional writers contributing. It will be treated like mainstream media throughout this thesis.

The survey also sheds light on the demographic makeup of #CDNpoli users. There are about the same number of female as male respondents in the follower category (51% male) while there are more male respondents in both the opinion leader (63% male) and public influential (71% male) categories. Similarly, followers are distributed about evenly across age groups with 52% of opinion leaders in the 18-34 years age category, 27% in the 35-54 category and 21% in the 55+ category. For public figures, 38% were in the each of the 13-34 and 35-54 age categories with only 24% in the 55+ years category. In other words, opinion leaders in this study are younger and male. Notably, Internet users generally are often younger and male (Dutton, Blank, & Groselj, 2013; Statistics Canada, 2015b). This does not suggest more youth care about politics than non-youth but instead that there may be settings in which youth engage in political discussion to a higher degree than non-youth. #CDNpoli appears to be one such setting.

With a broad view of #CDNpoli and its connection to the wider hybrid media system in mind, the question becomes what are the specific patterns of political information access and dissemination for opinion leaders within this context? Phase two of this research takes an in-depth look at the daily routines of specific opinion leaders in order to answer this question.

4.2 Phase 2: Daily routines of digitally enabled opinion leaders

In this section the daily routines of opinion leaders are examined to help explain the findings reported above. Interviews and analysis of trace data reveal significant aspects of these routines. While analysis of #CDNpoli and the related survey highlight the centrality of political elites - and likely reliance on traditional media for accessing political information - the actual practice of the individual remains unexamined. In a hybrid media system, opinion leaders develop routines to access,

process and share political information that spans across channels and audiences.

4.2.1 Who are the opinion leaders?

Before examining daily routines, it is helpful to gain a sense of who these digitally enabled opinion leaders are. Table 4.7 summarizes gender, age, location and occupation of the digitally enabled opinion leaders interviewed.[4] Table 4.8 similarly outlines this information for those associates of opinion leaders who were interviewed.

[4]This table also indicates whether an opinion leader is an 'enthusiast' or a 'champion.' These distinctions will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Table 4.7: Opinion leaders interviewed

Alias	E/C	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation
Zach	C	M	26	Edmonton (previously India, now Ottawa)	Law student
Logan	C	M	27	Edmonton (previously Toronto, Vancouver)	Law Student
Cary	E	M	55	Victoria (previously Vancouver)	Tourism Industry
Jason	E	M	37	Dartmouth	Lawyer
Ross	C	M	19	Victoria	Server
Rory	E	F	-	Toronto	Writer, Dog Trainer
Emily	C	F	40	Toronto	Publishing
Joe	E	M	51	Vancouver	High School Teacher
Diane	E	F	60	Halifax (previously Toronto)	Director of NGO, Former Political Staff
Eli	E	M	30	Edmonton	Communications for an NGO
Richard	C	M	54	Toronto	Programmer/Program Manager
Alicia	E	F	31	Cape Breton (previously Halifax, Ottawa)	ESL Teacher
Max	both	M	62	Vancouver Island	Lawyer
William	E	M	61	Rural New Brunswick (previously Halifax, Ottawa)	Unemployed/Disability
Alex	both	M	32	Halifax	Energy Company
Dean	both	M	37	Toronto	University Professor
Taylor	E	M	44	Vancouver (previously Halifax)	Union Staff Member
Jess	C	M	36	Edmonton	-
Kirk	E	M	62	Edmonton	-
Luke	E	M	50	Toronto	Freelancer in Film Industry
Linda	C	F	34	Vancouver	Teacher, Advocate

Note: E stands for enthusiast and C stands for champion. This represents the style of opinion leadership the interviewee most closely aligns with (see end of chapter 4).

Table 4.8: Alters interviewed

Alias	Ego	Opinion Leader?	Gender	Age	Location	Occupation
Alf	Cary	Likely	Male	54	Victoria	Programmer
Barney	Eli	Likely	Male	32	Toronto	Marketing Executive
Carlos	Max	Likely	Male	32	Qualicum Beach	Programming / Marketing
Jess's mom	Jess	Likely	Female	-	Edmonton	Education Administrator
Lily	Joe	Likely	-	29	Vancouver	Student
Marshall	Jess	Likely	Male	33	Edmonton	Computer Technician
Robin	Max	Likely	Female	26	Qualicum Beach	Social Worker
Ted	Eli	Likely	Male	54	Edmonton	Librarian
Virginia	Kirk	Likely	Female	61	Edmonton	Nursing Advisor/Professor Emeritus
A1	Zach	Likely	Male	27	Edmonton	Student Advisor
A2	Zach	Likely	Male	26	London, UK	Post-Graduate Student
A3	Richard	Likely	Male	50	Sault Ste. Marie	University Professor
A4	Taylor	Unlikely	Male	49	Vancouver	IT Manager
A5	Jess	Likely	Male	32	Edmonton	Communications Advisor
A6	Logan	Unlikely	Male	26	Toronto	Lawyer
A7	Logan	Likely	Male	31	Vancouver	PhD student
A8	Jason	Likely	Male	35	Halifax	Chef
A9	Kirk	Likely	Male	58	Edmonton	Writer-Editor
A10	Richard	Unlikely	Male	59	Guelph	Project & Account Manager
A11	Alex	Unlikely	Female	58	Halifax	Outreach (Retail)
A12	Alex	Unclear	Male	32	Halifax	Environmental Advocate
A13	Dean	Unlikely	Male	37	Guelph	Warehouse Labourer
A14	Dean	Unlikely	Male	-	Fredericton	University Professor
A15	Dean	Unlikely	Female	37	Toronto	Teacher
A16	Taylor	Unlikely	Male	69	Vancouver	Retired

Note: See 4.7 for Eli and Zach who are alters of each other but were also interviewed as opinion leaders.

Of opinion leaders interviewed, more men than women participated. Participants from a wide range of age categories were interviewed. The youngest participant is a 19 year old recent high school graduate and the oldest is a 62 year old lawyer. They hail from across Canada and at the time of interview, reside in one of four geographic regions: Halifax, Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver/Victoria. All but one lived in a major Canadian city and four lived in, or currently live in, a rural area. One participant is a permanent resident born outside Canada. Despite geographic differences these opinion leaders are all active digitally enabled opinion leaders in the realm of Canadian politics. Other notable demographic divides in Canada include nationality and language. Two First Nations participants were interviewed but no French-Canadians.[5]

In general participants tend to be highly educated with all but two opinion leaders earning at least one university or college degree/diploma (about one third have at least two). That said, the range of occupations is wide from lawyer to dog walker to high school teacher. Notably these people are not professional politicians nor political staff. Only about half report having been a member of a political party in the past year (at time of interview) and only six were active volunteers or staff members for a political party or politicians in the past year (at time of interview). Political information seeking and sharing is largely personal rather than professional for most.

Considering alters, the range in age, location and occupation mirrors that of opinion leaders. Of the 27 alters interviewed two are also opinion leaders in this study. Sixteen alters display opinion leader characteristics such as trying to convince others of their political opinions and being asked for advice on political issues. Eight are unlikely to be opinion leaders and one is unclear as to whether they are a likely

[5]Requests in French or English depending on primary language of Twitter account were sent out including to Quebec residents and residents of other French-speaking areas of Canada, but the response rate was too low.

opinion leader or not.

Eleven alters report having changed their political opinions or behaviours as a result of their interactions with the specific opinion leader in question. For over half, the influence of the opinion leader is specific to a given topic. Another twelve alters explain that they value discussion, debate and general information sharing with the opinion leader in question and it helps them better understand and/or contextualize issues which in turn influences their political opinions and behaviours. Only three alters do not believe their interaction with the given opinion leader impacts their political practices. Chapter 6 examines in more detail the relationship between opinion leaders and their alters.

4.2.2 Accessing political information

When it comes to accessing political information there are two basic decisions opinion leaders make. The first considers which sources to rely on and and the second, which channels to use to access those sources. As the survey showed, mainstream media sources are most popular but a wide range of other sources are accessed as well. When asked about their source preferences opinion leaders tended to fall into one of two camps: mainstream media directly or filtered access.

A small group of opinion leaders rely on mainstream media sources primarily because leaders perceive them to be trustworthy and consistent. Alternatives were seen to be of questionable quality. For all, online versions of mainstream media are used on a daily basis which some complement with offline versions. For example, Alicia is a woman in her early 30s currently living in a rural area in Nova Scotia. Previously she lived in both Halifax and Toronto. She explains (see below) why she chooses to go to mainstream media directly as her primary way of accessing political information. Alicia relies primarily on CBC radio, television and online which she contrasts to other sources.

> I don't want to post something that is false. 'Cause I see people post

> things from satire websites all the time and they don't realize that it is completely and utterly a satire website. And they look like idiots. And I know CBC ... are an accurate and reliable source of news.

She goes on to explain that even when she does come across content from other sources, she returns to trusted mainstream media sources: "... I'll see when people post things, especially the Huffington Post. I'll read it. And then I also try to back it up with the CBC. I'll probably do that several times a week."

But Alicia's approach is not the only one. About two thirds of opinion leaders reported that on a daily basis, filtered access to political information is primarily their way of getting informed. Unlike Alicia and the six others who prefer to go directly to a limited number of mainstream media sources for their political information, these leaders described a wide range of initial sources of information including mainstream media at the international, national and/or local levels, as well as blogs and other non-mainstream media sources. Not surprisingly, those who rely on a wide range of sources also tend to access those sources through channels which allow them to filter through the large amount of possible content. This, interviewees explained, helps ensure a wide range of high quality sources depicting diverse perspectives are accessed on a daily basis.

For example, Cary, a man in his late 30s currently living in Victoria although he also lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, noted, "I think that Twitter is a good way for rubbish ideas to be discounted fast enough." This was echoed by others who point to tools like Reddit, Facebook, and the specific tweets of others as ways of sifting out information that merits attention. These types of filters rely on the "wisdom of the crowd" as Max, a 62 year old lawyer from a rural area on Vancouver Island explained. By relying on social media to filter content, digitally enabled opinion leaders assume that others who are also interested in sharing political information will point to the most important or valuable sources.

Filtering routines differ. For example, Diane is a 60 year old woman from Halifax

who grew up in Toronto. She has been making use of a variety of digital tools since the 1980s in order to access political information. She uses Google Alerts so that issues of particular importance to her are flagged by an automatic Google search and emailed to her daily. Alex, a man in his late 20s who is also Halifax-based and working for an energy company similarly uses Google alerts - in addition to a range of other channels - to filter information.

Table 4.9 shows the frequency of accessing political information via the most popular channels used to filter. The number in each cell represents the number of opinion leaders interviewed who fall into that category. Twitter is by far the most common channel mentioned while Facebook, Google News Alerts and Reddit are also referenced as fulfilling a similar role.

Table 4.9: Frequency of access by channel

Frequency	Facebook	Twitter	Reddit	Google News Alerts
At least daily	6	19	2	3
Several times a week	9	0	0	0
Several times a month	2	1	2	0
Monthly or less	1	0	1	0
Never	3	1	16	18

When using Twitter as a channel for filtering information a number of tactics exist. Digitally enabled opinion leaders made strategic use of Twitter primarily by following specific accounts such as journalists and searching certain hashtags on a regular basis. For example, Richard, from Toronto, is in his mid-50s, works as a computer programmer and explains, “One thing I do to currently is, I use TweetDeck. I have a filter set up for #TOpoli hashtag but apart from that, I have my main feed of all people I follow and I get through them.” He noted that there are about six accounts he follows in particular. TweetDeck is a tool that allows the user to connect their Twitter account and filter through tweets by searching for

specific hashtags, terms, or accounts. Though Richard uses this third party tool, many other interviewees explained a similar process whereby they search specific tags or only follow certain kinds of accounts.

For example, Ross explained his daily routine on Twitter whereby he may check his feed when he happens to have extra time but will also seek out the posts of specific others once a day. He notes, "[t]here are certain people I check every day 'cause I know they tweet 30 times a day. I will see them every day cause I agree with them. It's fascinating."

Many others, described a similar process whereby general Twitter browsing is saved for spare time while a more strategic approach is taken on a regular basis to get a sense of current affairs. In other words, Twitter as a primary channel of access for political information is tactically different from Twitter as a secondary point of access.

While distinct differences in primary channels for accessing political information exist, namely there are those who go directly to mainstream media and those who make use of a wide range of sources via filters, secondary channels for access are more generic. For all but four opinion leaders, Twitter served as a channel to access information when they have extra time, for example, when waiting for a bus or in between meetings. Facebook, Reddit and face-to-face discussions were also regularly mentioned as channels used to access political information when filling free time, but never as a primary channel of political information access. Other secondary or tertiary channels include LinkedIn groups, Instagram, specific blogs and in-person political events including campaigns, rallies or community BBQs.

Importantly, use of these digital channels is often intertwined. While an opinion leader may choose to fill time by accessing information on Twitter, they often navigate away and back again by following links. For example, Luke who is a 50 year old Toronto-based man working in the film industry uses YouTube to access political information on a daily basis but he explains, "To the extent I use YouTube

daily, it is because I've clinked on a link on Twitter."

Similarly, Jess, an Edmonton-based man aged 36 who accesses political information via YouTube on a weekly basis explains how his Facebook use and YouTube use are intertwined:

> I don't use Facebook politically but I do view the parties and candidates I support. I tend to be part of their likes, and so a lot of times you'll get videos that are posted to YouTube coming at you through [candidate's Facebook pages], snippets from the House [of Commons], or whatever.

Jess' approach to accessing political information on Facebook only through dedicated political pages and his use of YouTube only via those Facebook pages illustrates a complex path along which political information flows in a hybrid media system. This complexity is evident for most interviewees who describe tactical uses of social media in order to access or share information across other social media and/or across other channels. Indeed, while Facebook is used to access political information with relative regularity, only one interviewee pointed to it as key to their regular, information seeking practices.

So far interpersonal channels or interpersonal uses of channels have not been examined in detail. In general interviewees distinguish between seeking information and engaging in discussion. The latter is most often paired with interpersonal communication. That said, SMS, email and telephone are all channels used by some to ask specific questions of specific friends, family or co-workers. These channels are not regularly part of an opinion leader's daily routine but will sporadically be incorporated into their information access practices. For example. Eli, a man in his early 30's working as a communication strategist for a non-profit organization in Edmonton explained how he will sometimes use SMS to ask a question about a current affairs issue. An interview with Eli's mother, a doctor also living in Edmonton, reinforced this explaining "sometimes we will send each other messages [via SMS] when an issue comes up. We share facts or ask opinions and then discuss later

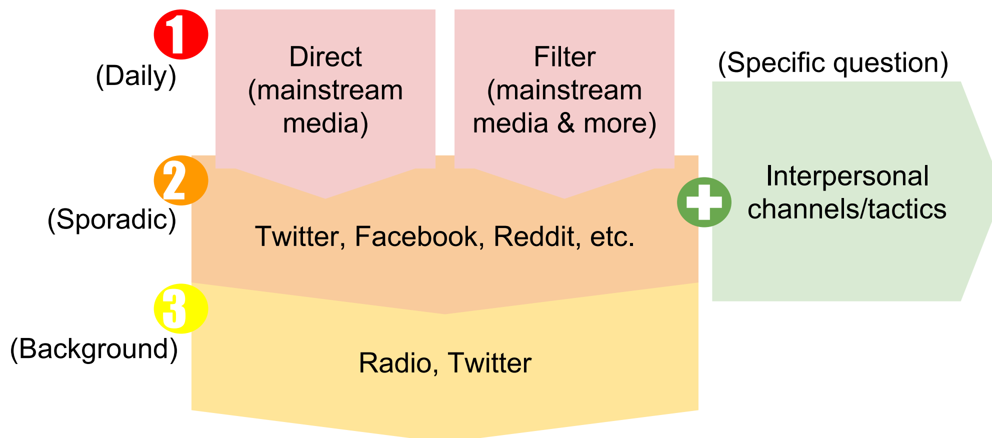
in person." This again points to how various channels of communication are used in chorus throughout the political information seeking and dissemination process but also highlights the fact that information seeking is not limited to impersonal channels of communication.

Finally, many opinion leaders mention channels of communication which are left "on in the background." Radio and television are most common. Notably, those who have the radio or television on in the background also report seeking specific programs they tune into on a daily or weekly basis. For a small minority, Twitter is also described as an on-in-the background channel. For example Alex and Jess both tend to have a Twitter tab open in their browser while at work.

The finding that digitally enabled opinion leaders have clear media use routines supports findings of past work which suggests that because there are so many digital channels now available individuals will develop routine habits (Diddi & LaRose, 2006). Figure 4.3 summarizes the approach to political information access taken by opinion leaders interviewed. The daily information seeking routines of digitally enabled opinion leaders can be separated into four steps. First, political information seeking for these opinion leaders involves either direct access to mainstream media sources (including both online and offline channels) or filtered access to mainstream and alternative sources using channels such as Twitter. Filtered access requires the opinion leader to make tactical use of their chosen channel in order to ensure high quality sources are available. Second, opinion leaders then make tactical use of digital channels extending to non-primary channels such as Facebook which are normally used to fill spare time. Though Twitter is a primary channel for many, it is also a secondary channel for most. Next, interpersonal channels of communication are used sporadically in order to access specific information from others, a theme that will be discussed in more detail when considering information dissemination and discussion. Finally, some channels are used "in the background," such as radio, television and to some extent Twitter. While it is not surprising that Twitter is

prevalent given the sampling strategy used, what is surprising is that it is used in such diverse ways to access political information when other channels are not. Twitter is the only channel which is used in all three settings but it is used in different ways in order to fulfill the purpose of each setting.

Figure 4.3: The daily routines of digitally enabled opinion leaders



4.2.3 Sharing political information

Looking at how opinion leaders disseminate information, channel and audience are the two most important considerations. Table 4.10 shows opinion leaders' frequency of channel use for political information dissemination. Only channels used by at least three opinion leaders for political chat are included in this table. The value in each cell is equal to the number of opinion leaders using that channel at the given frequency. Most opinion leaders make use of both Facebook and Twitter at least daily but only five use Facebook at least daily for political content. In contrast all but one opinion leader uses Twitter to share political content at least daily. Political use of other channels is rare.

In addition to asking opinion leaders to self-report their channel use and information dissemination practices a sample of their tweets was collected. On average opinion leaders made 67 tweets during the two week period leading up to the day they were interviewed. The minimum number of tweets was 10 and maximum was

Table 4.10: Frequency of dissemination by channel

Frequency	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Blog
At least daily	5	20	0	0	0
Several times a week	3	0	1	0	1
Several times a month	5	1	0	1	1
Monthly or less	5	0	2	2	2
Never	3	0	18	18	17

182 which is a large range. This could suggest that the assessment of the frequency of dissemination may need to be more granular since the 20 opinion leaders who all use Twitter at least daily could do so very differently. For example, this study has not examined potential differences between those who tweet consistently throughout the day versus those who tweet only once a day. Further, those who tweeted most also tended to retweet the most which points to tactical differences in Twitter use.

On average, about half of each opinion leaders' tweets were retweets illustrating the integration of mainstream media into the opinion leader's communication practices. Indeed every single opinion leader either retweeted or mentioned a journalist, media outlet, politician or political party during the sampling period. During that same time only three were mentioned or retweeted by one of those political players. While not every mention of a member of the political elite on Twitter is expected to spark a conversation or interaction, the stark difference is nonetheless interesting. Discussed in chapters 6 and 7, a lack of interaction between opinion leaders and members of the political elite runs counter to arguments that opinion leaders may be able to reverse the flow of information and influence the agendas of political elites (Weimann, 1982).

Considering audiences, there are three broad categories opinion leaders refer to when asked who they are trying to connect with: their social ties, the general public and the political elite. Table 4.11 shows which channels are generally used to reach each audience. 'X' indicates the channel is commonly used by opinion leaders for

the given channel and audience, '(X)' indicates it is used only if the opinion leader considers the audience member politically aware or interested.

Table 4.11: Channels and audiences

Channel	Social ties	General public	Political elite
Twitter		x	x
Facebook (timeline)	x (avoided)		
Facebook (pages and groups)	(x)	x	x
Blogs, Tumblr	(x)	x	
LinkedIn	(x)	x	
Flickr, Instagram	(x)	x	
VoIP	x		
SMS, BBM	x		
Telephone	x		
Face to face (interpersonal)	x		
Face to face (event)	x	(x)	

The political elite include journalists, politicians and other political decision makers. Social ties are people the opinion leader knows on some personal level be it a work colleague, a family member or friend. The general public include all others. While political elites are, by definition, politically aware and engaged, social ties and members of the general public may or may not be.

Notably, some opinion leaders, particularly those also interested in reaching the political elite as an audience, conceive of their audience as politically aware citizens. Conversely, others conceive of this public and/or social tie as largely made up of politically unaware individuals whom they hope to inform.

For example, when asked who his Twitter posts go to, Mike - a Vancouver-based 44 year old who has also lived in Halifax - explains,

> Sometimes its directly right at, say it's Jason Kenney on the temporary foreign worker program, maybe you get a message across to him, maybe

> he's not listening to me in particular, but if they get enough of these, maybe they'll wake up. The Unfair Elections Act or Fair Elections Act, that's one where it really got me pissed off actually. So if I'm going after Pierre [Poilievre], obviously, I direct a few tweets at him hoping - you hope that over time if there's enough people tweeting the same kind of subject matter, [at] ... politicians, they might sit back and go, 'You know what? This is a problem we have to change.' Who knows if Twitter played a part in turning, changing that legislation, just recently. ... Mr. Harper - I have issues with a lot of the stuff he does. So, I might bring it up and you hope it gets replayed.[6]

By replayed, Mike is referring to re-tweets or posts which send the same or a similar message. Mike's comments describe a feeling many interviewees expressed. While they are unsure of the impact of their tweets, they hope that together with many others who are also sending out similar posts, some political elites will take note and then use their political power to implement change.

But Alicia is different. While she does engage in online and offline discussions with the political elite and others who are politically aware, she also engages with others. When asked if her online and offline communication varies she explains,

> Ya, 'cause online is mostly federal. The majority federal. Offline is quite a bit of Federal as well but also provincial and municipal. But also different issues. Me and dad will talk about anything. Mom doesn't follow it as much as me and dad does, but knows enough to carry on a conversation. Mostly with mom we talk about scandals, dad and me

[6] Mike refers to multiple current affairs issues that were salient at the time of interview. Jason Kenney was the Minister responsible for foreign worker programs in Canada at the time and the Fair Elections Act, which opponents dubbed the Unfair Elections Act, was tabled in the House of Commons by Minister Pierre Poilievre. Harper was the Prime Minister at the time.

> will talk about the issues, with my theatre people it is mostly the cuts and funding to arts and things like that.

For conversations with those social ties who are politically aware Alicia discusses specific topics according to their interests. However, she also engages with those who are not very politically informed:

> Other people, like [gestured to sociogram] it's just like [whatever is going on]. With Jamie, she's not political but when I bring something up with her, she doesn't follow it all so I kind of educate her. Same thing with Jacob, he doesn't follow it at all, he has not voted regardless of my nagging. But I will talk about different issues with him.

Alicia's political information dissemination and discussion practices underscore the importance of audience and point to different conceptualizations of those audiences, to be further examined in the following two chapters. What is important is that some opinion leaders choose channels of communication based on the interests of audiences they can access via those channels.

Notably, Table 4.11 shows that there are a variety of channels opinion leaders might use to connect with social ties but there are relatively few that are used to connect with the general public, and even fewer to connect with political elites.

Nevertheless, opinion leaders tend to describe their primary audience and ideal audience as either individuals they do not already know well or the political elite. As Table 4.10 shows, digitally enabled opinion leaders most often prefer Twitter for political information dissemination.

That said, when attempting to disseminate information to social ties, channels (and tactical use) of interpersonal communication dominate. While all but three interviewees prefer face-to-face communication in these instances, other channels do supplement this main channel. For example, tactical use of Facebook via closed Facebook groups or chat is commonly used to connect with social ties.

Eli, for example, noted a Facebook group for Christianity and Socialism that he shares information through:

> With the discussion group we started a group because we knew there was a small group of us and we didn't normally interact all that much in person or outside of it. So we decided to start this group. We thought, for just the purposes of organizing where we are going to meet and sharing an article or something, we will create this group. And all of us are keenly interested in the topic. So, I think it was because it felt like something really specialized, that other people wouldn't necessarily care that much about.

Facebook allows Eli and others in the group to share information and organize in-person meetings. Eli is able to share and discuss political issues with his specific subset of social ties who are interested in the topic at hand. This tactical use of Facebook and for some, Twitter and email, to seek out issue-based audiences for their political information dissemination is common across opinion leaders interviewed.

It is evident that digitally enabled opinion leaders do not all make use of the same channels in the same way or access like audiences. Opinion leaders' use of channels is at least in part dependent on the audience accessible via that channel. The varied nature of opinion leaders' dissemination routines underscores the complexity of channel choice in this domain. The following chapter will delve into the motivations behind channel choice.

4.3 Enthusiasts and Champions

So far opinion leaders' patterns of political information access and dissemination in terms of source, audience and channel have been outlined. It is clear that there are varied approaches to channel choice in a hybrid media system. But how do they vary and to what end? These two questions set the stage for the following

two results chapters. In order to lay the foundation for the examination of these motives for channel choice and impacts of such choices, this section presents two basic types of digitally enabled opinion leaders. The enthusiast and the champion represent two types of opinion leaders characterized by their approach to accessing and disseminating political information. These ideal types are not based on a fixed set of requirements or accounts of specific individuals, instead they are illustrations of common approaches to opinion leadership. Most interviewees can be classified as primarily an enthusiast or a champion but they may exhibit behaviours of both types.

Enthusiasts are digitally enabled opinion leaders who make use of channels of communication primarily to engage with others who are already politically aware and engaged. They often find themselves sharing information and engaged in discussion with other opinion leaders or people who are already politically engaged. For example, Zach is a 26 year old law student who was born in India but lived most of the last decade in Edmonton. He is very engaged in student politics as well as provincial and federal politics with one of the major parties in Canada. When asked who might go to him for advice on a specific political issue he knows well (in this case, refugees), Zach explained,

“The people who would are the people already involved in the issue. Like the people right now who are the people involved in the Day of Action, but they’re already involved, so they wouldn’t be asking about it, just talking.”

As with members of a model airplane enthusiasts club, these individuals seek out others who share their interest in politics. Enthusiasts often intentionally seek out those who have differing political opinions and who have different perspectives on political issues. For example, numerous interviewees brought up, without being prompted, that they try to follow people on Twitter who have different political views. The enthusiast’s goal is to seek out new, interesting and valuable political information.

The enthusiast typically makes use of a channel such as Twitter to filter information from a wide range of sources. For most this is their primary way of accessing information. These individuals also make use of secondary channels such as Facebook groups and topic-based discussion boards in order to fill spare time and ask specific questions of those who self-identify as caring about, and having knowledge of, a given issue of interest. Finally, the enthusiast avoids social ties and members of the general public who are not self-identified as politically aware and interested.

In contrast, the champion seeks broad audiences and selects channels of communication that connect them to the uninformed. Like enthusiasts, champions sometimes rely on channels which help them filter information from a wide range of sources. However, the champion is more likely than an enthusiast to go directly to a limited set of mainstream media sources. This difference in information access speaks to enthusiasts' and champions' differing goals when engaging in political communication. Enthusiasts aim to access and discuss as much information as they can while champions prefer to limit the amount they access by strategically selecting high quality and trusted sources. They then share what they deem to be the most important of that selection of information with a wider public who does not access it on their own.

Both enthusiasts and champions exhibit tactical usage of channels which help them filter sources in order to get the information they most want. Champions disseminate information they believe will resonate with the specific audience accessible via a given channel. While many champions do engage in conversation with others who already care about politics, their distinguishing characteristic is that they seek out opportunities to communicate with others. They make tactical use of channels in order to access others, rather than to silo themselves off to a group of already engaged and aware enthusiasts.

Cary is a quintessential enthusiast. A middle-aged man from British Columbia (who has lived in Victoria and Vancouver), Cary works in the tourism industry

and has a Masters Degree in English Literature. He makes use of a wide range of traditional media and also follows some specific journalists on Twitter. Indeed, he gets a lot of his information through Twitter and, as noted previously, believes it is a good way to sort out the bad from good.

When disseminating political information, Cary is very careful to consider his audience. Cary has distinctly different uses for "social" and "non-social" media. He explains that by this he means media which imply social risk or responsibility (to not annoy or anger social ties) and media which do not. Of course other issues related to the social context could apply, for example embarrassment or fear of sanctions have been examined in terms of their social impact on media use (Scheufle & Moy, 2000).

Cary does not consider Twitter to be social. He does not engage in conversation nor does he worry about upsetting others or violating social norms. Describing his Twitter use, Cary explains:

> There have been times in the last couple of years where I have tweeted like five times in a day while I've been watching Power and Politics with Evan Solomon and three or four times I'll send something. Or, a year and a bit ago when one of the omni-budgets were going through and there were all of the amendments that were being voted on one by one by one until 1 in the morning our time, and I was tweeting during that because the process was so interesting. The minutia details really interested me.

Cary feels most comfortable disseminating information when there is an external event justifying his posting. In other words, he believes the audience receiving his posts already care about the political issue and that is why they are paying attention to the specific event he is commenting on.

In terms of digital media, Cary prefers face-to-face or video communication because it is more "accountable" and despite being prolific online he considers himself as more of a "lurker" (he observes regularly but contributes content infrequently).

He views connections with elites as an end result that is a “surprise” and “flattering” but not necessarily evidence of influencing them. He also sees his public Twitter participation as something of a civic duty to ensure those engaged consider a variety of perspectives.

Cary integrates various channels, for example, he might instant message a YouTube link that then sparks discussion on FaceTime. He is very tactical in his use of different channels but only in order to send messages to people who are already interested in politics.

In contrast, Logan is a clear example of a champion. From Edmonton, this late-20s male has also lived in Vancouver and Toronto. Logan relies primarily on mainstream media both directly and via Twitter for accessing information. He will also use other channels like Reddit when re-directed there for information access. When it comes to dissemination, Logan strategically uses a wide range of tools according to their specific affordances, technological constraints, norms, and audiences they provide access to. His political information dissemination is normally related to specific issues or campaigns and is therefore sporadic. While enthusiasts are encouraged to engage more with others who are politically aware given certain issues and events, champions see these kinds of moments as opportunities to engage with wider audiences.

For example, Logan is driven to inform the uninformed and correct the misinformation others who are politically aware send out. As a law student Logan has developed specific areas of expertise and so when others present information publicly that he believes is not factual he sometimes feels compelled to correct the error as is the case from time to time with one prolific tweeter:

> I do have an insight that others don’t because I read a case and I studied it in class and some people talk about it like they know it but they don’t know anything. Frankly, I get into heated conversations, one between me and [a prolific tweeter], we got into a heated argument because I think he

> gets it wrong frequently and he has certain beliefs with law like, people in the legal community, who are experts and legal theorists, don't view him the way the public views him or Maclean's [a popular Canadian current affairs magazine] and the Globe [and Mail] view him. They give him a lot of credit when he provides this insight that is irrelevant or not bang on or doesn't understand how legal doctrine or court works. The real [read: mainstream] media gives him so much credit when he blatantly gets it wrong.

Logan goes on to reference a specific Twitter exchange,

> We had this back and forth ... He does judicial politics which is important and narrow. I don't know how that allows you to talk about section 2B jurisprudence or doctrine or aboriginal rights. Sometimes I make a conscious effort to like, not call them out, less so recently, but just provide a different perspective. [For example,] how the court is not crazy if they want to put restrictions on paid speech, you know there's rationale for this that doesn't make them, the supreme court, I don't know, anti-free speech whatever. To some people I feel like I have a duty... for public education and awareness...

While Logan is describing interaction with others who are politically aware he is driven to engage by a desire to ensure a wider public is well informed. Logan feels a need to respond on Twitter when the information is being re-posted and disseminated via mainstream media to a larger and uninformed audience.

Like many champions Logan borrows dissemination tactics from political elites such as political communications strategists and large advocacy campaigns. For example, he uses his online presence to attract offline attention either directly or through the traditional media, a known tactic of advocacy groups (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). While champions are not necessarily activists, in a hybrid media system

their approaches to communication may overlap. The goal of a champion is to reach uninformed and new audiences. This is sometimes accomplished through the contribution to campaigns.

For example, describing the campaign he was most recently involved in, Logan noted two ways he makes use of different channels of information dissemination:

> We emailed news organizations, prominent people, did the blog as well as Twitter and we used each one for different purposes. With the blog, we brought in prominent Canadians who have local or national following to come and write and reflect and talk about current issues and the idea was that you engage people in the process so that their networks will become involved and the issue will permeate or extend to communities in groups that wouldn't necessarily access it if not for this person. ... On Twitter you have got to get someone to follow you first so we were conscious of who we followed first and whether they followed me back and we would show up on their friends' lists so it would say oh you should follow this guy...

Logan also noted that offline events were organized in conjunction with online initiatives because:

> We knew that people in our school would be interested in listening to these issues ... they want to engage on the face to face level and create an academic environment. We were probing important public issues. Then it's perfect because I got content that's more than just what people in this room are interested in so it's like trying to reach as many people as possible for sustained and engaging conversation and we took questions from people on Twitter. It's just spreading the network, spreading the conversations.

He went on to explain that by recording the number of people who attended in-person events he was able to work to get mainstream media to do segments on the campaign, thus reaching even broader audiences of those who are not necessarily already politically engaged or aware.

Logan is most concerned with sending his messages to the people who do not already know about the issue at hand or to those who can help reach that wide audience. He will use which ever channels and which ever tactics make most sense in the particular situation. This means his communication can range from correcting mis-information on Twitter to facilitating offline discussion groups. Unlike Cary, Logan views interaction with the mainstream media and other political elites and enthusiasts as a step toward reaching the general public. Cary sees interaction with members of the political elite and other opinion leaders as the entire purpose of his everyday political chat.

Considering demographic spread, enthusiasts and champions are found in various locations, both men and women fall into both categories as do opinion leaders from various educational backgrounds. Older interviewees rarely exhibited tendencies of champions. Notably, champions are rare compared to enthusiasts. See Table 4.7 for a table showing the information practices and category of opinion leadership for each interviewee. The following chapters will make use of these archetypes as motivations for, and implications of, channel choices for dissemination of political information.

4.4 Conclusion: Dynamic variables in the process of opinion leadership

This chapter has responded to the question: What are the modes of access to and dissemination of political messages by digitally enabled opinion leaders? It is evident that #CDNpoli users rely heavily on mainstream media, though often from digital

channels be it an online version of a newspaper directly, links through social media or via the 'personal' accounts of specific journalists. While patterns of political information access are relatively stable, dissemination of political information is more varied in the daily routines of digitally enabled opinion leaders. Enthusiasts and champions are archetypes of the digitally enabled opinion leaders based on patterns of political information access and dissemination. These two versions of opinion leaders will be relied on in following chapters investigating the motives behind channel choice and impacts of those choices.

Accessing and disseminating information have become dynamic variables in the hybrid media system, presenting a variety of choices to opinion leaders. While opinion leaders once relied on mainstream media via broadcast channels to access information and partake in interpersonal communication, in a hybrid media system many options exist.

Digitally enabled opinion leaders continue to rely on traditional sources although they tend to go online first to access these sources and sometimes make use of digital tools to filter through a wide variety of sources. Digitally enabled opinion leaders also limit the number of channels they use to disseminate or discuss political information (with some exceptions) but do regularly make use of non-interpersonal channels for this purpose.

It remains unclear why digitally enabled opinion leaders, falling into the broad categories of either enthusiast or champion, choose the channels they do or what impact these choices have on their ability to lead opinion. The following two chapters tackle these issues.

Chapter 5

Motivations for channel choice

The previous chapter outlined the ways in which digitally enabled opinion leaders access and disseminate political information in a hybrid media system. While patterns of access are relatively straightforward, patterns of dissemination are more complex. When sharing or discussing facts and opinions, opinion leaders make use of a wide range of channels of communication, in a variety of ways. This chapter aims to untangle the process by which opinion leaders disseminate political information by investigating why one channel is chosen over another. Specifically this chapter responds to the second research question:

RQ2 What drives channel choice among digitally enabled opinion leaders when disseminating political information?

Channel choice is potentially driven by a range of factors including those related to the channel itself, the wider social context and the audience to which an opinion leader is accessing given a specific channel. In order to understand what motivates channel choice six sub-questions are posed covering technical and normative characteristics of channels, social setting and opinion leaders' relationships to their associates and audiences.

First it is expected that an opinion leader will choose rich channels of communication when discussing issues and convincing others of their political opinions. Lean channels will suffice for fact sharing (RQ2.1). In a similar vein, it is expected that opinion leaders will make use of channels which are socially appropriate for political communication (RQ2.2). Political climate is considered by examining everyday political chat on an average day as compared to chat during times of heightened political activity (RQ2.3). The political climate is thought to impact channel choice because it creates an environment in which others are likely to hold the opinion that political chat is appropriate and as such opinion leaders should be more willing to share political information and engage in discussion. Similarly, feeling a sense of community (RQ2.4) is also supposed to bolster political communication because belonging to a group of like-minded individuals is thought to create a setting in which people feel free to contribute - for example, sharing political information and engaging in discussion. Looking to the individual level, the opinion leader's relationship with their potential message receivers (RQ2.5) is also thought to impact channel choice because people tend to use different channels with different kinds of relations/social ties. Lastly, in a hybrid media system the audience of an opinion leader's message may be a mix of social ties and it may be unknown what types of ties make up the audience (RQ2.6).

Each sub-question is taken in turn. The first two focus on the impact of the actual channel of communication on an opinion leader's decision. The next two focus on social pressure and support functions. The final two focus on opinion leaders and their perception of their audiences. It is shown that in each case the potential audience of political communication is top priority whether it be in terms of attempting to avoid the risk of offending or annoying someone who does not care about politics or using the affordances of technology to find ways to place the responsibility of avoid being offended on the receiver of the message.

5.1 Picking the appropriate channel

When faced with a decision about which channel to use to communicate political messages digitally enabled opinion leaders must consider both the technical affordances and constraints of the channel as well as the media context and norms surrounding that channel.

5.1.1 Technical constraints and norms of media in context

As Chapter 2 details[1], the earliest research investigating how individuals select their channels of communication focuses on the technical affordances of channels. Depending on the technical affordances of a channel, varying levels of nuance are reproduced during the communication process. For example, while text-based messaging delivers content but not tone of voice nor intonation, telephone or other audio-based channels offer content as well as tone and intonation. This makes audio-based channels more rich than text-based. In theory, when people are engaging in complex communicative acts, to discuss or attempt to convince someone of a political view, people will prefer richer channels (tools) which deliver more nuanced communications. When simply sharing facts, on the other hand, lean tools will suffice (Daft & Lengel, 1983). As such the following sub-question is proposed:

RQ2.1 How does the richness/leanness of media channels influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choice?

The sub-question is based on the assumption that a communicator will select a channel which is most technically appropriate for their particular communicative goal. Evidence supporting this sub-question is found in this study. Rich media are

[1]Throughout this chapter the sub-questions are reintroduced and a basic reference is made to the larger body of literature upon which they were developed. See Chapter 2 for more details.

often preferred for more complex discussion and lean media for fact sharing generally. That said, there are instances where this does not hold true which suggests technical appropriateness is not alone sufficient for explaining channel choice among digitally enabled opinion leaders.

Though technical constraints are relevant, the normative appropriateness of channels for a given kind of communication complicates things. It is common wisdom that "the dinner table is not a place for politics." Particularly in the era of online social networking sites and online topic-based discussion forums, different channels of communication are designed for different kinds of social and topical interaction/communication. As such the following sub-question is tendered:

RQ2.2 How does the social appropriateness of exchanging political messages (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

This study shows that for the purposes of political communication, opinion leaders perceive some channels as being more (normatively) appropriate. When channels are perceived as appropriate for political chat they are more commonly used for that chat.

This section addresses both sub-questions because opinion leaders consistently spoke of technical and normative constraints as working in concert. First the most common constraints are reported, followed by a comparison of Facebook and Twitter as very different media contexts.

Which constraints matter and when

For all digitally enabled opinion leaders interviewed - and most of their alters - the technical and normative constraints of different channels, given certain media contexts, do impact their choice of channel. In general rich channels, particularly rich interpersonal channels, of communication are preferred for enthusiasts, champions

and their alters. When asked what their preferred channel of communication is for political chat almost unanimously the responses were face-to-face conversation. "It's just more fun," Diane, an enthusiast who has extensively used information and communication technologies to build and maintain social relationships, explained. Other affordances like the ability to receive feedback, take in non-verbal cues, and engage in more meaningful discussion absent of constraints often found online, were oft cited by interviewees.

But face-to-face interpersonal conversation is not always available nor is it necessarily the most practical. It can be hard to arrange since people need to be physically co-present and it can be time consuming since there is an opportunity for back and forth communication. For these reasons, the technical and normative constraints of a given channel of communication are important for opinion leaders as they choose their channels.

For sharing simple facts, articles or even basic opinions, lean channels of communication suffice. For example, among tweets made by opinion leaders in the two week period leading up to their interviews, about of 50% of posts were retweets that were simple facts and did not include any new content added by that opinion leader. Conversely, conversation was more rare with less than one quarter of opinion leaders engaging in a back and forth political discussion (at least three tweets and responses) on Twitter during that time period. Simple facts, articles and basic opinions are most common across Twitter which is a relatively lean channel.

Similarly, Joe's daughter Lily described how she sometimes makes use of text messaging:

> Maybe informing each other of something and then directing them to social media or something like that. I think I text him a little bit more pragmatic, for planning or to... update on something that has happened and related to politics, but it's not our - it's not a very literary exchange, it's very simple exchanges. We'll send each other news articles sometimes

> via text in the same way - we only use text sometimes in the same way we would use Facebook private messaging.

This is a common theme echoed by Jess and his mother, Zach and his friends and Logan and his friends. The use of lean, but still interpersonal, channels of communication is most common among champions. Other lean channels, which include most text-based channels like Twitter and discussion boards, are used by both enthusiasts and champions to share facts, articles and opinions. That said, the sharing of political information, when it is not intentionally interpersonal, tends to be woven together with more complex tasks like debating, discussing or convincing someone else of a political opinion.

For these more complex tasks, rich channels of communication are preferred. Alicia's reflection on why face-to-face chat is often superior to Twitter chat is illustrative,

> 'Cause it's just - you really just get a feel for people face-to-face. I don't know, especially on Twitter you have 140 characters and face-to-face you can go on forever. If you come up with something, you can be like 'Oh wait, what about this, rather than.' You also have to be very careful (because you only have a small amount of time online) that you are not going to be misinterpreted.... But you just have to make sure you are not going to be misinterpreted because that will become blown out of proportion. Face-to-face you have the opportunity to explain yourself.

Clearly there are number of factors that come into play for Alicia when considering which channel to use. The character limit, the opportunity for feedback and the immediacy of chat all impact her decision making process. First let us consider character limit. Richard is a champion with extensive experience using a variety of digital channels including Reddit, Twitter and podcasting to name a few.

> On Reddit, someone writes a short paragraph and then they feel compelled to put a 'TL;DR' [read: 'too long, didn't read'] - like sorry, you can't read two hundred words? You feel that people expect an apology because you wrote a paragraph? I find that frustrating. Again part of the problem is - you can't - it's hard to formulate a meaningful argument or anything like that in 140 characters [on Twitter]. It's like, if you are going clubbing or something and you want to discuss political philosophy and music is like *thud thud thud* and you basically have to take turns screaming in each other's ear. That's what Twitter is to me. Whereas at least on Facebook you can be more like sitting in a quiet coffee shop and having slightly longer, more nuanced interactions.

Richard points to the fact that richer channels allow for nuanced communication that is more amenable to political chat. Indeed, the character limit on Twitter in particular is a technical constraint over half of all interviewees pointed out. Richard and his wife both explain that one of the benefits of podcasting, in contrast, is that it allows for more meaningful information sharing because of the ability to speak rather than type.

Cary is an enthusiast in his mid-50's with extensive experience using a wide variety of digital channels including Vine, FaceTime, Facebook and Twitter. He responds to the question, 'do you ever use Vine for political information access or dissemination?'

> No, not at all. Not at this time. It's a little quirky that way. The medium does not seem to lend itself to that. It seems more personal, comical or entertainment oriented. If it would be political it would be spoof or something. It wouldn't seem to be meaningful way of communicating. Twitter is challenging enough to fit in developed ideas, but you can always link to it.

Linking is common practice. Among tweets by opinion leaders during the two weeks before their interviews, all shared at least one link and for the majority, over one third of their tweets contained links to either news articles, blogs or other social media sites.

Cary's response not only underlines the technical constraints and affordances of lean channels but also to the relationship between technical constraints and norms of use. The sense that Vine is not *for* political chat is replicated in the feelings others have for Instagram, Flickr and Facebook. Conversely, Twitter is seen by many as particularly appropriate for political chat, despite the character limit imposed and relative leanness of the channel.

Cary continued explaining why he uses Twitter despite the challenging character limit, "[Twitter is useful] because of the moving nature of political ideas, I think, it seems to me Facebook is more static, relatively. More like a scrap book rather than a flow." In other words, when you cannot have the back and forth of face-to-face communication and a text-based channel is your only option, then one that allows for immediacy is preferable.

Unlike Cary, Jess is a champion in his 30s. His experience watching the news on television provides a clear example of why the immediacy of some channels is important:

> If there is an interview on [the TV show] *Power and Politics*, then I'll probably just say 'This is making my head explode' and I'll do that only through Twitter. Not on Facebook. Simply because it's a bit of a time sensitive thing. I can only send it really in fifteen minutes or so, or it's kind of redundant. Articles? Yes.... If what I post on Twitter I [then] post on Facebook, it has to be pretty good, and it has to speak toward something massive, rather than, you know: 'Did you know the small regulation in the budget bill is this?' It's not really going to resonate with these people.

Here the technical constraints of Twitter and Facebook are tied to normative ones. Enthusiasts and champions alike consider that what will be thought of as relevant by the Twitter audience is different than the Facebook audience. Similarly, Max, a lawyer in his early 60's from Vancouver Island, points to Twitter's strength in the ability to immediately respond to political occurrences such as a speech or a current act of parliament.

> Yes, yes because its real time and because it just seems to me the nature of Twitter is more focused on a particular issue. If somebody makes a speech about voting, for voters under the *Fair Elections Act*, and the changes that are proposed, and you've got 1,200 people you follow, half dozen will be commenting and a sort of discussion will be going. I don't often get back and forth with people about things, but I'll follow and read something about it. Facebook to me is more 'What I had for dinner the other day' or something like that. It's more personal stuff.

Max prefers to post facts or opinions to Twitter rather than engaging in conversation but the ability to follow the chat of others in real time is one reason Max chooses Twitter when he is engaging in political chat. Despite his self-reported use, examining his tweets for the two weeks prior to the interview shows that he does engage in conversation on Twitter at times. He had four discernible conversations via Twitter in this time period consisting of back and forth mentioning each related to issues of the day. For example, he challenged another Twitter user's understanding of the legal system in Canada when a new Supreme Court Ruling was put forward.

For Max, Twitter is useful as it brings together the technical affordances, constraints of the channel and a normative sense of what it is for. It is the 'nature' of the channel.

Facebook, where the personal is not political

The unique media context of Facebook as compared to Twitter is particularly relevant for digitally enabled opinion leaders who, on average, report preferring Facebook over Twitter for conversation but still select Twitter for political chat. Opinion leaders tend to abide by the perceived norms associated with Facebook. Facebook is a social place and not a political one. Jason, a very prolific Twitter user based in Halifax, explained, “I don’t post a lot of political things on Facebook anymore. Once I got my Twitter account going I sort of stopped. I decided to kind of segregate the social aspect and the more political aspect to a certain extent.”

This is a common approach across opinion leaders and their alters. For example, Eli’s friend Ted is politically engaged and also active on Facebook. When asked about the whether he is political on Facebook he explained,

> No. For me, it’s social, not a political platform. I’ve got way better political platforms. And I’m dealing with all kinds of people: Nieces, nephews. I don’t want to - I use it for family and friends... [I]t is pretty unfiltered. You don’t know who is going to be reading that - if it’s my nephew, sister, brother, step father - and saying: ‘your hand’s up your ass when it comes to this issue,’ I don’t think that is right. It is a medium that is mainly about: ‘when are we getting together,’ type of thing. I know that I do have one cousin who posts political stuff and she got a bit of a punch from my brother-in-law. [The post was] kind of anti-oil and he lives in the middle of an oil patch, so there was a bit of a dust up there. I don’t mind it myself, I think it’s hilarious. I’m not - I don’t see what I would achieve in terms of my own political objectives - I’d rather deal with people I have some hope of influencing [laughter].

Many others agree that, in general, Facebook is a social and personal platform. It is the impersonal channels including Twitter, discussion forums and interpersonal

channels (e.g. face-to-face and telephone) that are political. This conceptualization of political context is interesting. Ted, an alter of Eli and Edmonton-based librarian speaks of the ability to 'achieve political objectives' as a driver of channel choice and others agree. When it comes to political chat the goal is not necessarily to enjoy meaningful conversation. For some, in particular champions, it is to convince others of a particular opinion. It is the hybrid nature of the current media environment as it manifests on Twitter that is crucial to understanding why Twitter is an acceptable political platform and Facebook is not.

On Twitter all users have virtually the same account set up. There is a place for a photo, a short biography line, a link to an outside website and a place to make status updates of a limited character length. Everyone is faced with the same constraints; everyone can follow and be followed by everyone else. This is in contrast to Facebook where a person will normally have their own Profile but a political party, politician, media outlet or journalist (among other political elites) will have a Page. The elite can be followed and do not follow back while the individual with a profile can choose to follow pages in this non reciprocal way but also maintains friendships with other profile users which are reciprocal. Thus hybridity is embedded in the technical design of Twitter where political elites and average citizens are on more level ground. The sample of opinion leaders, particularly enthusiasts, tended to perceive the normative context of Twitter as one where they are free to engage with political elites on a personal level. Respondents noted they would mention political elites in their tweets in hope they might respond. For example, Kirk posted a tweet mentioning his Member of Parliament and asked, essentially, if he would leave the Conservative Party following a news story (which Kirk linked to in the tweet). He posted this in the same type of language he uses when engaging with other non-elite Twitter users to discuss news stories.

While enthusiasts take the political context of Twitter to mean they can engage on a personal level with key political players, champions take a different approach.

For champions Twitter is a political context because it is one channel of many that can be used to promote a particular issue to a desired audience.

For example, Logan is a champion who created multiple successful blogs advocating for particular issues as well as a range of campaigns to promote awareness and action on specific issues normally related to legal policy issues (he is a law student). He describes combining in-person events, radio broadcasts, letters to the editor of local newspapers and Twitter hashtag campaigns in order to make his blogs and campaigns succeed.

“It’s all to the same goal, you vary the mediums because each one has its own advantages and if you’re an advocate you just use what’s at your disposal. [There’s a] wider readership in the Edmonton Journal than anything I could write,” Logan explains. In fact the idea that one might prefer to use multiple channels of communication to get a message across is not new, nor is the logic of the advocate which Logan references. What is new is that champions can make use of this wide variety of channels and be advocates independent of institutions or formal organization (Dutton, 2009). Logan and other champions, to varying degrees, speak of advocating for specific ideas or opinions without necessarily identifying as formal advocates or activists. In a hybrid media system the opinion leader is free to make use of a wide range of channels of communication in order to reach whatever goals they set for themselves. The likely success of this strategy is discussed in the following chapter.

Ultimately the technical constraints and norms of context for each channel do impact the opinion leader’s choice of channel. Supporting the first sub-question, rich channels are normally preferred for discussion and debate while lean ones will suffice for fact sharing when necessary. That said, a caveat applies. Twitter, which is a lean channel, is often preferred to Facebook which is a relatively rich channel. This is because Facebook is perceived to be intended for social use while Twitter is thought to be more appropriate for political use. In this way sub-question two is

also supported.

5.2 Appropriateness as a moving target

Technical and normative characteristics of channels clearly play a part in how digitally enabled opinion leaders choose their channels of communication but they do not tell the full story. Appropriateness is not static and can change depending on the social setting in which communication occurs. In particular the political climate and whether or not a given channel connects the opinion leader to a community they feel part of, are potentially relevant factors.

5.2.1 The political climate

When people feel that a given point of view is shared widely they are more likely to themselves express that view (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). People are likely to be more comfortable talking about politics when the social setting is perceived to be amenable to those discussions, for example during an election campaign. Considering digitally enabled opinion leaders specifically, though they may be more prone to accessing political information generally, it is still reasonable to think the effects of social and political context on channel choice will follow this pattern. As such the following sub-question is tested:

RQ2.3 How does the political climate influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

This research shows that the political climate does influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices - such as during times of scandal and during electoral campaigns. These are often referenced as motivations for sharing and discussing political information via various channels. Interviewees were in fact more

active during highly political moments and also perceived those they might share information or discuss issues with as likely more receptive to political messages.

This section first explains how enthusiasts and champions make use of channels of communication differently given different political climates. Next the desire to present novel information is discussed.

How use changes during elections and scandal

At moments of heightened political tension digitally enabled opinion leaders report increased levels of political communication. For enthusiasts this increase is primarily restricted to the channels of communication they normally make use of. They just use them more frequently. In contrast, champions add new channels to their repertoire for political communication in addition to increasing their frequency of chat across existing channels.

When asked what opinion leaders and their alters talk about when it comes to politics, overwhelmingly (approximately 90% of all interviewees) the response from both opinion leaders and alters was "whatever is in the news" and "current affairs". This suggests these opinion leaders may not be as specialized as previous research predicted (Katz, 1957; Schenk & Döbler, 2001). Only three opinion leaders did not reference current affairs or the news as common topics of conversation. Their political communication tends to be driven by specific issue-based interests. For example, Kirk is focused on climate change and environmental issues at all times, regardless of what is most popular in the political climate of the day.

Mark's experience fluctuates between being very active and completely inactive on Twitter. His experience is a more colourful example of the impact of political climate and current affairs on channel choice. When asked what drives him back to Twitter, Mark explained, "Rob Ford did for a while, to be quite honest. I knew someone else who got on Twitter just because of that, to get the latest Rob Ford."

Indeed, scandalous political events lead to increases in political chat. So when

the video surfaced of then Mayor of Toronto, Rob Ford smoking crack cocaine, or he insisted (from rehab) he would be running for the next election, chatter increased. Diane talked about "needing" to tweet when something "big" happens. Max described how he selects the best article he can find and posts it to Facebook when a scandal or unexpected event comes up since these are things he believes people "ought to know about." Others talked about issues coming up suddenly and feeling compelled to share their initial thoughts and later to vent out frustrations. Joe spoke of the emotional response to breaking news and scandal and pointed to a need to express one's self quickly. In response to scandal both enthusiasts and champions want to quickly share information and/or personal opinion.

Moreover, during election campaigns almost all opinion leaders interviewed (17 of 21) report an increase in frequency of communication across the set of channels they most often make use of. Those who can be classified as champions (just over one third) also report expanding the number of channels and tactics used rather than just increasing use of their tactics and channels.

For example, Logan is a champion who makes use of a wide variety of channels sporadically. For some channels, political chat is nearly exclusive to campaign periods. Logan uses five different social media accounts and describes in his political Instagram use: "I guess it depends on the cycle. Election campaigns definitely! I did some campaigns this year and used it quite regularly."

When asked about his YouTube use and blog use he reiterated this statement, explaining that election and campaign times are when using these channels for political purposes is most valuable. For him, the value is determined by the audiences reached and their likely interest in the political issue at hand.

For Jess, a champion who also exhibits some enthusiasts tendencies, the use of additional channels during the election is rooted differently. When asked if he ever participates in online chats hosted by traditional media, on their website or connected to articles published, Jess explains,

"Occasionally. They'll have [a] live chat feedback board during elections. I watch all the different provincial elections. I'll chime in occasionally on those if I am using that site to stream the video anyway."

In this context channel choice is inter-dependent. Jess makes use of live chat specifically because he opted to stream video coverage of the election. While Logan introduces new channels in order to reach wider audiences given the political climate, Jess is presented with new channels because of the political climate.

In contrast, Luke is an enthusiast and is particularly interested in the monarchy and related issues. He is an active participant in two different monarchy related online forums and described a Twitter audience of others interested in the monarchy. These forums are selected only when Luke wishes to share information about the monarchy and related issues. Luke's diversity of channel use is stable regardless of political climate but his use of each existing channel in his repertoire and the topic of chat do change.

> The most consistent conversations I have are either monarchy related or definitely in the last couple of months, political stuff, and recently because there is an Ontario election, it tends to focus more on that. Prior to the Ontario election it was very [focused on] national politics.

Logan, Jess and Luke exemplify different strategic approaches to channel choice and use of channels given the political climate. While almost all opinion leaders interviewed report higher levels of political chat during election periods and moments of scandal there is an important difference between enthusiasts and champions. Enthusiasts like Luke use their standard set of channels more frequently while champions like Logan draw in additional channels in order to reach wider audiences. In short, the political climate impacts patterns of use and thus, channel choice.

Need to be Novel

Though the impact of the political climate on an opinion leader's channel choices is evident, the underlying reasoning is not clear cut. It is assumed that the social support and pressure an individual feels from society encourages sharing of opinions during times of heightened political tension because others are more likely to share an interest in politics at that moment. Spiral of silence theory goes further suggesting people will only share information and opinions when they believe others - their peers and their message recipients - will generally agree with their position (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). Digitally enabled opinion leaders, however, describe a desire to present novel and valuable information to their message receivers. Many do not want to simply reiterate an existing point of view, but rather aim to present new information and perspectives.

A champion from British Columbia, Ross describes his limited Facebook use in everyday political chat:

> I used to do it more and then realized I was preaching to the choir and irritating everyone... And that's more or less why I've avoided it as well: clutter. If it's on an issue correlating to the environment, that's when I'll get better response. If it's just the PQ Values Charter[2] and the Ontario Election no one cares... Which, I understand, I get it. I'm the nerd and in the zone but they're not.

Ross is careful to post only information be believes his Facebook friends would find interesting and new. During election campaigns Ross reports being more active, though he is still careful to avoid being redundant or irrelevant. He explains that he has access to content which his Facebook friends are less likely to have access to since he is often an active campaigner. This means that Ross sometimes finds

[2]The PQ Values Charter is a piece of legislation put forward at the provincial level in Quebec by the Partie Quebequoise (PQ).

content worth posting to Facebook but the frequency is limited by concerns about the content being both new and relevant at the same time, two constraints that can be hard to balance.

Dean, a Toronto-based university instructor also pointed to the importance of presenting novel information but referenced different motivational factors. Rather than being driven by social pressure (trying to avoid annoying others), he is driven by a desire to send his content to as many others as possible. Being "new," "interesting," and "provocative" are all terms various opinion leaders use to describe how to gain a larger following and/or generate discussion across channels. Dean and others borrow from the media logics of political elites and activists as they strategically make choices about both frequency and kind of channel to use.

Beyond bringing into question the way in which social pressure and support actually impact the opinion leader's desire to communicate political messages, this example also begins to outline the strategic approach some opinion leaders take. The perceived view of the audience becomes important for the opinion leader as they make choices about content and channel use. This points to the need for further investigation into the role of the audience as a motivator for channel choice. It also underscores increasing hybridity of media logics and tactics between the traditional media and political elites - who have long targeted messages in a professional and strategic way - and members of the public including opinion leaders who formally, were not thought to do so.

The motivations for sharing political content during campaigns are also instructive. Champions specifically speak of the aim to inform the uninformed and access new audiences who would not otherwise be exposed to specific information, perspectives and opinions. For example, Facebook is seen to represent a very different group of message recipients than those accessible through other tools. All but two opinion leaders with Facebook accounts reported this is true. Facebook allows for access to a new audience which, because they are not already interested in and/or

not recipients of regular messaging from that opinion leader, is likely uninformed.

Take Emily, a champion, whose use of Facebook to post political information is limited and in fact decreased since she began using Twitter. Describing her political chat about a defunded needle exchange program in Toronto, Emily noted that she chose to share information on Facebook as well as her normal Twitter posting, "I was putting it on Twitter too but I was like, here's an entirely different group of people who may not hear about it otherwise - unlike the group of people who follow me on Twitter."

Her Facebook use has decreased because, the majority of the time, she feels compelled to limit what she posts on Facebook. She does not want to offend or annoy her Facebook friends whereas with Twitter she feels regular content will be well received. When she does choose to post on Facebook the goal is to inform the uninformed which is a finding very much in line with traditional opinion leadership research. A problem emerges when considering the theoretical underpinnings of the sub-question, namely that channel choice will be impacted by the political climate. Specifically, the spiral of silence theory predicts an increase in channel use because there is a perception that others will agree and/or support the message being expressed (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). By targeting the uninformed, the opinion leader is attempting to communicate with those who have yet to form an opinion and therefore are unlikely to be able to agree or provide support.

During times of political excitement channel use will increase but the explanatory theory remains unknown. Considering RQ2.3, social support and pressure on a broad scale seem to encourage increased use. Specifically, if the wider political climate is such that politics seems like it is or should be important to potential recipients of an opinion leader's political messages, use increases. However, digitally enabled opinion leaders are often driven by a desire to present their message recipients with novel information and opinion which is in direct contrast with the suppositions of the spiral of silence theory. This is because in a hybrid media system digitally enabled

opinion leaders must balance social support which encourages communication, social pressure to avoid being redundant or annoying, and media logics which discourage sharing content not likely to be found new or worthy of sharing.

The finding that opinion leaders communicate differently during campaign times both in terms of their frequency of communication and the types of channels they make use of is particularly important given the vast majority of current research takes place during campaign time. That said, the political climate seems most important for deciding whether or not political communications are appropriate in general. When it comes to specific channel choice the pressure to be novel coupled with perceptions of who the audience is and what they know, emerges as explanatory.

5.2.2 A sense of community

Beyond political climate, it is known that people are more likely to engage in political discourse when they feel they are part of a community (S. Coleman et al., 2008). In theory, feeling part of a community should impact the opinion leader's decision making in ways similar to the spiral of silence theory. The opinion leader is likely to feel a sense of belonging and social support which makes the environment feel safer. Shared experiences and norms contribute to a perception that others in the community will feel similarly to the opinion leader even if exact opinions on every topic up for discussion are not known. As such, the following section investigates the sub-question:

RQ2.4 How does one's sense of community (given a particular channel) influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

There are mixed results when it comes to the relevance of community membership for opinion leaders making choices about channels. When evidence of a community is found, social pressure tends to restrict political communication rather

than encourage it. Topic-based communities which are drawn together based on a shared political interest rather than by the channel specifically or uniquely, present an exception. This section reviews the case of two channels of communication to illustrate this mixed result looking first at Facebook and then Twitter.

The case of Facebook

Facebook is the main online channel where opinion leaders report feeling a sense of community. Considering Facebook generally, opinion leaders often describe it as possessing more qualities of community than Twitter does, suggesting Facebook feels more personal. This personal setting dissuades most opinion leaders from political chat via Facebook. An exception is found for political issue-based Facebook groups. Ultimately, however, a sense of community on Facebook does not encourage increased use for political chat.

Richard described why he feels a sense of community on Facebook but not Twitter:

> On Facebook I feel that I know people, or even sometimes you'll be members of pages and post something occasionally - there's a certain photography one that I'm involved with - and occasionally I'll comment on a picture or comment or give advice. I don't even know this person, they don't even fit on this graph [gestures to sociogram], but it still feels more like a community than Twitter does.

Richard went on to explain he believes this is because Twitter allows only 140 characters at a time making it difficult to gain background knowledge of the others you are interacting with and/or their positions.

Others also pointed to pre-existing relationships as reasons Facebook provides a sense of community. For example, Emily responded to a question about whether Facebook felt like a community to her, "Sort of, it's a very passive way to keep up

with people I don't really care about. Many of the people I went to law school with I don't particularly like but if they have children, I feel like I should know about it."

Joe, a high school teacher in Vancouver, echoed this when explaining whether Facebook provides a sense of community: "A little bit. Because they are family members who live far apart so we keep in touch that way a lot, so yes."

Interestingly, eleven opinion leaders report feeling a sense of community generally on Facebook. Of those eleven, eight post political content either less than weekly or primarily in specific topic-based groups. Of the eight Facebook users who do not feel a sense of community, the majority (five) post political content at least weekly. In other words, feeling a sense of community generally on Facebook does not appear to be linked to increased Facebook posting of political content.

In pointing to the social norms associated with friendship, Alicia offers insight into why political communication is avoided when users perceive a sense of community, "when you are friends with someone, you don't want to piss them off either. There is more of a community [on Facebook] because you are friends with them, you know them."

Max explained that on Facebook, "It's mostly just family, they don't care [about politics]" and so he avoids making political posts which might annoy others. Ross too explained, "I just feel like an irritation" and Eli explained that he and a small group of friends created a topic specific Facebook group because they knew their wider Facebook network of friends would not be interested.

When seen as providing a sense of community opinion leaders are less, not more, likely to select Facebook as a channel of political communication. Most opinion leaders have a range of friends on Facebook originating from a variety of communities they currently or previously felt a part of. Discussion of community on Facebook often turned into a discussion of audience and as such, Facebook will be more closely examined in the following section. Facebook groups, however, were more often described in terms of topic-based communities and represent a different kind of use of

Facebook. The ability to restrict membership, impose rules and norms, and interact on a personal level were items mentioned by those who felt part of a community in Facebook groups. Here are two examples of community characteristics impacting channel choice in Facebook groups.

First, William, an interviewee from east coast Canada, is highly involved in the (then named) *Canadians Online Watching Question Period* (CWQP) closed Facebook group. The group is most active during the hour-long Question Period held in the House of Commons on every weekday the House is in session. The idea for the group was generated through conversation on another Facebook group.

William meticulously curates the group by investigating the profile of each individual who asks to join the group and reviewing all posts. He regularly posts to explain the kinds of content that are acceptable and sends personal messages to people who have violate the norms of the group and/or seem like they might. He explained, "you won't find any conspiracy theorists on there."

Before Question Period each day William makes a post, normally a photo with a comment about what kinds of things are expected to come up. This is in essence a discussion prompt. There are just under 700 members in the group with 25-30 people he describes as "regulars." For him, CWQP is very clearly a community with which he regularly engages. William explains he can have conversations, post photos, and interact more easily on Facebook than Twitter.

However, he is also very aware of who the members of the group are and as such who his audience is. When describing a group of CWQP users and Facebook friends William explained, "These are the people I do this work for. The ones who don't know enough [but are interested]."

William is an extreme example of using Facebook groups extensively and feeling part of a community and he even describes his posting behaviour in terms of gaining access to an audience of interested but under-informed citizens.

Conversely, Kirk, the Edmonton based man passionate about climate change

describes choosing specific Facebook groups rather than posting to his own timeline specifically because he perceives a community but not because he feels supported by, or even part of it. This contradicts both the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993) and communities literature (Gruzd et al., 2011; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The Friends of Science is a group which garnered just under 10 000 likes and describes its self as "a non-profit organization run by dedicated volunteers comprised mainly of active and retired earth and atmospheric scientists, engineers, and other professionals." The group is made up of what Kirk describes as "climate deniers." Kirk explains:

> I go to a site called *The Friends of Science* and they use the phrase in an Orwellian sense cause they are anything but friends of science. They use it in a newspeak kind of sense. And so on that page I will post relevant reports or passages from relevant reports only because I figure, on Facebook, maybe my friends and family are used to it or people that follow me are basically among the converted, but here I can address the issues in the enemy camp and what I've often discovered.

He sees this group as a community of mis-informed and/or ignorant individuals whom he would like to inform. For example, he will read the posts others make and then comment with a link to contradictory information. Kirk goes on to note, "I think what it does is sharpen your arguments," by which he means engaging with people who have an opposing view forces him to develop clearer points. Further, he explains that everyone in his daily life already knows or can surmise his opinion on things and is "tired" of hearing from him. This group is a chance to connect with a different community. That said, he also reported that he rarely gets into "productive discussions" nor convinces others using this method and so the ultimate effectiveness of his choices might be questioned. Nevertheless, this is a poignant counter example to that of the CWQP group.

These Facebook groups provide vivid but limited examples of perceived community leading to an increase in channel use but even here a sense of community and belonging is not a necessary driving factor. William is indeed bolstered by a sense of community to contribute regularly but Kirk is driven by a sense of duty to correct mis-information and both are keenly aware of their audiences and participate in Facebook groups strategically.

Notably, when others describe community related to Facebook groups they tend to be tied to existing offline groups or communities, for example a local chapter of a political party or a discussion group which uses Facebook to coordinate and share articles in between face-to-face meetings. In fact, only one opinion leader of six who make use of Facebook groups for political purposes did not reference offline meetings or events which take place beyond Facebook in describing why that group provides them a sense of community. Selection of these channels for sending information is relatively rare with only three opinion leaders posting in political Facebook groups at least weekly.

Considering RQ2.4, while a sense of community may exist on Facebook, whether that is general use or in the context of specific groups, evidence suggests feeling part of a community does not drive increased use of the channel but instead reduces it. First, the social pressure to avoid political communication which may be annoying or offensive to some members of the community dominates and in effect restricts communications rather than encouraging them through a sense of belonging and understanding of common ground. Second, even in instances where a sense of community is supportive of political chat due to the specific nature of the group, opinion leaders seem to be driven by a desire to access an audience and it is in fact presence of an audience which is motivating when it comes to making posts and/or engaging in discussion.

The case of Twitter

Twitter generally is not perceived to provide a sense of community to opinion leaders with the exception of those who participate in tight-knit sub-groups (for example a hashtag community around a specific issue or smaller city). When Twitter does support a sense of community, much like in the case of Facebook groups, it is normally a community of people bound by their interest in a given political issue. While this may increase channel use it is not necessarily because opinion leaders feel social support but instead because they are able to access political elites and wider audiences via the group.

Twitter generally is not perceived by opinion leaders to provide a sense of community beyond connecting people based on a shared interest. Opinion leaders noted the 140 character limit, the partisan nature of content and lack of consistent interaction prevented them from developing a sense of community. However, for nine opinion leaders interviewed, specific hashtags did serve to unite users in a community. Issue or event-based hashtags (eg. #BCed) and municipal/city level tags (eg. #HFXpoli) were most commonly referenced as providing their users a sense of community. Five opinion leaders mentioned tags in these categories. Only three opinion leaders mentioned provincial-level tags, all referencing #ABleg and no interviewee cited national tags (eg. #CDNpoli) as providing a sense of community. #CDNpoli is described as “too busy,” “too noisy,” “full of partisan hacks,” and a place for “shouting.” Furthermore, even when a sense of community was perceived, it did not seem to impact frequency of use of hashtags, of tweets, or of reported political use of Twitter to access or post information.

Many describe how #CDNpoli can be a useful feed to search for new information. The Vancouver-based high school teacher, Joe, uses #CDNpoli in a strictly strategic sense, in order to send information out to others beyond his followers. Others maintain there is no real value in #CDNpoli. #CDNpoli is thought to provide access to an audience beyond one’s own Twitter followers but does not provide

these opinion leaders with a sense of community. Jason, a Halifax-based lawyer and enthusiast suggested that while #CDNpoli does not provide the support of a community, there are sub-groups that might:

> I don't think #CDNpoli is a true "group" I think it is simply too large and covers too much geography and too many issues to really be a true group. I think there are a lot of subgroups within it.There is a community that talks about aboriginal issues more, and that's really a community unto itself. I don't think a lot of that discussion filters out into the larger #CDNpoli.

Jason and other Halifax-based interviewees provided a counter example to #CDNpoli suggesting that #HFXpoli (Halifax politics) is a tag that could be considered a community. Halifax is the largest municipality in Nova Scotia and one of the few major cities on the east coast of Canada. Two opinion leaders interviewed are particularly active users of the #HFXpoli tag, Diane and Jason. Both are enthusiasts who have developed relationships with political elites in the Halifax area either professionally or via their online visibility.

Diane is a communications specialist who previously worked for the NDP in Nova Scotia. She lives in Halifax but grew up in Toronto. She contrasted #TOpoli with #HFXpoli explaining the smaller size of Halifax makes it possible to develop meaningful relationships online that can also be transitioned offline and across other online channels.

Describing one of the clusters in her sociogram Diane explained the genesis of what she calls her "downtown crowd,"

> I knew some of these people individually and in some cases for a long time but it wasn't until we started interacting on Twitter that we really coalesced as a group of friends from various backgrounds and ideologies.

> And so we generally get together for a beer once a week or every two weeks at Charlie's Club.

She explained that the group began to coalesce through Twitter conversation using #HFXpoli, and to a lesser extent, #NSpoli (Nova Scotia politics) to discuss scandals related to then Mayor of Halifax, Peter Kelly, and the new provincial NDP government. She described back and forth conversation and explained that her downtown crowd is a sort of sub group of #HFXpoli. For her the size of the city makes it possible for people who are engaged to connect online in more meaningful ways and enables more meaningful offline interaction and discussion.

Jason, another avid user of the tag, described the Twitter stars of #HFXpoli,

> I think it is a core group of people but they are all kind of influential and have their own audiences. So there's a guy in Sackville whose tag is [Twitter name A] and he talks a lot from the Sackville perspective. And I'm [Twitter name B], and I talk about things in Dartmouth and I have kind of a following in Dartmouth. And then you got people downtown.... And those people are kind of interacting and then what comes out of that interaction gets fed back to our constituencies. Like Dartmouth people are like "Oh, here is something" and Sackville people are like 'Oh [Twitter name A] is talking about something.' So I think there's kind of a few of us who hash things out and come to some understanding and then it filters back to the people who are maybe not directly involved in that discussion.

In describing how each area (former cities which now make up the Halifax Regional Municipality) is represented by a central Twitter account, Jason explained how people connect with each other and form bonds over the shared experience of living in a particular area.

While #HFXpoli is obviously related to Twitter specifically, for Jason it feels like a community specifically because it transitions across channels. The shared experience of living in Halifax or being from the Dartmouth area are the foundations of the community in Jason's view. Additionally, for both Diane and Jason the participation of political elites in Halifax and engagement of politicians, journalists, and activists bolsters that sense of community because it is indicative of social interaction that reflects the wider political community in Halifax.

Users of the tag each described instances of connecting with Councillors, journalists, and other political elites via #HFXpoli in order to also contribute to what Jason describes as a 'solutions oriented approach.' While #NSpoli or #CDNpoli may be about expressing partisan views, Jason argues,

> #HFXpoli is more solutions oriented. I find the discussions end up going in the direction of 'here's a problem, how do we fix it?' And you might not agree on the solution, but you are at least going back and forth. I think [#HFXpoli] actually contributes to shifting the broader discussion, you see it reflected in the media, you see it reflected in what politicians are talking about in terms of priorities for this city.

For example, Jason and a city planner conversed on Twitter (paraphrased):

> *Jason*: The closure to the transit terminal is going to take half a year, it was scheduled for 2 weeks #HFXpoli
>
> *City planner*: Hi @Jason, when did we say 2 weeks - I'd like to track communication? We are a few weeks behind.
>
> *A few others contributed comments.*
>
> *Jason*: @CityPlanner [link] and something on the city website too.
>
> *City planner*: @Jason Yes, that is a city public service announcement, we need to (and will) do better.
>
> *Jason*: @CityPlanner thank you for clarifying, Appreciated.

Here the receptiveness of the political elite and their willingness to participate in discussion and engage with Twitter users is seen by opinion leaders as legitimizing the community and giving purpose and meaning to #HFXpoli as a group. As such, participation is propelled by the potential connection to the larger political system and not simply the social support - or pressure - related to belonging to a community.

This connection through Twitter to the larger political system and/or specific political elites was echoed in discussions of #ABleg, the hashtag used by Edmontonian interviewees to discuss provincial politics. For example, Zach who exhibits both enthusiast and champion tendencies reflected on why he uses #ABleg, "it's cool you can get responses from public figures." Issue specific hashtags like #tidalenergy or tags related to schools in British Columbia (#BCed) were described in similar ways. Opinion leaders, in particular enthusiasts, choose to use these hashtags, a specific method of Twitter use, in order to connect with an community interested in a specific topic. That community is not limited to members of the general public and importantly include political elites who are also invested in the topic at hand.

Though a sense of community is present for some, it was rarely described as a motivating factor for use of a given channel or even a specific Twitter hashtag or tactic. Instead, more specific characteristics of community members were referenced, such as their role in the larger political system. This can be paralleled to reasons people chose to use the #CDNpoli hashtag: to access a specific audience.

Ten opinion leaders described their hashtag use as allowing them access to broader audiences. Mark even explained how he sometimes does not include a hashtag in order to avoid a possible audience and Joe explained that hashtags are "where I want the audience to be."

On Twitter some hashtags do promote a sense of community, however that sense of community tends to be both issue based and related to pre-existing larger political communities. Notably, when the hashtag is thought to be related to a smaller and tighter-knit group (which enthusiasts tend to participate in), such as a relatively

small city like Halifax, a sense of community appears stronger. In response to RQ2.4, access to political elites and/or wider audiences tends to drive use of hashtags regardless of whether or not one feels a sense of community.

5.3 Knowing and relating to the audience

An undercurrent to the potential drivers of channel choice investigated so far is the relationship between the opinion leader and the potential receiver of their political message. Digitally enabled opinion leaders think about who they are sending messages to when they decide which channel is best and when they decide whether or not the climate is appropriate. The final two sub-questions consider the relational variables explicitly looking at how tie strength and channel choice are related as well as how knowing and potentially controlling the composition of one's audience is related to channel choice.

5.3.1 Strength of ties

While research into channel choice in the digital era rarely examines audience broadly as a driving factor, relationship to the intended receiver of a message is considered. Research suggests people tend to engage with strong ties using a range of channels both online and offline but primarily a limited range of online channels with weak ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Of course this is not absolute and so the following sub-question is posed:

RQ2.5 How does the strength of social ties to their audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

Notably little research differentiates the types of online channels in terms of preferences given to tie strength. In this study the strength of one's tie to a given

audience does impact the channels they select but not in the expected way. The face-to-face channel is popular for both strong and weak ties. Online channels tend to supplement strong tie communication whereas for communication with weak ties, though often connected via online tools, political information sharing or discussion is rare. A third type of tie also presents as important for political communication: the very weak tie. A very weak tie is someone with whom the opinion leader regularly engages in political chat but who is not considered a close or even somewhat close social tie. Very weak ties are often a part of larger unknown audiences (discussed in the following section). Twitter (also discussion forums, comment sections of online articles, and for some, Facebook groups) is the primary channel used to connect with very weak ties. The following section explains channel preference by tie type.

Table 5.1: Alter distributions (n=19)

	General Ties		Political Chat Ties			Summary	
# Alters	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Very Weak	# Alters	Frequency
0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
1-8	3	3	7	10	13	1-16	0
9-16	9	8	9	6	4	17-32	10
17-24	5	4	2	1	0	33-48	4
25-32	1	1	0	2	0	49-65	3
33+	1	3	1	0	0	66+	2
Total	292	330	221	192	104		726
Median	12	13	9	8	4		32
Mean	15.4	17.4	11.6	10.1	5.5		38.2

For the analysis of tie strength and channel choice the sociogram created during each interview with opinion leaders is considered. Table 5.1 shows the distribution of alters considering 19 sociograms. Notably two interviewees' sociograms are not considered due to challenges during the interview process that caused substantial deviation from the normal approach to generating lists of alters. Alters, as explained in the methods chapter, are the associates of opinion leaders. Everyday associates

to whom a person feels strongly tied are considered 'very close.' Weak ties are considered 'somewhat close.' Those with whom the opinion leader regularly talks about politics but is not considered somewhat or very close, are called 'very weak ties' in Table 5.1. This table shows the distribution of alters for opinion leaders.

The number in each cell represents the number of opinion leaders who fall into that category. For example, if 'Number of Alters' is equal to 1-8 and you are looking at 'General' (as opposed to only those with whom politics is regularly discussed) and 'Strong Ties,' then the cell value is 3. This means there are two opinion leaders who only have between 1 and 8 strong ties. You can see that it is most common for opinion leaders to have between 9 and 16 strong ties (9 opinion leaders fall in this category). Both the median (12) and mean (15.4) for strong ties fit within this range as is reported at the bottom of the table.

Looking to the 'Summary' columns, the majority of opinion leaders (10) report having between 17 and 32 alters, all others were above this threshold resulting in an average of 38.2 ties. This marks a difference when compared to previous studies of Canadians using similar sampling techniques. These have found individuals to have 23.8 ties on average (Hogan et al., 2007). While the difference is substantial, it should be noted that, if two outliers (opinion leaders reporting 77 and 86 alters when no others reported over 57 alters) are removed then the average number of alters drops to 33.1. Further, the addition of very weak political ties, of which individuals had 5.5 on average, likely contributes to, but does not completely explain, this inflation.

Considering those alters with whom individuals talk about politics, on average digitally enabled opinion leaders talk about politics with 75% of very close ties (roughly 70% for enthusiasts and 85% for champions) and 58% of somewhat close ties (roughly 55% for enthusiasts and 70% for champions). It is evident that individuals are more inclined to talk about politics with their very close ties. This is the case for both enthusiasts and champions, though champions tend to have higher rates of

political chat with both kinds of ties.

On average three different channels of communication were available for strong ties, three for weak ties, and one for very weak ties. Considering only ties with whom political chat regularly occurs these averages were similar.

Despite the range of channels from which opinion leaders choose when sharing information or discussing political issues with strong ties, for those an opinion leader feels very close to, offline communication is often the preferred channel for all but four opinion leaders. That said, availability of the channel and purpose of the communication also influence channel choice. For example, Cary described using email to chat about politics with his family in Scotland and Jess and his mom both mentioned using text messaging to send quick facts or pieces of information in between face-to-face encounters.

While face-to-face communication is viewed as the ideal option for political communication with strong ties, it is also supplemented with the use of a range of other channels. Specifically other channels which can be used for interpersonal communication were common including email, text message and Facebook message. Notably, few felt the phone, Skype or other VoIP channels were ideal for political chat. Further, Twitter is a rare channel for strong ties regardless of whether the opinion leader is an enthusiast or a champion. Rory who is a writer and dog trainer in Toronto explains, "That's weird. If they are on Twitter I have no interaction with them on Twitter. These are people I interact with in real life with the most. And I interact with them on Facebook the most too, but have nothing on Twitter."

Emily also explained how she does not have much overlap between those she engages on Twitter and those she engages on Facebook.

When considering strong ties, the distinction between channels based on the media properties discussed above is even more pronounced. When the conversation partner is known well opinion leaders more regularly reported feeling comfortable sending quick updates, facts, or thoughts via leaner media while still preferring the

richness of face-to-face communication for more detailed discussion.

When chatting with weak ties about political issues, opinion leaders also prefer face-to-face communication but are more hesitant to choose any other channel. This undermines work which suggests online tools will be preferred for weak ties but supports the notion of media multiplexity (Haythornthwaite, 2002). While communication with strong ties happens across a range of channels, weak ties are more limited. There is a perceived risk of annoying, angering, or confusing weak ties due to the inability to explain one's self using channels other than face-to-face.

Kirk's choices about moving from one channel to another highlight this point:

> I'm not one for carrying out a discussion on Twitter or - if it gets to that point, I will pick up the phone and call people. If somebody says they have a question for me about a particular topic, and I know this is not a simple topic, the last thing I want to do is be drafting text messages or even IM comments. To really get the sense of what their question is, it is easier for me to just pick up the phone.

He then goes on to explain, "But somebody who knows me well - I had an exchange with [Bob],[3] because we both know each other, a simple text message to Bob would say, just to draw his attention to [the issue]. He might come back in with a similar - or just a pointed comment."

Both enthusiasts and champions select their channels in part due to their relationship with potential receivers given those channels. For both, the social risk of annoying or offending their ties is paramount and is further discussed below.

Organizing events or coordinating meetings provides an exception where opinion leaders report using additional channels with weak ties. Opinion leaders are hesitant to engage in discussion or even share information with weak ties via most

[3] Bob is an alias for a friend who was not interviewed as part of this study.

channels, however they will use text messages, email and Facebook messenger to make arrangements to later engage in political discourse.

Finally, there are a select few weak ties with whom opinion leaders engage in political information sharing and discussion. These are individuals who the opinion leader identifies as already interested in politics generally and/or the specific issue at hand. They are then treated more like strong ties than weak ties in terms of channel choice.

Through asking opinion leaders about who they most often engage in political chat with, it became evident that a third type of relationship is important. Not considered very, or even, somewhat close, most opinion leaders reported engaging regularly in political chat with what are called very weak ties in this study. For many, Twitter followers were among this group though these ties were not exclusively Twitter based connections for all.

For enthusiasts and champions alike, chat with these ties is typically based on an understanding that they already care about politics and/or the specific issue at hand and as such little social risk is perceived. It is very rare for opinion leaders to encounter these ties in daily life and so interaction is typically limited to a specific online channel. Once other channels are added to the repertoire of political communication between the opinion leader and that specific tie, they tend to become thought of as somewhat close/weak ties.

Tie strength is related to channel choice but not in the expected way. When selecting a channel for communication with a strong tie the availability and affordances of the media tend to dominate choice. Considering weak ties, on the other hand, opinion leaders will rarely choose channels other than face-to-face even when they are available which means communication with them is rare. This is particularly important considering Granovetter's (1973) argument that it is through weak ties that new information is passed to others. If weak ties are avoided when communicating political facts and opinions then digitally enabled opinion leaders are

potentially avoiding the audience for whom they may be most influential. However, a third very weak type of tie presents as important for opinion leaders in their everyday political chat. For these very weak ties opinion leaders choose a single tool almost exclusively, often that tool is Twitter.

5.3.2 Control over the audience

In a hybrid media system political communication is not simply interpersonal, particularly given online social networking sites, there are many opportunities to communicate with groups and larger audiences which may be a relatively homogenous community, or may be a heterogeneous group. Instead of mostly private interpersonal communication, the opinion leader's communication may be more public and/or quasi-personal or impersonal. In other words, the potential recipients of a given message may all be strong ties (for example when one emails a list of close friends), may be a mix of strong and weak ties (as on Facebook), or they may be unknown, potentially consisting of all kinds of ties and strangers (as on Twitter).

Given that opinion leaders are thought to engage with their everyday associates, it is hypothesized that they will prefer channels which allow them to connect with known audiences in order to exert their personal influence:

RQ2.6 How does knowledge about one's audience influence digitally enabled opinion leaders' channel choices?

It is found that knowledge of the composition of one's audience is only positively linked to selecting that channel when the audience can be tightly controlled. Interestingly, a completely unknowable audience too is positively linked to selecting that channel.

Opinion leaders prefer face-to-face and other forms of strictly interpersonal communication when chatting about politics with their social ties. This is because

they can assess the social risk and respond to and correct misunderstandings. In other words, when the opinion leader can control exactly who will receive their political messages, they are most comfortable sharing them. Channels which permit interpersonal or small group communication, like face-to-face, text message or even Facebook messenger offer the ability to tightly control audiences. That said, other channels available in the hybrid media system are also used for political chat. This section returns to the cases of Facebook and Twitter to explain how different levels of knowledge and control impact the opinion leader's choice of channels.

General Facebook use is very different from interpersonal channels. When posting or sharing on Facebook most opinion leaders post to their own or to a friend's timeline. Those posts are visible to all the opinion leader's Facebook friends. These friends, for many, were collected over a number of years and represent a diverse range of people.

An analysis of ego-networks of opinion leaders who use Facebook showed that most opinion leaders had on average four distinct groups ranging from home town acquaintances to college friends to family and so on. These groups were easily identified by most opinion leaders during the interview. The existence of a varied audience places pressure on the opinion leaders to use Facebook in a way that would avoid annoying or offending others.

Joe explains, "most who follow me on Facebook are family and friends and I try to keep that more for family and friends [as opposed to political chat]. I try not to pollute it too much because they don't want to hear it."

Ross also expressed his concerns sharing political information via Facebook in reference to his audience,

> It's the standard line: 'oh I hate politics' which is a little bit like saying I hate science. You need it, it's there whether you like it or not... [I worry] especially if I'm doing something that is more contentious of an issue, whether it's abortion or euthanasia... I don't know, I just feel like

I'm bothering people.

When questioned about whether he ever feels comfortable sharing political information or engaging in discussion on political issues which he considers contentious, Ross noted that with his close friends he is willing to because they know his background and because ideas about the issues he is discussing can develop over time.

This points to an important characteristic of the Facebook audience which makes it seem particularly risky for political communications. Beyond sending information to people who may not be interested in politics, the many weak ties which make up most individual's Facebook friends list adds increased risk. Context collapse - wherein relations from various social groups are collapsed into a single context when using social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011) - is evident on Facebook. For example, the Facebook audience often includes people with whom the opinion leader was once close but is no longer, for example friends from high school. In all cases, opinion leaders who discussed their Facebook ego-networks noted clusters of Facebook friends they are not in regular contact with. In practice this places these Facebook friends in the same category as weak ties in terms of the risk taken when talking politics. With weak ties, their current political stance is often unknown and they are unlikely to have recently shared experiences or have up-to-date background knowledge to guide the interpretation of political posts.

As such, for all but a few opinion leaders, Facebook is considered risky. Despite the fact that one can exert control over their audience (by friending - or not, and by making use of Facebook lists to categorize people and restrict content accordingly) Facebook is thought of as too risky because the level of control is not enough.

Notably, a small sub-set of six opinion leaders (all but one exhibiting characteristics of champions), aware of the risk, choose to use Facebook to make political posts nonetheless. This occurs particularly when the political climate is such that the opinion leader feels compelled to post.

In contrast, the Twitter audience is largely unknown yet opinion leaders feel

comfortable posting political content much more frequently than on Facebook or any other channel, save face-to-face communication.

Opinion leaders' lists of followers ranged from 142 to 2531 at the time of the interview. On average only nine followers were identified per opinion leader during the sociogram phase of the interview. Even if some simply slipped the opinion leader's mind, this means the vast majority of Twitter followers are not close personal ties nor are they individuals with whom the opinion leader consistently discusses politics.

When asked to describe their Twitter audience most opinion leaders had a vague idea of what kinds of users made up their followers list but few could articulate this in detail. Opinion leaders were more readily able to describe what they perceived as a second, wider audience.

Richard explained, "I have two audiences, people who follow me so I appear in their stream and the other people who find me through a hashtag filter, like #TOpoli. I get the sense they are two separate audiences."

Ross also described this two part audience,

> [My followers are] a conglomerate of people from high school, coworkers, and these folks [gestures to cluster politically minded friends on sociogram]. And sort of these hacks slash activists. If I'm using a hashtag then it can go out there too. So I do have a sense, but it's not a consistent audience.

Others also sensed their Twitter audience was inconsistent and fluctuated over time. Rory mentioned, "Occasionally I'll delve into American politics so then the hashtags will be about Americans." This, she believes, changes her audience. Similarly while Alicia believes she has, "no particular audience, just who ever happens to see it," she also described interacting with others on Twitter while watching Power and Politics, a regular CBC television program focused on national politics.

This sense of the Twitter audience as an inexact and moving target does not deter these opinion leaders from choosing to use Twitter which is an unexpected finding. The flexibility of the audience is strategically used by opinion leaders. For example, as has been noted, Joe claims "my hashtags are strictly strategic. I'll post them to where I want the audience to be." He goes on to explain, "A hashtag to me means I want the people interested in this topic to see what I have to say. I only use it to identify who I want to see it."

The public nature of Twitter accounts means that many others could be hidden in the audience and access the information being shared. When asked why they feel comfortable sharing and discussing political information via a public channel like Twitter, opinion leaders pointed to a sense of anonymity. For example, Emily explained, "I am much more upfront about what I actually think on Twitter because I feel more anonymous. I don't want all of my loose connections [on Facebook] seeing that." Emily wants to be able to share information and express political opinions without necessarily having those messages attributed to her. Informational and social aspects of opinion leadership must be considered independently to understand how Emily uses Twitter to act as an opinion leader sharing information and opinions but also to refrain from using personal influence via social pressure and social support.

Both Linda and Alicia are teachers and they each explain that their students do not follow them on Twitter but are friends on Facebook. Multiple others described similar instances where they are Facebook friends with work colleagues but assume those colleagues do not bother to follow them on Twitter.

In essence, opinion leaders believe that if someone chooses to follow their tweets or search a hashtag they use, they are clearly interested in what is being said. The opinion leader does not feel responsible for offending or annoying them since they elected to follow and could easily un-follow. This is very different from Facebook where becoming friends is not generally based uniquely on receiving posts, but rather

on a more complex social relationship. For example, when asked who her Twitter audience is, Emily explained, "I don't think about it, I'm usually just venting. If I do think about audience it's usually my own little group of prison abolitionists." Her comments point to a disregard for those who may encounter her content.

Further, many opinion leaders describe the benefits of using Twitter on a regular basis as outweighing the risk of upsetting social ties who are not interested in, nor agree upon, political issues encountered on Twitter. For example, Max explained how he was able to replace reliance on newspapers which are quickly dated, "I think there is a mutual exchange of information [on Twitter]." And Luke explained how he looks for "anything that is very insightful or up to date or intuitive," when it comes to Twitter.

Describing why he first began using Twitter, Jason explained,

> I got into it because of the transit strike and was venting about the transit strike and then got into discussions that way. [Twitter] has forced me to be more concise in my arguments and actually useful for my job. It's kind of like the idea of the elevator pitch - but you can't explain your argument in 140 characters then you're probably just being a little too wordy. Being able to make arguments in a more concise manner I think is actually a useful skill you can acquire on there.

Others echo this sentiment commenting on how they benefit from Twitter's format and their ability to engage with those who disagree. They explain this prepares them for future interactions with others who have opposing views. Twitter is not the only channel used to sharpen arguments in this way. Others make use of listservs, email chains, and blogs in order to articulate ideas for an unknown audience - to review, consider, and critique.

While Facebook provides an insufficient amount of control over the audience, other channels do not require the opinion leader to control the audience. Instead of

being concerned about social risk the opinion leader offloads that responsibility to the environment/media context or the audience themselves.

Considering RQ2.6, when it comes to controlling the audience there are two streams of thought about what drives channel choice for political messaging. Channels will be selected if either the audience can be tightly controlled or the responsibility for offending or annoying someone (the social risk) can be offloaded. Digital tools then offer the flexibility needed to avoid or offload social risk but they do so in different ways. This underscores the importance of considering the various tools as having their own distinct characteristics as discussed previously.

5.4 Assessing social risk

There are two components of social risk opinion leaders describe. First is whether or not the communication recipient - the alter - is interested in politics and second, whether or not there is enough of an existing relationship that the recipient will understand the nuances of the message and intention behind it. In other words, the opinion leader's knowledge of the partner and the partner's knowledge of the opinion leader are paramount in assessing the social risk related to political chat.

If the opinion leader is aware that a communication partner or larger audience cares about politics generally, or is likely to care about the particular issue at hand, regardless of political climate, community or tie strength, any channel through which they are connected becomes a potential option. There are, of course, still choices present. As discussed, face-to-face tends to be preferred and other issues of availability and the specific affordances of a given channel also come into play once an interest in politics is established. Indeed, the media properties assessed in the previous results chapter are important but often seem to take second chair to social risk.

For potential communication recipients who are known not to care about politics

or who are thought to likely be offended by the opinion leader's position, there are two responses. One response is the complete avoidance of political chat with that person and the other is engaging only when the issue is considered very important by the opinion leader or appropriate given the political climate. The channel choice in this scenario then depends on the existing relationship the opinion leader and communication partner have which is addressed by the second component to assessing social risk.

Finally if it is unknown what a potential communication partner will think or if they care about politics, the second component to assessing social risk becomes particularly crucial.

Strong ties are thought to "know me well enough" so that even if they do not care about politics, or disagree with an opinion being shared, the communication partner has enough background knowledge and are unlikely to be annoyed or offended (or if they are, it will not significantly damage the relationship).

Unknown/very weak ties on the other hand tend to be potential recipients only in situations where there is a shared interest, for example, in a topic based discussion forum. In cases where an existing shared interest in politics is not established political communication does not pose a significant threat in the eyes of the opinion leader because they do not care if the communication partner(s) is surprised, annoyed, or offended.

Weak ties pose a unique problem in terms of evaluating social risk. Opinion leaders feel close enough to them that they worry about offending or annoying the tie yet are not so close that they necessarily know each other's interest in, or position on, political issues in the context of everyday political chat. A lack of shared experience makes it difficult to navigate unknown territory. "They might not get what I mean," "I don't know what they'll think of it," and similar comments were common reflections when opinion leaders thought about why they avoid certain channels of communication with their weak ties.

Face-to-face communication or abstention from interaction are the options most opinion leaders then select when communicating about politics with weak ties (with the exception of those weak ties that are known to be engaged in politics). Face-to-face communication is perceived as most appropriate for navigating unknown territory, correcting misunderstandings, and smoothing out disagreements. However, face-to-face is limited with weak ties in many instances which means the communication sometimes simply does not take place.

5.5 Conclusion

Media properties such as the richness or leanness of a channel and the normative media context of channel use do impact channel choice. Further, the wide social context, in particular the political climate, is an important factor which impacts both the kinds of channels opinion leaders select and their frequency of use. Notably, opinion leaders make different choices during moments of heightened political activity such as elections and scandal which lead to increased political communication and for some strategic users (champions but not enthusiasts), interaction with wider audiences.

Social pressure, a sense of belonging, and group norms tend to suppress political communication, for example on Facebook, unless the opinion leader perceives the potential audience to be interested, as is the case with topic-based online groups such as Twitter hashtag communities.

Depending on the relationship between the opinion leader and the intended receiver(s) of their political message, the opinion leader selects different channels through which to send political messages. For opinion leaders, talking about politics with certain others is seen to be risky because they may annoy or offend their social ties. In a hybrid media system those ties are not only accessible through a range of channels but the channels themselves sometimes make it possible to com-

municate with a variety of ties and with audiences which are completely unknown at the same time.

In responding to each sub-question in this chapter it becomes evident that the opinion leader's perception of their potential audience is of crucial importance when it comes to making choices about channel. This is because opinion leaders wish to avoid the social risk related to sharing political information and opinions.

Broadly, two components to assessing social risk exist. First, opinion leaders assess whether or not the communication partner or larger audience shares an interest in politics. Second, opinion leaders assess whether or not there is a sufficient existing relationship between themselves and the receiver of their message so that they will understand the nuances of the message and intention behind it. Central to the assessment of social risk is the opinion leader's knowledge of the recipient and the recipient's knowledge of the opinion leader.

Returning to RQ2 and the six related sub-questions, it is evident that channel choice is motivated by a complex collection of factors reflecting the complexity of the hybrid media system in which opinion leaders act. Table 5.2 summarizes the findings.

Evidently the technical affordances, normative media context, political climate and understanding of one's audience all drive channel choice.

Table 5.2: Sub-questions and results

Sub-Question	Enthusiast	Champion
RQ2.1: Media Richness	Important but limited	
RQ2.2: Norms of use	Strict views of appropriateness	Contextual views of appropriateness
RQ2.3: Political climate	Increase existing channel use	Add new channels and tactics
RQ2.4: Community	Not a driver	
RQ2.5: Tie Strength	For political ties only	Contextual, varies
RQ2.6: Audience	Audience a driver but not in expected way	

Chapter 6

Impacts of channel choices made by opinion leaders on their political role

In theory, the opinion leader plays an important political role by interpreting messages from the political elite, informing the uninformed and generating discussion. In doing so the opinion leader shapes public opinion and encourages political awareness and engagement. Chapter 2 highlights the fact that in a hybrid media system opinion leaders are presented with a wide array of choices when it comes to engaging in political chat in terms of the channel they use and the audience they access. The ability to choose impersonal channels and tactics of communication, in particular, threatens to undermine the opinion leader's ability to play their political role and influence others. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that opinion leaders are indeed choosing a range of channels and engaging in communication that is not uniquely interpersonal. The social risk of talking about politics drives strategic use of these channels. Understanding how and why opinion leaders are talking about politics, it is now appropriate to turn to the question of impact. It is important to ask if opinion leaders are able to fulfill the same role as in a mass media environment and/or

whether they take on new roles. The third and final research question addresses this issue:

RQ3 What are the impacts of the channel choices made by digitally enabled opinion leaders on their political role?

In order to respond to this question, this chapter takes each piece of the opinion leader's theoretical role in turn. It is shown that: 1. Opinion leaders do interpret political messages. 2. Opinion leaders rarely reach the uninformed. 3. While opinion leaders do generate discussion it is with the already engaged and largely is not perceived as a means of influence. 4. Rather than shaping the opinions of the public, opinion leaders try to shape the perception of public opinion by attempting to influence the political elite. 5. The strategic communication of opinion leaders narrows their audience and so they are less likely to be able to encourage political awareness or participation among non-engaged others. That said, opinion leaders may contribute to more well-rounded politically aware citizens within that narrow audience.

6.1 Interpreting political messages

In a mass media environment opinion leaders interpret the messages sent out from political elites who control broadcast media. Opinion leaders, interested in politics, pay more attention to the political messages than the general public. The opinion leader, sifting through and interpreting messages on behalf of their associates, produces a better selection of information. In a hybrid media system, as Chapter 4 explains, opinion leaders still pay attention to messages from political elites but also rely on a wider range of sources. This section describes how opinion leaders serve as - what one alter who was interviewed called - "key informants" on specific political

issues for others who they are socially tied to and compared to whom, they are an issue expert. Notably, opinion leaders see their role as one of "setting the stage" rather than influencing others when it comes to interpreting and sharing political messages.

As Chapter 5 explained, some opinion leaders champion specific issues or events and interpret information for the public at particular moments. For example, when they believe an issue or event is very important and/or will be perceived as relevant to those who are normally uninformed, or who are perceived to be uninformed about the particular topic. Both exhibiting characteristics of champions, the youngest and oldest interviewees explain,

Max:

> If there is something that's not just annoying or wrong but reaches the point of being outrageous enough that I think that people ought to know, for example, that recently has been the *Fair Elections Act*, I will take the best thing - article - I find and post it to Facebook.

Ross:

> If what I post on Twitter I [also] post on Facebook it has to be pretty good, and it has to speak towards something massive, rather than, you know: 'Did you know the small regulation in the budget bill is this?' It's not really going to resonate with these people.

Max accesses a wide range of information and then selects only the best to share. His interpretive role has to do with his ability to assess what his audience will want or need and then provide that and only that. Ross similarly considers what will resonate with his Facebook friends before deciding what to share. Champions attempt to provide their interpretation "service" in strategic ways which balances the social risk of talking about politics with those who do not care with the sense of responsibility to express opinions and share pertinent information.

But, from the perspective of the alter, there is another way in which opinion leaders provide new information. Alters speak of seeking out specific others when they are looking for advice or information about particular issues. The social relationship between the opinion leader and the alter is crucial in this instance. When an opinion leader is seen as an expert (relative to the alter) on a given topic, issue or event, they become the "go-to" person on a particular topic or several topics and serve the role of what some call a "key informant." The term key informant was drawn from the language used by one interviewee and is used to describe the specific kind of information delivery and interpretation that opinion leaders sometimes carry out.

Notably, it is not only the uninformed whom rely on opinion leaders in this way. The informed, some of whom are also opinion leaders - with different areas of focus or expertise - also report learning new things from opinion leaders in specific issue-based or event-based areas.

Joe's daughter Lily, a doctoral candidate in western Canada describes her interaction with what she calls key informants. She demonstrates characteristics of opinion leadership herself, is very politically aware and engaged, and regularly writes opinion pieces for Canadian newspapers.

> I go through a few key informants that I have on Facebook. They are some of my closest friends and when something comes up I look to see what they have posted, and when they circulate something, I read it. So I see those people as - I trust in their integrity and intellect and calculation and evaluation and that sort of thing. So I will like keep those people in my back pocket, as people I want to influence me.

This highlights two important characteristics of key informants. First, they are people who are believed to be highly politically aware, knowledgeable and likely of having selected good content to interpret and share. Second, they are within the individual's social circle and are known personally. Indeed when asked how

she selects her key informants Lily explains they are "usually people I've known personally, like face to face. I guess, like, three or four of my go-to people, I've gone to school with them or dated or something like that. I kind of trust them on a personal level and see them as experts at certain things."

Lily also points to the difficulty of measuring the impact of a key informant or determining their influence:

> I don't think it's evident through "shares" or "likes" necessarily, especially when a topic is political. I find out well after publishing something that a person read it and liked it, who I would never expect would and would never assert that on social media - because they might not want to be associated with that post publicly, so I think that's really tough... A lot of people consume and... don't post.

Even in offline settings, Lily describes key informant relationships. For example, her father, Joe. As a teacher Joe is very informed and involved in the teacher's union and education policies. Lily explains,

> I get updates from him so just for example, on the teacher's strike he's aware of what's happening and when, so he will influence me in the sense that he makes me aware of the issues and I generally accept his position on the issue on which he is an expert.

Lily is not alone, others, using different language echo this. Luke explains,

> My neighbour takes me very very seriously on subjects of politics and so do his circle of friends who I've had interaction with; it's a wide circle of friends and I've met about half a dozen of them and they tend to take very seriously my views as the sort of person, the go-to person if they wanted to ask a political question.

This is because Luke is both socially accessible and politically informed. He is an enthusiast who is known for being interested in, and aware of, current affairs in Canada. As such others who are less aware and who know him will seek him out when they have a question.

Barney, a friend Eli first met via Twitter, also explains he will go to Eli to talk about specific issues he likely knows more about.

> I know he is really passionate about certain issues, more on the foreign policy front, I don't care too much about foreign policy. He's vocal on Palestine and what is going on over there and I don't know anything about it and really don't care. If I don't know something, I know that he is kind of a good point man for that sort of thing. Or the NDP and unions. I don't know much about unions, I never belonged to one. I'll ask him questions about that sort of thing. And I've got Conservative friends I'll ask questions to.

It is Eli's interest in, and knowledge of, topics outside of what Barney himself knows that makes Eli an ideal key informant. That said, in some instances the opinion leader is seen as an expert on politics generally.

Marshall, Jess's co-worker explains that he would go to Jess for advice on most things:

> He is by far more politically involved and savvy than I am. So if I ever felt like I wanted to flesh out an idea or wanted to - maybe if I'm going to go to a round table and I wanted to bring up a topic that I felt was really important, I would probably ask Jess: well what do you think about this? I've had a couple of conversations like that. I definitely would see Jess as an adviser in some cases. We don't always agree on every topic, but in a lot of cases we do agree on things and he's got a lot more breadth of knowledge and experience and something like the more

> nitty gritty, like aspects of politics, stuff that I don't know anything about. So I definitely find that if there was a topic, I would love to know what he has to say about it and if I needed assistance in that, he'd be my go to guy for sure.

This underscores the importance of the social relationship between the key informant and the person seeking political information because expertise is measured relative to the other. The opinion leader's message recipient has a social connection to and trust in the opinion leader which makes their view on the topic resonate and feel reliable. When Marshall wants to "flesh out an idea" he is looking for someone who can not only provide information but engage with that information and present it in a meaningful way.

The social connection is the feature that distinguishes the opinion leader from any other information source available (such as an online search, a blog, newspaper etc.) The opinion leaders use their social relationship to interpret content in a way that is relevant to the person they are engaging with.

When opinion leaders are selected as sources of new information it is based both on their relative expertise and the social connection the two communicators have. This kind of interaction is rare but highly effective in terms of changing opinions, attitudes or behaviours (according to alters who report making use of key informants.) The key informant relationship is most reminiscent of the traditional mechanism of influence opinion leaders use where their expertise and social placement allow them to apply social pressure and support.

In fact, alters who describe a key informant relationship all reference the opinion leader's knowledge and social connections as core to their ability to influence others politically. Yet, key informant communication tends to be limited to face-to-face or other interpersonal tactics and channels of communication. As Chapter 4 described, these are the least frequent channels of communication used by opinion leaders.

Ultimately the opinion leader does serve to interpret political messages for oth-

ers. This is the case primarily for those with whom the opinion leader has a social relationship and is done primarily through interpersonal channels. As such, interpreting political messages for others is rare relative to the other forms of political chat digitally enabled opinion leaders engage in.

6.2 Informing the uninformed

While some do seek out information from opinion leaders this is relatively rare. As described in Chapter 5, opinion leaders avoid those who are politically unaware due to social risk. This section shows that the uninformed do not seek out opinion leaders because they assume the opinion leader will come to them either directly or through social media.

Making decisions about when to talk about politics requires a balance between the social risk of engaging in political chat and the benefits of such chat. Benefits of political chat, opinion leaders explain, include self-fulfillment (for example, expressing one's self, learning from others) and fulfilling democratic responsibilities (for example, informing others, contributing to public opinion). These benefits are in question because through strategic channel use opinion leaders are no longer regularly faced with an uninformed public.

While the sample of politically uninformed alters is small, the consensus is clear. Alters assume that either the opinion leader specifically, or the general collection of politically informed others online, will alert them to any crucial political issues. For example, Robin (Max's daughter who lives in the same town) does care about politics but is not highly involved nor an active opinion leader; she explains,

> Because I don't watch television and because I am not consistently listening to news radio either, at this point, ... big stories - either world events or policy moves - I may actually hear about them via Facebook and then take a look at it further on other sources.

Robin relies on her Facebook friends, like Max, to inform her about the most important political issues of the day.

This kind of reliance on others to approach them with political information is not limited to those who are very uninformed. Even opinion leaders who are highly informed commonly seek out others who are also politically aware in order to learn about new issues and perspectives.

For example, Marshall explains that while he does seek out some political information on his own, he is not as informed as some of this other friends and relies on them when they are accessible.

> I get a lot of news from Jess, it's funny. Jess and I will talk politics every once in a while and every once in a while he'll let me know what's going on on something I maybe missed in the news. He'll provide a little bit more detail about that. And, I have another friend - we chat on Facebook and she is fairly right wing and so she'll let me know what issues are on that front. Between Jess and her I get both ends of the spectrum. And they, they'll inform me just through general conversation. I'll be, like: I didn't even realize that was happening. And then that will probably involve an Internet search to get a bit more detail.

Others describe navigating to news outlets they never, or rarely, use because a friend posted it on Facebook, it was on the Reddit homepage or someone retweeted a link on Twitter. For those who actively make use of social media as a filter for accessing political information, this is the primary way they become informed. Serendipitous encounters with information is an expectation, this is despite trends suggesting these chance encounters will become rarer (Prior, 2005; Sunstein, 2002).

This points to an important distinction between Robin, or others like her, and all opinion leaders interviewed. Robin replaces a reliance on watching the evening news or reading tweets from a news outlet or journalist with a reliance on serendipitous encounters. Her channel use is not designed to access political information instead

she assumes that information will come across her channel when pertinent. Opinion leaders supplement their own political information accessing strategies and/or intentionally make use of channels where they are likely to come across political information.

In particular Facebook, which Robin notes is a source of political information for her, is believed to be an ideal site for encountering political information serendipitously. Indeed, opinion leaders who champion issues post on Facebook in hopes that the politically uninformed will stumble across their content.

Yet, as Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, Facebook is the one channel where almost every opinion leader carefully curates and limits their political posting specifically because the uninformed might encounter it. Enthusiasts tend to avoid engaging politically on Facebook altogether (save politics focused groups or private messages) and champions limit their Facebook political chat to moments of heightened political tension and activity. And so two divergent activities take place. While individuals believe they and the general public will encounter political messages on Facebook, they are also actively avoiding contributing such content. Thus, the strategy of opinion leaders may be exacerbating the existing trend Prior (2005, p. 577) (referencing Sunstein (2002)) describes wherein, "as media choice increases, the likelihood of "chance encounters" with any political content declines significantly for many people."

Since both the opinion leaders and the uninformed avoid interacting with each other, the opinion leader is rarely faced with the fact that there are those among the general population or even within their own social circle who are not politically aware. When one can make use of technology in order to avoid the uniformed and the uninformed do not make themselves known, it is easy to overlook their presence. Consequently, opinion leaders interviewed had a hard time identifying individuals with whom they talk about politics but who they do not consider actively politically aware or engaged: Among enthusiasts, on average they could name less than three

very close or somewhat close ties; Among champions this rate was somewhat higher with two opinion leaders noting over 15 ties but the majority of other opinion leaders mentioning between 5 and 10 ties. This political chat with those who are uninformed is rare for both enthusiasts and champions.

When attempting to balance the social risk of talking about politics with the benefits of engaging in political chat, this lack of interaction with the uninformed is crucial. For opinion leaders, cutting out interaction with the uninformed does not prevent them from feeling fulfilled or feeling as if they have contributed sufficiently to the democratic system. At the same time there is little social risk because they are not engaging with those who are uninformed. However, this lack of interaction means that one piece of the equation is obscured and so the balance opinion leaders strike actually further alienates the (invisible) uninformed public.

Ultimately, opinion leaders avoid influencing the uninformed but the uninformed assume the opinion leaders will influence them. Beyond severing ties of communication, the strategic approach of opinion leaders does not embrace a sense that reaching out to the uninformed would or could be a valuable form of influence.

6.3 Generating discussion

Opinion leaders do generate discussion and debate among other opinion leaders and those already politically engaged. The most regular discussion happens online through Twitter and some discussion boards or Facebook groups. The social relationship an opinion leader has with their discussants is of secondary importance and is not considered a necessity for successful discussion. It should be noted, success here is not measured in terms of influence per se. Typically opinion leaders do not feel they are exerting political power or being influential through this discussion.

Of alters interviewed, all but two actively seek out political information regularly

and 16 are likely opinion leaders.[1] Explaining their own everyday political chat, the majority also engage primarily with others who are already politically aware. Discussions between these politically aware individuals typically focus on current affairs issues. Unlike in the context of an opinion leader acting as a key informant on a specific issue or event, these discussions tend to be wide-ranging.

Even among those who are connected via specific topic based groups, the discussion often covers a wide range of topics. For example, Eli and Ted originally connected when Ted reached out to Eli to create a venue for discussions of Christianity and socialism. Together they created a Facebook group where they, along with 5-10 others, regularly post articles and opinions on the subject. The group is open and there are additional members who rarely participate. On the first Sunday of each month members of the group are invited to meet in person for a discussion. Over the past three years Eli and Ted have met in person every few months, interacted on Facebook weekly and exchanged the odd email. Often their conversations are political but they are not always restricted to Christianity and socialism.

For example, Ted describes how he sees Eli as having varying areas of expertise,

> There are three areas I know of him politically. One is on issue of Christianity expert, I see he's written on the subject, he knows a lot about it, so expert. On the issue of actual practical politics, campaign manager and political campaigns, constituency president in important federal ridings - I'd say party organization, expert. And the third area is Israel and Palestine. He cares a lot about that issue, and I would call him an expert.

Similarly Ted notes the areas in which he feels Eli has influenced his political opinions, attitudes and behaviours,

[1] This is despite explicitly attempting to seek out and interview alters who are not themselves opinion leaders or highly politically engaged.

> On the first issue, Christianity he suggested a very important book - didn't necessarily change my outlook, I did not do a 180 but it really enriched my understanding. And secondly on Israel and Palestine, I do not in any way, I don't like his position that much, but it has forced me to temper my own position. I realize there are really good, well informed voices on the other side.

Ted and Eli's relationship is common among others who are politically aware. Whether enthusiasts or champions, they often end up discussing a variety of issues across a range of channels.

Whereas previously a social connection was typically a pre-requisite for engaging in political discussions, in a hybrid media system it is not. As noted, opinion leaders increasingly select channels of communication which do not necessitate a social bond. Though the example of Eli and Ted highlights a strong social bond, this is rare compared with the frequent online discussions they each have with those they are not strongly, or even weakly, socially tied to.

Take Twitter, for example. Opinion leaders choose Twitter for political discussion explaining it offers exposure to a wide variety of ideas, informed individuals, and opportunities to hone and sharpen arguments. Rarely do opinion leaders refer to social connections to explain their Twitter use. Alters using Twitter tend to agree.

For example, when explaining who he hopes to influence with his political talk Ted explains,

> I go to Metafilter and the other two discussion boards. What I like is: it's open. Anybody can join. It's not designed for particular ideologies or orientations and so you can have a conversation about anything... I feel it's an open audience, more or less distant people... putting out provocative ideas.

Ted explains that most people on the board are "distant" and do not know each other well. He explains the social relationship between users,

> You get to know some people over time. I've been doing this for many years and there's people I recognize and one or two with whom I'm friendly, even just outside the discussion board now, we are more or less like pals. I've never seen them. It is sort of anonymous and sort of not. Everyone uses a handle but in my profile is my full name. It's whatever you want from it. I don't want any close friends. I got one or two just cause they are exceptional individuals, I think. Generally it is for exchanging ideas, pure ideas.

The draw of this kind of discussion board is that people who are highly aware and informed opt-in and those unaware and uninformed do not. Through self-selection there is a higher quality of ideas being exchanged. Ted is not alone, Luke spoke similarly about the Monarchy related discussion boards he is active on and other interviewees referred to topic specific Facebook groups and clusters of Twitter users in similar ways. Consistently, it is the caliber of content users produce and their intellect that is valued, with explicit disregard for the any possible social relationship.

Further, opinion leaders who present as informative, quick witted and intelligent are seen as most worth following and engaging in discussion with, on Twitter.

Luke, a freelancer in the film industry who has a small social network explains why he makes use of Twitter for his political engagement:

> If I have the opportunity to talk to someone. I suppose the only other thing that wasn't political that I would talk about would be history, I love history. I spend a lot of time in isolation. I work on an on call basis and I haven't done much work recently and so I have a lot more time to sit with the computer by myself and carry on with Twitter. If I go out and about, in society, I don't have a wide group of friends and they may

> or may not want to talk about politics 24/7. And then strangers you bump into, you're not supposed to bring up such contentious subjects, they may not want you talking at all, let alone something like that.

For Luke, who describes himself as an introvert, Twitter does not provide a social connection but instead replaces the need for them. Cary echoes this sentiment pointing to the non-social utility of Twitter engagement. He explains why he chooses Twitter or newspaper comment sections online over interpersonal channels of communication:

> Well because it's not social. Because it's about the idea and people are there to discuss an idea. Talking at least, the social aspect, if there is a meal involved, you don't want to start raising voices cause someone might get emotional or have to shut it down cause you realize you touched it.

This disregard for the social relationship between communicators is evident across channels which allow for impersonal and quasi-personal communication. This is the case even when those channels are being used for more direct and interpersonal means such as when having a one-on-one conversation on Twitter. Conversely, social connections matter greatly in offline settings or via other channels which are primarily interpersonal such as email (excluding listservs) or Facebook messenger.

Virginia a close friend of Kirk and former political candidate for whom Kirk worked, recounted an evening she spent with Kirk and his wife who also worked on her campaign,

> Well I would certainly not ask his advice on how I should vote, although just as recently as this past Friday the three of us went out to a jazz concert and most of the conversational time before and in the intermission was spent talking about whether we still wanted to vote Liberal or whether we should switch to the Green Party. This is a major topic

> when we get together, and I think it is because we know we have similar feelings but also we are each interested in what the other has to say about it. So I think it is the best of that kind of relationship, it is not one person haranguing another, it's the three of us talking about, 'we're disappointed about this,' and 'does that mean we should change something,' that sort of thing. It is a conversation among people who care about a subject, it is not just cynical political conversation, if you know what I mean.

Virginia emphasizes the importance of knowing each other and each other's political views and feelings. Kirk also felt similarly talking about how Virginia might come to him for advice on climate change or campaign issues because she knows him well enough to trust and respect his point of view.

When considering political discussion or debate via Twitter and online discussion boards, personal relationships between communicators are seen as largely inconsequential. Via other channels the social relationship maintains relevance. That said, across channels opinion leaders and alters are hesitant to characterize their interaction as examples of influence or event advising.

In theory, part of the democratic role of the opinion leader is generating political discussion and debate. Their ability to engage others in conversations about political issues is thought of as a demonstration of political power. However, when alters who are already informed and/or opinion leaders themselves are asked about getting or giving advice it is almost exclusively re-defined to be conversational. Most interviewees hasten to explain that they do not try to advise, nor to influence, but instead intend to provide a new perspective.[2]

For example, Dan who is a friend of Richard explains, "I don't go to people for

[2]It could be hypothecized that an attempt to avoid influencing others is specific to the (stereotypical) polite Canadian culture. Future studies can speak to the generalizability of such a statement.

advice. I might ask people what they think, at work, for example, I'll see my friend and I'll say 'What do you think of this' - and he'll say one thing and I'll say my thing and we'll talk."

Dan further emphasizes the value of discussion over influence (rather than influencing emerging as a result of discussion). In response to the question of whether he is influential,

> My daughter, to a point. She's 21. But I try to make a point, again with her, to let her get her opinions. She asked me stuff, I remember she was eight or nine years old asking me stuff about, during some election, I think we were living in Newfoundland and she was asking me about the Provincial election and she asked me how I was going to vote and I explained to her the policies of the three parties and then she said which one are you going to do and I said I think I'm going to vote for Brian Tobin the Liberal Party and she said 'Why?' and I told her why and she said 'That sounds pretty sensible to me. So her, ya, but I try to give her - not as much now because she's a grown adult, but I used to always try to give her the other side of the argument. I think it is only fair. You're not trying to make little copies of yourself. Now when it is hockey or something, there is only one way to look at things, but when it is politics it is different (laugh) approaches and solutions.

Dan's feelings about using political discussion to flesh out ideas and share view points without the intent of changing people's opinions, attitudes or behaviours is common. Yet the examples interviewees provide to support this kind of claim also provide evidence that opinions, attitudes or behaviours do change as a result of such discussion.

For example, when Alf was asked whether he can think of any times his friend Cary influenced his political opinions, attitudes or behaviours he explained,

> Other than informing me about something I haven't heard about, yep, I would say. So I might follow up with some article or more detail if it was something he knew about and read about. So I would say *expand*, I wouldn't say *influence*. Expand my knowledge about something.

In this case conversations with Cary alert Alf to issues he is not informed on, convince him they are worth investigating and prompt him to seek out further information. Alf also explains that he and Cary have the same ideas and so influence is rarely a possibility. Instead, he laughs, "I don't go for advice but go to commiserate is more accurate."

Alicia talks about wanting to persuade people to vote (i. e. change their behaviour) but not to sway people to voter her way. She clarifies, "But I wouldn't say influential." Similarly, Carlos explains the impact of discussion with his father (Max),

> I'm a very stubborn person, so is my father - We'll discuss things and mutually come to compromises through discussion, but I can't think of anything specifically where he had a specific beef and sold me on something that I would not believe otherwise. He'll certainly adapt to my thinking just through conversation.

Zach, explaining his relationship to his alters, similarly talks about political discussions and offers,

> Advice is not the right word, I think it is more an explanation. If something has been kind of simmering for a while and then all of a sudden it is big news, like the Dean Del Mastro trial - my partner said 'I heard this guy was on trial, what was it for?' And then I'm able to fill in back story.[3]

[3]Dean Del Mastor was a Member of Parliament in Canada who was convicted with three counts

Repeatedly opinion leaders and their alters offer new framings for what influence is. While it is easy to say this is a matter of semantics, the distinct language individuals use is telling of a deeper issue. Engaging in this kind of discussion where ideas are shared, explanations offered and new perspectives provided, does not make the opinion leader feel as if they have been influential nor as if they have changed the course of politics in any meaningful way. Opinion leaders do not see their political discussions as being democratically crucial or as evidence of any political power. Instead the benefit of discussion and debate is self-fulfillment, new perspectives and sharper arguments.

These individuals go out of their way to learn from others who have different perspectives. When deciding which channels to use and who to engage, opinion leaders and alters alike look for others who are intelligent, quick and interesting. Alters report substantial learning from discussion with opinion leaders. They rely on discussions with these opinion leaders in order to bring up new issues and point to new perspectives. Almost three in four alters referenced being exposed to new perspectives as a benefit of engaging in political discussion with the opinion leader in question.

The politically aware strive to bring new information, perspectives and ideas to conversations. They use channels of communication to access audiences who opt-in to political discussion and are highly knowledgeable. Ultimately this approach to discussion with the already aware leads to well-rounded informed citizens. As such, the approach opinion leaders take in a hybrid media system does lead to democratically valuable discussion and debate but this is limited to those who opt-in.

of breaking the Elections Act which include exceeding the elections spending limit, donating over the personal limit and falsifying documents.

6.4 Shaping public opinion, or at least how it is perceived

Beyond discussion with the politically aware, shaping public opinion is not a concern for opinion leaders as they do not consistently engage with that general public. However, shaping the way political elites perceive public opinion is a main intention of many opinion leaders. Opinion leaders attempt to influence the political elite either by engaging in online political chat that they hope elites are "listening" to or by explicitly attempting to reach out to political elites to offer story ideas, alternative perspectives, or newsworthy campaigns. While influencing the elite is thought to be the least common outcome of political chat, it is also the most valued measure of political influence in the minds of opinion leaders.

The chat approach is employed primarily by enthusiasts who assume that online, political elites pay attention to those in the general public who are prolific, intelligent and thought provoking. Enthusiasts interact with political elites as they do with any other politically aware individuals using Twitter, or other channels which provide access to unknown audiences. Enthusiasts assume the political elite are looking for the same things they themselves look for when following new accounts, taking opinions seriously (or not) and engaging in discussion. Subsequently, they measure success in similar ways. On Twitter this means mentioning, re-tweeting and favouriting.

Considering their success in reaching the elite, opinion leaders note:

Alicia

> "Occasionally, very occasionally, politicians or former politician will re-tweet or favourite."

Cary

> "And sometimes I'll get a Twitter back from Rosemary Barton, or Kady O'Malley even Tweeted back to me at one point, which is flattering cause

she's bombarded."

Max

"There are people that I send messages to, or retweet messages with a comment that is intended for them and others. One would be Andrew Coyne, another is Kady O'Malley... Every once in a while [someone will respond]. I even got one from Trudeau once!"

Interaction with the political elite on Twitter and elsewhere is rare. Of all opinion leaders interviewed only three were mentioned or retweeted by a journalists or politicians on Twitter during the two weeks prior to being interviewed.[4] But as Taylor explains, attention from the political elite is not the only reason to try. "Sometimes it's directly right at, say it's Jason Kenney, for example, on the temporary foreign worker program. Maybe you get a message across to him, maybe [he's] not listening to me in particular. But they get enough of these, maybe they'll wake up.[5]"

Linda provides another example which makes similar claims about the value of Tweeting to political elites.

> [The Minister] tweeted something like, find your path, and people who are movers and shakers in education reply back to him; 'it is easier to find your path if you have adequate and sustainable funding.' And if [the Minister] was at 20 retweets, then the person criticizing him gets 400 retweets, then it makes him sweat a little bit, not that [the Minister] manages his own account, but the ministry staff is small and pays attention. So it is sort of a way of applying pressure.[6]

[4]While this is a small sample of their tweets it remains instructive. Further, when paired with evidence that political elite within #CDNpoli do not engage in conversation with non-elite on Twitter (see Chapter 5), the rarity of interaction is convincing.

[5]Jason Kenney is a Member of Parliament in Canada and has served as the Minister of National Defense, Minister of Employment and Social Development, Minister for Multiculturalism and Minister for Citizenship and Immigration over his nearly 17 years in office.

[6]The name of the Minister in question has been removed to maintain anonymity of the interviewee.

The underlying logic is that at a minimum the opinion leader gets to contribute to society through discussion and debate. They get the self-fulfillment of sharing their own opinions and creating content. At best, they also influence political elites and this *potential* is sufficient for feeling as if they are contributing democratically.

This influence is demonstrated, opinion leaders argue, either by being mentioned or retweeted by political elites or by political elites making use of a body of content the opinion leader contributed to, for example a #CDNpoli search, in order to gain a sense of public opinion. Both show that the political elite have paid attention to the content the opinion leader has produced and incorporated it into their thinking to some extent.

This relies on an assumption that the political elite will view the opinion leader as simply an average citizen. The enthusiast is, in this sense, a vessel for public opinion. Their personal relationship to the journalist, politician or other elites in question is largely inconsequential.

Of those enthusiasts who claim to influence or try to influence the political elite, there is only partial evidence this strategy works. As noted above, there is very limited interaction between elites and opinion leaders on Twitter and no opinion leader reported a specific instance of engagement with any political elites via any other online channel (this excludes any volunteer or paid work done for a politician or political party).

Ultimately the enthusiast's approach, whereby the opinion leader contributes to online chatter in hopes that it garners the attention of the political elite, is limited in its effectiveness. Nevertheless, at an aggregate level enthusiasts believe there is enough evidence of this kind of influence from themselves to the elite occurring that they continue to engage.

In contrast, champions take an approach designed to gain the attention of media. Though not necessarily activists or professional campaigners themselves, champions borrow campaign logic to bring a certain issue or perspectives to the fore and influ-

ence the media or policy agenda(s) and angle(s).

For example, Logan describes a campaign he ran in Alberta in order to put pressure on a politician who Logan believed was intentionally neglecting a small community. Logan worked with others to create a Facebook group and campaign that gained media attention. They asked for donations in order to cover the cost of a trip for the politician to visit the community. This campaign was creative and newsworthy. While informing the public of an environmental issue the campaign also garnered media attention and put pressure on the government.

The rationale is that an event or campaign that is interesting or surprising enough will be newsworthy and thus reported on. Mainstream media attention will then generate greater awareness among the general public as well as other political elites, such as politicians. As noted, Logan makes use of a variety of channels in concert in order to reach the widest audience possible. "There's a wider readership in the Edmonton journal than anything I could write," Logan explains. Even outside of the context of a campaign, Zach, Kirk and Lily all described similar reasoning when explaining why they choose to write letters to the editor or opinion editorials.

Indeed, mainstream media attention is the first mark of success. The social connection an opinion leader has to certain others can be used to generate attention and interest from a public which may not otherwise be interested. For example, Logan encourages his friends to re-tweet links and use hashtags for initiatives he works on. However, it is not sufficient to engage with only those one is socially tied to. Expanding to a much wider audience is a desire many champions express.

Notably, this kind of approach takes much more effort on the part of the opinion leader and is much less frequent. Even though these opinion leaders can reference examples of successes, they also have examples of failures. In other words, like the enthusiasts, champions are faced with low returns on investment when it comes to attempting to influence the political elite.

That said, the ability to influence the political elite is the only kind of influence

many opinion leaders are willing to explicitly state they hope to accomplish. For most interviewees "influence" is seen as a negative thing which runs counter to the principles of democracy such as freedom of speech and opinion. The political elite who, in theory, are supposed to represent the views of the public and also have political power, are the only ones it is acceptable to overtly try to influence.

This form of influence is undertaken primarily online. Indeed, one of the reasons opinion leaders choose to engage in political chat online is because they can access journalists, politicians and other publicly influential individuals.

Joe explains the kinds of content he posts on Twitter,

> I always try to talk - try to keep close to some reporters and I had to try to influence them, by just throwing in a little question and, kind of turning their head - as you would a child: look at this, look at that. Not to sound condescending, but I do try. That's part of my activism, I guess, trying to alert mainstream reporters to other sides of issues. Most of the mainstream reporters work for papers that are heavily influenced by large corporations, or papers or news outlets, but I do believe that most reporters also, the core of them, they want to be journalists, and balanced and intellectual. Most of them are at least clear thinking enough to look at both sides of an issue. So I try to show them the other side. That's my activism I guess. Trying to sway people who have political clout.

This example represents a common theme. Opinion leaders agree that shifting the focus of mainstream media is a meaningful measure of influence. Further, it is the core measure of success many opinion leaders and alters point to when asked to explain how one knows if an opinion leader is influential. Yet, while interaction with political elites may be thought of as evidence of influence it is relatively rare. In the two weeks prior to each interview, all tweets made by and containing mentions of the opinion leader in question were collected. Among these tweets there are just two cases of a member of the political elite in Canada responding to an opinion leader.

This is in keeping with research indicating limited use of Twitter by Canadian political elites for interactive purposes (Small, 2011).

Enthusiasts and champions take two distinct approaches to influencing the political elite: chat and campaign. Both capitalize on impersonal communication via channels such as Twitter. The online communication that opinion leaders and their alters equate to influence do not involve deep social ties, even for tools like Facebook where interaction is often more personal.

Both the chat-based approach of enthusiasts and the campaign-based approach of champions point to hybridity. Enthusiasts use one channel, and often the same content, to engage in discussion with other average citizens while also attempting to send a message to political elites. Enthusiasts mesh together divergent aims by publicly discussing items that could be discussed privately via some other channel. Champions embed the logic of campaigns and borrow from political strategists, advocates and journalists in order to shift the focus of political elites.

The hybrid approaches taken by opinion leaders as they attempt to influence the political elite underscore the fact that the availability of channels does change the ways opinion leaders can exert political influence.

6.5 Conclusion: Outcomes for political awareness and participation

The types of influence opinion leaders want and the factors they consider the chief measures of success are also the least common and least accessible. While interpreting political messages and informing the uninformed seem like low hanging fruit, the risk of engaging with the wide public paired with a media system that allows the informed and the uninformed to drift further apart, suggest it is not seen as a valid or worthwhile goal. Informing the uninformed may not be as fun or exciting as engaging in debate with those who are aware, or getting mentioned by powerful

elite.

Engaging in and generating discussion and debate with the already aware public is common. This appears to lead to a more well-rounded political citizenry in terms of the range of perspectives and ideas a politically aware individual is exposed to. This discussion with those who opt-in to politics does not necessitate strong personal ties and in that sense selecting channels of communication, which are quasi-personal or impersonal, does not have a negative impact on how influential an opinion leader might be.

As such, when it comes to shaping public opinion these strategic opinion leaders are not adept at connecting with the public nor is this a goal. Instead these opinion leaders strategically use their (primarily online) channels of communication to shape how the political elite perceive public opinion. Influencing the political elite occurs rarely but is considered the most important way to measure an individual's political power. To influence the political elite, strong personal ties are not required and indeed it is the ability to use impersonal and quasi-personal channels of communication which have introduced the possibility of influencing the political elite to the tool kit of average opinion leaders.

Ultimately opinion leaders are undermining their potential political power in their own strategic use of communication channels. Most opinion leaders use technology to bypass those who they are most likely to be able to consistently influence and encourage to participate (their social ties who are uninformed). A small group of champions present an exception. However, opinion leaders do make strategic use of these tools in order to potentially influence wider audiences including those who are aware but do not necessarily have the same view or area of focus and the political elite. While opinion leaders may have greater influence over an audience's perspective, in terms of political engagement and participation, these are an audience of already active citizens and so any change is likely marginal.

In short, opinion leaders in the hybrid media system are using technology in a

way that narrows their potential for increasing participation.

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusion: The opinion leader and their political role

In a hybrid media system where opinion leaders are equipped with tools of communication allowing them to source and disseminate political information in a wide variety of ways, these personal influencers are making strategic choices. Two contrasting profiles of opinion leaders emerged. The enthusiast is one who seeks out others also politically tuned in, aware and making use of the hybrid media system. They avoid the social risk of political chat almost entirely while still fulfilling their need to express their opinions and sharpen their arguments. The champion is one who, at moments of political unrest, scandal or excitement strategically changes their communication practices in order to reach out to wider audiences. The champion borrows from communication strategists and public relations professionals in order to develop an approach that will reach the non-aware when it matters most. Ultimately in the hybrid media system opinion leaders are exceptionally good at generating political discussion among the already engaged but are also disconnected from the wider public who do not self-select into political chat.

This chapter first provides a summary of findings before articulating the way personal influence is conceptualized in a hybrid media system. Next, the implications of the strategic approaches of enthusiasts and champions are examined considering the ways in which opinion leaders interact with other citizens and political elites.

7.1 Summary of Findings

The first research question (RQ1) asked what patterns of communication opinion leaders exhibit as they access and disseminate political information. It is found that opinion leaders have daily routines for information. First they seek information from mainstream media directly or via a filter such as Twitter, Google Alerts or news aggregators. Opinion leaders looks for information that is up to date, credible, reliable and new. Notably, the social nature of Twitter and ability to follow others who are not media professionals is not the draw. Instead the connection to elites and/or the connection to those who are knowledgeable and provide high quality content is the most crucial aspect. This underscores the difference between informational and social aspects of opinion leadership.

In the second step of information access, once the opinion leader has established a base of high quality content, more social approaches to information access come into play. The second step is initiated when the opinion leader has spare time and often involves discussion with others who are politically aware. Lastly, some channels of communication are on in the background such as radio or Twitter. Like in the first step of information access, the source of information is either mainstream media or trusted content providers who are pre-identified as being able to distribute high quality content.

Unsurprisingly, given the sampling strategy, Twitter is a common channel for political information access for all opinion leaders interviewed. However, it is noteworthy that Twitter is the sole channel which is used as the primary source of

information for some, a second step where information is accessed when the opinion leader has extra time, and as a channel for access that is simply on in the background. The use of Twitter is tactical and different opinion leaders embed different approaches into their daily routines. This speaks to the importance of considering the strategic use of channels and of designing methodological approaches which are responsive to these kinds of potential differences.

In terms of disseminating political information opinion leaders demonstrate different patterns of communication based on the audience they are attempting to engage with, be it the general public, the political elite, or their social ties.

These findings suggest that social relationships are not of top importance for opinion leaders when accessing information. This is even though the hybrid media system could allow opinion leaders to very easily filter information based on their social ties, for example by choosing to follow accounts on Twitter based on friendship rather than quality of content or by making Facebook a primary source of political information. This is perhaps not surprising given that opinion leaders have always been conceptualized as preferring mainstream media content as compared to non-opinion leaders (Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Keller & Berry, 2003). Concurrently, when disseminating political information opinion leaders are making use of the changed channels and types of audiences available in the hybrid media system. Opinion leaders take different approaches to political information dissemination based on the type of audience they aim to connect with. This points to an important level of complexity in the strategic thinking of opinion leaders.

Having identified the strategic nature of opinion leaders as they disseminate political information, research question two (RQ2) (and six sub-questions) asks what motivates the opinion leader's choice of channel. It is shown that the technical capacity of a channel to communicate non-verbal or non-textual cues and the norms of a channel are important drivers in channel choice but are secondary to the perceived social risk of political communication with particular audiences. Opinion

leaders are most concerned with disseminating political information to those who have not opted into receiving that information. This is particularly relevant when an opinion leader is socially but not strongly tied to a potential audience member. The factors that come into play are the political climate, how strongly or weakly tied the opinion leader is to their potential receiver and whether or not the audience is known. A sense of community does not seem to come into play.

These findings suggest that the social nature of political communication is indeed relevant. Opinion leaders are thought to be influential because they can exert social pressure and social support upon their everyday associates. Opinion leaders may increase their influence by strategically selecting channels and audiences that allow them to exert that social pressure and support most efficiently and effectively. However, this is not necessarily the case. In avoiding social risk, opinion leaders often avoid the politically unaware and those to whom they are weakly tied - the very audiences they are best socially placed to influence.

Research question three (RQ3) examines the impact of opinion leaders' strategic choices about channels and shows that while opinion leaders do help interpret political messages, they rarely connect with the uninformed and their political discussion tends to be limited to be with those who have opted into the conversation. Neither chatting with uninformed social ties nor discussing and debating with others who are politically tuned in are seen as important means of influence by most opinion leaders or their alters. Instead, attempts to shape how public opinion is perceived by the political elite is thought of as a crucial way opinion leaders exert influence on their political system. Ultimately this approach to opinion leadership relies less on social pressure and support than on appearing to be knowledgeable content experts with interesting or entertaining things to contribute to conversations among the existing political class. Rather than drawing citizens into the political process and encouraging participation, opinion leaders are cutting ties to the uninformed.

These findings suggest the process of opinion leadership is in fact different in a

hybrid media system. There is now a mechanism of influence that does not rely on social connection in the repertoire of digitally enabled opinion leaders. Further, the decreasing use of social pressure and social support by digitally enabled opinion leaders paired with increasing efforts to appear influential based on the content one produces lead to significantly different outcomes of opinion leaders' political communication. With these findings in mind the remainder of this chapter examines the mechanisms of influence digitally enabled opinion leaders have available to them and then discusses the potential implications considering a just-in-time informed citizenry. The just-in-time informed citizenry which I propose refers to a scenario in which the average citizen who does not opt in to politics and is largely not politically aware is only ever confronted with political information at the last possible moment before they are expected to act politically (e.g. voting in an election).

7.2 Mechanisms of influence

This section briefly reviews the traditional process of personal influence as it relates to opinion leadership. Next, the mechanisms of influence used by digitally enabled opinion leaders are articulated and their context of use is explained.

7.2.1 Why personal influence does not necessarily imply interpersonal communication

In a mass media environment one's personal influence was necessarily tied to the ability to make use of social pressure and social support. Personal influence required a social connection and interpersonal communication. The utility of personal influence, researchers argued, was that communicators engaging in interactions often have similar values, that there is an opportunity for two-way communication and feedback, that there are cues beyond simply the information (for example intensity

of feeling) and that personal influence is harder to "turn off" or avoid (Rogers & Beal, 1957; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009).

Personal influence becomes a much more complex concept in a hybrid media system. In a hybrid media system the influence an average person may have extends beyond face-to-face communication to include interpersonal communication (e.g. phone calls, text messages and video calls) as well as quasi-personal communication (e.g. posting on Facebook or other semi-private social networking sites) and impersonal communication (e.g. contributing to anonymous discussion boards online.) Therefore, some assumptions made about why and how personal influence functions no longer hold true. Communication no longer occurs primarily between those who are likely to have shared values. Channels of communication have varying levels of richness allowing, or not allowing, for feedback and extra-informational cues. Finally, it is unclear whether or not influence via these changed channels can easily be "turned off."

As described in Chapter 5, digitally enabled opinion leaders use different channels and tactics depending on their personal relationship to their audience. Opinion leaders also consider the media properties of a channel when deciding which one to use for political communication and do so in accordance with the kind of message they are sending. Ultimately, digitally enabled opinion leaders make use of channel of communication in order to "turn off" their influence on behalf of those they assume would not be interested. They see the increased channel choice offered in a hybrid media system as solving the problem wherein they may communicate to, and potentially influence, those who do not want to be faced with such messages.

The deeply strategic nature of opinion leaders' everyday political chat suggests that the existing conceptualization of personal influence is insufficient. Personal influence in a hybrid media system should be thought of as related to the communicator or source (i.e. the person) rather than the channel or type of communication. This is in line with other work in related fields. For example, Buttle (1998, p. 243)

explains that definitions of word of mouth marketing (WOM) are insufficient in their emphasis on the channel through which WOM occurs and thus defines WOM as "uttered by sources who are assumed by receivers to be independent of corporate influence." WOM research is closely tied to research on personal influence and often references Katz and Lazarsfeld's work as the instigator for this line of scholarship and practice. The key point Buttle (1998) makes is that someone's ability to influence is inherently connected to them and how they are perceived by others and not to the channel of communication they use. Despite defining personal influence as requiring face-to-face interaction, even Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) point to the personal characteristics of opinion leaders, for example topic area expertise. Similarly, in public relations the personal influence model describes how professionals make use of their social connections, status and whether or not they are perceived by others to be credible in order to influence others (Toth, 2000).

Researchers distinguish professional uses of personal influence and non-professional (often called informal) uses of personal influence (Carl, 2006; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Rogers & Beal, 1957). These distinctions are valuable for understanding the impact and role of institutional affiliation or paid WOM campaigns. Despite distinguishing between types of people who use personal influence, that influence has continued to be examined in terms of use of specific channels rather than across channels or in the context of a complex system. Even within electronic WOM research where online interaction is considered, it is primarily interpersonal interaction that is measured and/or little attention is paid to the underlying mechanism of influence when something other than interpersonal communication is being examined. Further, in a hybrid media system the distinction between professional and informal is harder to tease out since both groups tend to borrow from each other in their tactics of communication (Chadwick, 2013). This provides further support for the need to re-think the definition of personal influence to include the influence of a person in a variety of, and potentially quickly changing, roles or sets of roles.

By thinking of personal influence as related to an individual rather than a type of communication we can account for the strategic and hybrid approaches they may take in their communications. The digitally enabled opinion leaders within this study exemplify how individuals may exert influence through a variety of types of communication. Notably, the impact of such personal influence does vary across approach.

7.2.2 Two mechanisms of personal influence and contributions to collective action

The traditional mechanism of personal influence employed by opinion leaders relies on social pressure and social support. The opinion leader accesses information and transmits it to their social ties via interpersonal communication. Among opinion leaders, enthusiasts and champions alike, traditional types of personal influence remain popular. They still engage in face-to-face and interpersonal communication with their social ties, preferring it for political discussion and opinion sharing as Chapter 4 shows. This is the mechanism of influence in play when opinion leaders oft serve as key informants (see Chapter 6).

Social pressure and social support continue to be highly effective as a mechanism of influence for both enthusiasts and champions. Yet among opinion leaders the mechanism is undervalued and avoided with certain audiences. Research to date tends to accept, and works with, the notion that opinion leaders rely on social pressure and social support both on and offline (Flynn et al., 1996; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). While some research shows that a significant proportion of the population continue to rely on conversation with their friends and family in making decisions about voting and other important political decisions (Norris & Curtice, 2008), opinion leaders in this study consistently report avoiding the very situations where their social placement would make them most influential. Further, in the Canadian context specifically, only 39% of Canadians have had a conversation they

consider political in the past year (Hilderman et al., 2015).

Most opinion leaders do not see their everyday political chat with their social ties as a form of influence despite its apparent success in shifting opinion and behaviours. Regardless, because it involves a lot of social risk, this mechanism of influence is rare with anyone other than those who have already explicitly opted-in to political chat.

In a hybrid media system a second mechanism of personal influence emerges among opinion leaders. Rather than relying on social pressure and social support, digitally enabled opinion leaders sometimes rely on content-based influence. This could be related to what (Van Eck et al., 2011) describe as informational influence wherein the content of a message is taken as representative of reality (discussed in Chapter 2). While the informational aspect certainly holds merit, in a hybrid media system the distinction between informational and what Van Eck et al. (2011) call normative (reliant on social norms, pressure and support) is more pronounced than they observed. In instances where digitally enabled opinion leaders rely on content-based influence it is specifically the lack of focus on interpersonal connections that drives political chat and modification of political opinions. Instead, the quality of content drives participation. Both enthusiasts and champions aim to access new information and present new perspectives in a space shared with others who actively self-select into political chat. Opinion leaders make strategic use of channels of communication in order to find audiences with whom they can chat about politics with little to no concern over the social risk of engaging in that chat. For example, on Twitter, opinion leaders do not limit themselves to communication with individuals with whom they have a social connection (which is sufficiently strong to know political interest or preferences) nor do they limit posting to times of political unrest or elections (when others are most likely to be positively responsive to political chat.) This is the same for topic based Facebook groups, discussion boards and other quasi-personal or impersonal channels of communication.

While traditional notions of personal influence ignore this kind of quasi-personal or impersonal interaction, opinion leaders consider this method of interaction to be fruitful in terms of shifting opinions and developing public opinion. Opinion leaders focus on a perceived ability to influence those they are weakly tied to, and/or unknown audiences. To understand the value of weak ties, we can return to the work of Granovetter (1973) who concludes that those who are most likely to be able to share new information are those who are weakly tied to the information receiver.

Weak ties are effective because as social beings, humans tend to surround themselves with likeminded individuals. More technically called homophily, the adage "birds of a feather flock together" illustrates the point (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). The weak ties are likely to be strongly tied to different social groups and thus be more likely to possess different perspectives, opinions and information. In a mass media environment this knowledge provided little insight for the opinion leadership process. In fact, they had little access to weak ties since, by definition, they are on the periphery of one's social network and thus less likely to be encountered on a daily basis. Even if there were access, it is assumed that people would avoid engaging with those ties because it is harder to predict their reaction to political chat given a lack of social knowledge. In other words, the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) would stifle potential communication because the opinion leader would not have social support for sharing their opinion or other political information.

In a hybrid media system the opinion leader now accesses a wider audience including weak ties and others with whom they are not tied at all. Rather than continuing to rely on social connection to determine when and what political chat to share, opinion leaders make strategic use of channels to circumvent social risk. Digitally enabled opinion leaders make tactical use of channels in order to eliminate or avoid responsibility for offending or annoying others with their political chat by connecting only with audiences who opt in to political chat. These opinion leaders

can then maintain regular political communication without worrying about the social risk of that communication. Moreover, they can now ensure they reach the audience which can provide the highest quality information possible, namely weak ties and unknown others.

Ultimately, when examining the influence of opinion leaders in a hybrid media system it is crucial to consider the intentions of those individuals. As discussed, opinion leaders aim to minimize social risk and access high quality information. They also want to maximize their influence and do so by targeting specific audiences.

There are three broad groups an opinion leader might try to influence: The unaware general public, other opinion leaders and politically aware citizens, and the political elite.

Attempts to interact with the unaware general public are rare. Only champions make this attempt and do so only when the political climate is such that social risk is minimized. The mechanism of influence tends to be in line with traditional conceptualizations of personal influence. Champions will decide a piece of information or an opinion is so important and relevant to the wider public they will choose to share it. This is normally done through interpersonal interaction although some quasi-personal communication exists as well which reinforces the need for a non-channel based conceptualization of personal influence.

When an opinion leader's intended audience are comprised of those who are already politically aware, such as other opinion leaders, political communication occurs across many types of channels using many tactics. This is the opinion leader's most common desired audience. Influencing politically aware others happens in two ways. Among strong ties the mechanism of influence is often in line with traditional notions of personal influence where interpersonal communication is relied on. Among weak ties and unknown others influence is not based on the opinion leader's social connection to their audience or their ability to exert social pressure and support. Instead the opinion leader's influence is based on their ability to contribute

high quality content that is new, interesting and informative. The mechanism of influence is based on perception of knowledge, expertise and eloquence and is about the content of a message more so than social placement of sender.

Finally, opinion leaders sometimes attempt to influence political elites. While the elite are a less common target audience for political chat, opinion leaders believe this is their main target for influence. When the political elite are the goal, communication is primarily quasi-personal or impersonal via channels like Twitter. The mechanism of influence in these instances is not in line with traditional views of personal influence. Instead one of two approaches is taken. In order to influence the elite, opinion leaders can rely on the content of their messages and position of expertise when engaging with other politically aware citizens. Alternatively, opinion leaders may envision themselves as members of a wider collective and assume that should the collective (potential voters and subscribers) become large enough, the political elite will pay attention. This kind of influence is perhaps better understood as contributions to collective or connective action (W. L. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). While beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to recognize that an individual's influence may be closely tied to their contributions to collective undertakings. In particular, a hybrid media system fosters collective mobilization (Bimber, 2003).

In sum, there are two mechanisms of personal influence and one contribution to collective action which describe the ways in which the everyday political chat of digitally enabled opinion leaders influences the political system. First is the traditional approach where opinion leaders use social pressure and social support on an individual level. The second mechanism of influence is based on the ability to provide content which reveals new and interesting insights. Finally the use of social pressure as a member of a collective is added.

7.2.3 The hybrid nature of digitally enabled opinion leadership

Having knowledge, credibility and high quality content are factors to consider when assessing public or institutional influence of the political elite. While having access to credible information and being perceived as an expert are often tied to whether or not a person is an opinion leader (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Weimann, 1994; Rogers & Beal, 1957), these factors are usually presented as boons to social pressure and support - as opposed to an independent mechanism of influence. Given that opinion leaders are borrowing tactics of communication from political elites, it is not surprising that their mechanisms of influence are also being shared in a hybrid media system.

Opinion leaders are not the only citizens borrowing tactics from elites in a hybrid media system. Take for example what Marwick (2011) calls “micro-celebrities” and previously characterized as ‘celebrity practice’ (Marwick, 2010). Micro-celebrities act as if they are celebrities being watched relentlessly, regardless of their actual status. They perform the role of celebrity even when no one is watching - just in case someone might start. Similarly, opinion leaders position themselves online as political elite even when they are not. They embed the logic of journalists, activists and politicians in a hybrid way. Rather than making use of flexible channels of communication in interpersonal ways in order to influence their social associates, they approach communication as political elites do. The opinion leader re-defines what their own political chat looks like in order to act as if they have the capacity to publicly influence. The trouble is, they do not always have that capacity. Opinion leaders do recognize the fact that their approach may not ultimately influence the elite but recognize other benefits.

As such, this content-based mechanism emerges as a form of influence which is not clearly public nor is it traditionally personal in terms of the way it is disseminated or received. For example, take Twitter: the opinion leader has an audience which

has chosen to follow them. This is personal but not interpersonal because the opinion leader and their followers are rarely socially acquainted. Communities which form around hashtags are an exception but for opinion leaders interviewed in this study are rare. Twitter and similar channels promote semi-public interaction but the communication is not necessarily received by a broad audience. The audience receiving the messages of the opinion leader is unknown but not broad. They select opinion leaders for their knowledge, not political power (public influence) nor social relationships (traditional personal influence).

This brings up questions about how one evaluates the content. Opinion leaders are well informed to be sure, but they are also abundant and competing with the mainstream media who are also experts. When social pressure and social support on an individual level are the main mechanisms of influence the social connection between communicators is the differentiating factor. For mainstream media, the fact that they are institutionally backed, adhere to standards of journalistic practice, and trained professionals differentiates them from others. Opinion leaders relying on their expertise alone have neither traditional personal influence nor institutional backing to support them. Not surprisingly, it is primarily political news and information junkies who demonstrate a near insatiable appetite for information, that opinion leaders are most likely to engage with. While this thesis has shown some evidence that opinion leaders are able to successfully influence each other, other research has shown that those who are politically aware are also less likely to be influenced by others (Kinder & Sanders, 1990) and that their opinions are more stable (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

This desire and potential ability to influence other opinion leaders and politically aware citizens is certainly very important. For example, a core tenent of deliberative democracy is vibrant political chat among citizens. Explicit attempts to counter the effects of echo chambers and filter bubbles that develop by opinion leaders is a clear example of how the strategies of digitally enabled opinion leaders could be beneficial

to the political system. The politically informed, opt in public are able to become versed and aware of politics by strategically using a variety of channels and tactics in the hybrid media system. However, those who opt in represent a small slice of the population.

7.3 When the citizenry is only informed just-in-time

This section considers the implications of the opinion leader's strategic approach to communication in terms of their relationship to other citizens. It is argued that, in concert with other factors, the strategic approach of opinion leaders is contributing to a just-in-time informed citizenry. Given the differing mechanisms of influence digitally enabled opinion leaders use and their channel choices, digitally enabled opinion leaders may no longer bridge the gap between the political elite and the general public.

The general public are rarely faced with political messages under the model of strategic opinion leadership so far described. The majority of opinion leaders actively avoid communicating political messages to those who have not opted in. These individuals are not likely to seek out information about current affairs from news media and as such are also unlikely to be targeted by the mainstream media or, for that matter, any other political elites (Howard & Kreiss, 2010). These are the unengaged. They are least likely to start paying for a news subscription or voting for a given party. Whereas in a mass media environment these individuals might encounter political information that was tailored to them by their social connections who do make efforts to be politically aware, that is no longer the case.

Opinion leaders in this study describe actively and purposefully interpreting mainstream media messages or messages from other elites in the context of discussion with others who have an established interest in politics. However, these same

opinion leaders describe avoiding wider audiences who have not demonstrated prior interest, for example by limiting Facebook posts. Of course the opinion leader has an imperfect view of who their actual audience is on social media such as Twitter. These opinion leaders on Twitter do not think they are followed by people who are not already interested in politics however this may not be the case. For example, someone who also tweets about non-political topics might have followers interested in those topics but not in politics. By virtue of following, however, that person may come across the opinion leader's political posts. Despite this possibility, opinion leaders in this study believe this kind of accidental political communication to those who are not already politically interested to be rare. In this way, the opinion leader may no longer be the connection that makes it possible for the public to be at least marginally connected to their political system. Instead, opinion leaders borrow tactics such as audience targeting and use technology to avoid the general public entirely. Opinion leaders are serving to further remove the unaware from a political system that ignores them (and which they ignore).

On the other hand, some opinion leaders (champions) do target the uninformed at very specific moments of heightened political tension. This could mean that the general public who do not normally care about politics are pushed information only when it is most crucial. The result is a scenario which I call a just-in-time informed citizenry. Strategic opinion leadership in combination with other trends such as opportunities to select information that reinforces existing preferences (Prior, 2005), tendencies toward audience targeting by political elites (Howard & Kreiss, 2010) and negative and/or sensational messaging by elites (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Hall & Bonneau, 2012) make it increasingly likely that the average citizen who does not opt in to political information sharing will often remain uninformed until the last possible moment. The remainder of this section considers the potential strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

The foremost strength of a just-in-time informed citizenry is that the public, for

whom politics is not of personal interest, can go about their daily lives without feeling the need to keep up with the massive amounts of information being produced. Blogs and other digital content are published by the minute by political elites. Politically engaged citizens like opinion leaders can also publish content. This leads to a high volume of information. Instead of sifting through this content consistently, members of the public can rely on opinion leaders in their social network to inform them about a political issue if, and only if, it is very important. This is in line with the notion of monitoral citizenship where citizens selectively engage in politics based on their individual wants and needs (Schudson, 1998; Deuze, 2008). A citizen who does not find politics interesting may choose to rely on their social ties to become informed. If their social ties are strategic like the digitally enabled opinion leaders in this study, they will be faced with political information only when it is necessary, or at least deemed necessary by the opinion leaders they connect with. In other words, the opinion leaders' strategic use of channels of communication can help prevent information overload by limiting what is pushed to the unaware. Opinion leaders who select the very best article they can find and share it on Facebook only when there is a major issue the general public 'ought' to know about (described in Chapter 6) are a prime example of this.

The opinion leader's role in restricting information could be likened to search algorithms which deliver content tailored to the anticipated interests and needs of the user (Pariser, 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015). Algorithms, designed to serve the needs and wants of users, have been shown to reinforce the human tendency toward information that confirms existing beliefs and supports existing preferences and behavior patterns. But the algorithmic 'filter bubble,' as Pariser (2011) calls it, is not the only one enabled by digital tools. Opinion leaders are strategically using tools in ways that mirror and perhaps enhance algorithmic filter bubbles.

At the same time that opinion leaders and algorithms may be limiting what an individual is confronted with, people tend to choose information that reinforces

their existing beliefs. Indeed, some worry about the creation of technology enabled echo chambers where people are only selectively exposed to opinions which reinforce their pre-existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2002). Similarly, Prior (2005, p. 577) writes, "As media choice increases, content preferences thus become the key to understanding political learning and participation." He goes on to explain that those who have an interest in politics will become more informed and engaged while those who are not interested will fall further behind. Prior claims greater choice will widen the 'knowledge gap' (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) which could further be supported by this study. Though a thorough investigation into the responses of politically unaware alters of opinion leaders is required to fully grasp the implications of opinion leaders' strategic choices, initial evidence suggests this could be a fruitful area for further investigation. This is because, if the citizenry is informed just-in-time, politics will feel increasingly detached from the citizen's everyday life and they will be exposed to only certain highly charged issues.

For a just-in-time informed citizenry, political participation could be hindered by a lack of continuity and lack of exposure prior to those points when they are expected to make decisions or express opinions. The citizenry will, for example, vote based on little information with little context. Even if it were assumed that a level of political knowledge does not matter nor influence the outcome of elections, political knowledge is tied with likelihood of voting. As Delli Carpini (2005) highlights in an overview of studies of citizen knowledge in the US: When a person is more informed they are more likely to vote. This is because when a person feels politically competent they are more likely to vote and when a person thinks of themselves as a political being and as a voter outside of elections, they are more likely to vote. When the general public is rarely a target of political communication, and they do not seek it out, they are unlikely to feel engaged nor aware enough to contribute the minimum level of knowledge necessary to maintain a healthy democracy (i.e. voting). Of course the strategic approach of enthusiasts and champions is not the only reason

the unaware public are not targets of political information. For example, politicians and political parties are increasingly adept at micro-targeting information and have little reason to send content to those they believe are not politically interested (i.e. likely to vote). Similarly, news media targets potential subscribers, already opted-in to receiving some form of political information.

Further, the infrequent messages that are likely to reach the general public could even repel citizens. Scandal, partisan attacks, etc. make individuals less likely to participate in their political system, less likely to vote and more likely to feel disconnected and untrusting of their political leader (Castells, 2007). As Chapter 4 explained, relatively few opinion leaders are champions. These few opinion leaders who do choose to engage with the general public do so only when there is heightened political unrest such as a scandal or election. Again, this scenario parallels an existing tendency of mainstream media and political campaigns toward sensationalism, arguments based on emotion including attack ads, and infotainment (Grabe et al., 2001; Hall & Bonneau, 2012; Jebril, Albæk, & De Vreese, 2013). Attack ads and other negative messaging serve the needs of the political elite producing them because they are likely to mobilize those who find the information credible (Hall & Bonneau, 2012) and at the very least be remembered by others (Soroka & McAdams, 2015).

These studies focusing on how individuals respond to negative content have not focused on differences between opinion leaders and others but there is little evidence to suggest that an opinion leader would respond differently. Opinion leaders, it follows, will be most likely to remember and share content which is negative. Further, negative content shared is most likely to resonate with the opinion leader's audience(s). This study did not examine the positive or negative nature of communications made by opinion leaders but this could be a valuable area for future study.

That said, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 do outline the centrality of mainstream

media in an opinion leader's access to political information and the tendency of opinion leaders to chat primarily about current affairs or what is "in the news." In other words, evidence does suggest that the political communications of an opinion leader are likely to parallel those of the mainstream media. And so, regardless of whether it comes directly from the elite or via an opinion leader, when messages originating from political elites do make it to the public that did not opt in, it is likely to reinforce a negative view of politics. From the perspective of the unaware public, politics will appear to be primarily scandal, attack ads and election promises. Furthermore, there will be a limited sense of follow through on those promises or reference to positive steps taken since that information is not normally disseminated during times of political unrest nor is it economically or politically prudent for many elites (Soroka & McAdams, 2015; Hall & Bonneau, 2012).

When the citizenry is informed at the last possible moment, the information that influences their opinions is likely to be restricted to that moment. This means that politics will seem scary, scandalous and often very disconnected from one's daily life. Indeed, in Canada only 31% of people feel the decisions politicians make affect their daily lives (Hilderman et al., 2015). If those who do opt into politics continue to make use of hybrid tactics and tools of communication in order to avoid the average citizen on a regular basis, there is a real risk that this number will continue to drop. Particularly since other contributing factors, such as the negative messaging noted above, are routinely shown to be effective (Hall & Bonneau, 2012). Clearly opinion leaders are not solely responsible for these trends. Indeed trends toward monitoral citizenship (Deuze, 2008; Schudson, 1998), targeted communication from elites (Howard & Kreiss, 2010) and media sensationalism (Grabe et al., 2001) all contribute. These are factors that have been contributing the ways in which citizens engage with their media and political systems for decades and should not be ignored.

Let us consider the logical outcome of the just-in-time informed citizenry during an election period. Note: the role of the opinion leader is limited in that many other

factors and political players exist in this political system. This vignette is intended to highlight a potential outcome and to emphasize the need for future research into how opinion leaders are or are not integrated into the political system.

If the population, on average, only becomes informed during elections, there is the real possibility we will see more surprising elections. There will likely be more undecided voters and more voters who do not feel they know enough until the last minute to make a decision. As such, polls will be less accurate and there will be more opportunity for last minute shifts which can result in major changes in support. On election day, opinion leaders might champion the importance of voting. Their strategic communication, if successful, could result in high voter turnout. However, those voters will be relatively unaware citizens since they are rarely faced with political information because they do not seek it out themselves nor do their social associates (opinion leaders) or political elites present it to them.[1] This could lead to unpredictable shifts in public opinion and election results. Alternative, the limited number of champions may be unsuccessful and few voters will head to the polls feeling unprepared to cast their ballot. This is particularly true in Canada where registering to vote in advance is encouraged but not mandatory.

Communication strategists, if they choose to target those undecided voters at all, will have to either provide a lot of background and detail or rely on very simple messages which require no real political knowledge. Educating the population even during an election period will be even more of a challenge since the majority of citizens will not have a basic understanding of recent political history and so education may not be the goal. As such, the use of attack ads and emotional messaging which are simple to understand and which have proven effective for campaigns and are likely to continue.

[1]The various ways in which a citizen may become politically informed in a hybrid media system is an important and understudied area of research. Here the traditional primary ways of accessing political information have been noted but others may exist such as serendipitous and accidental encounters. This is beyond the scope of this work but should be considered in future work.

This parallels trends witnessed in other aspects of political life such as collective action on social media. For example, Margetts et al. (2015) describe what they call chaotic pluralism, a model of democracy based on the turbulent nature of politics in the digital age. They point to the high volume of low cost actions which rarely and unpredictably succeed and note that when they do, their impact on policy and the political and media agenda is huge. The authors also note the role of social influence in these kinds of collective acts and explain that the information afforded by social networking sites allows citizens to act strategically. In other words, citizens can make tactical use of channels of communication in order to contribute to political change at strategic moments. While their work, which makes use of data science and experiments, is focused on collective action the similarity to digitally enabled opinion leadership is evident.

Arguably the turbulent and unpredictable nature of politics, fostered by a range of factors, could mean the role of the opinion leader - and their potential to influence - will be heightened during an election period. The general public will only then be faced with political information and a need for further information. They will likely turn to their key informants and their social networks on and offline to seek guidance. The relative shortage of opinion leaders willing to communicate with the general public, even during an election, could result in some members remaining detached from the political system.

Notably, communication with and influence over a wide range of members of the general public has never been the status quo for traditional opinion leaders. However, strategic use of channels to avoid even strongly tied associates means that political chat between opinion leaders and their unaware associates will be limited even within friendship groups. Although, if they happen to be target voters for a political party they will receive only the minimal information and messages noted above. Notably, those who are not consistently politically informed are also most likely to be swayed by misleading information and be less capable of evaluating

news, political information and politicians (Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Lanoue, 1992).

The just-in-time approach to an informed citizenry is then likely accompanied by turbulent and surprising elections. This is not necessarily negative. Contributing to low voter turnout is voter fatigue and a sense that politics never changes. A hybrid media system may help solve these types of problems as it fosters, albeit rarely, active and exciting moments of political awareness and engagement. Indeed, an inability to connect with complex issues, and boredom with mundane policies, are reasons some do not choose to participate in the political system on a regular basis (Rosenberg, 1954; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993).

Ultimately, digitally enabled opinion leaders, as they strategically avoid the politically unaware most of the time, likely contribute to what can be thought of as a just-in-time informed citizenry. The unaware public will be made aware only at moments of heightened political tension, a result that could be seen as positive because it combats issues of information overload and alternatively could be seen as negative because it further alienates citizens from their political system. Considering elections specifically, these patterns of communication either further disengage voters or reinvigorate a political system many find boring and hard to connect with. The detailed analysis of the strategic approach opinion leaders take as they choose channels of communication in order to avoid social risk presented in this thesis sheds light on the specific way opinion leaders can contribute to this trend. When opinion leaders take care to avoid those who may not be interested in politics and instead make use of channels of communication that connect them to weakly tied or unknown audiences they ultimately avoid the very individuals who might most benefit from the information and opinions the leader has to share.

7.4 Is online chatter needless noise or necessary nudge?

This section considers a second set of implications of the strategic approach of opinion leaders, this time in terms of their relationship to the political elite. The political elite, like other opinion leaders and citizens who self-select into political discussions, are safe targets for political communication. Particularly online, there is little social risk in sending a message to a journalist who covers current affairs or a politician. There is also a perceived potential to influence the agendas of these political elite.

Opinion leaders believe that their online conversations and chat with, or to, political elite can influence the agendas of those elite and thus the information reaching the public. Opinion leaders believe their content-based influence either directly or indirectly influences the political elite who have the ability to exert public influence on a wide range of political players and members of the public. While in theory this seems reasonable, in practice there are challenges inherent in this strategy. First, there is a potential disconnect between the kind of political opinion generated online and what is actually available. Second, there is a potential disconnect between what opinion leaders believe they are contributing and how political elite interpret it. Finally, there is little opportunity for those who do not opt into political chat online to contribute to this process of public opinion development. This, once again, reinforces the divide between those who are, and are not, politically aware.

When the public is informed just-in-time, outside times of elections and scandals, opinion leaders and others who opt in provide the most accessible glimpse into what the public think and feel. Online polls, social media data and other digital data are increasingly used to glean a sense of what the public cares about and how they feel. For example, the use of polls within news sites has been increasing (Brettschneider, 1997; Traugott, 2005; Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015). Similarly, political parties

in Canada have begun to send email surveys to their membership lists. Further, mainstream media regularly turn to social media analysis as a news story. Social media researchers and experts have received mainstream media attention (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015). Moreover, there is an increasing popularity of data journalism demonstrating the ways the mainstream media are relying on those who choose to chat about political issues online in order to inform their understanding of public opinion(s).

This has prompted some scholars to begin to re-consider what public opinion and public opinion research is. For example, Anstead and O'Loughlin (2015) describe three ways social media data was referenced by mainstream media during the 2010 general election in Britain. Using thematic content analysis the pair find that there are three approaches to using the data which can be aligned with three different views of what public opinion is. First, quotation of an individual tweet is connected to a conception of the public wherein an individual is representative of a strand within that public. Second, raw quantitative data like the reporting of the number of tweets about an issue or in a given time period is equated to reporting on unified reactions of the public. Finally, "semantic polling" is likened to opinion polling which attempts to "quantify a divided public" by harvesting large datasets by means of natural language processing, and reporting it making use of graphs or other visualizations of the aggregate data.

Anstead and O'Loughlin (2015) argue that when considering public opinion as social and multifaceted, social media data and semantic polling can reveal opinions within specific strands or sections of the public at notable moments. The strength is that this kind of analyses do not speak directly to a generalized public opinion but instead are more relevant opinions shared by publics. From this perspective, the strategic approach of digitally enabled opinion leaders is a strength because they expressly aim to be well-versed in a variety of views and informed. These opinion leaders invest time and energy developing their views. The enthusiasts and

champions alike go to great lengths to find others who are also interested in politics and excited about discussing and debating political issues.

On the other hand, if it is assumed that the traces of communication left by digitally enabled opinion leaders can be representative of a wider public, problems arise. As others point out, social media users, particularly those few who engage with politics online, do not represent the general public (Gayo-Avello, 2013) despite sometimes being reported as such. A level of imbalance is evident in mainstream media which fail to report methods and applicability of findings of social media analysis, online polls etc. (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2015). Moreover, opinion leaders who champion issues, borrowing from the tactics of communication strategists and activists (though not necessarily activists or communications professionals themselves), work to present certain issues as highly relevant to political elite even if they are not. The goal in championing an issue is regularly to make it newsworthy so that a wider public can care about - not to communicate about an issue that is already widely cared about.

Of course it is not new that activists attempt to influence the agendas of the mainstream media or politicians in order to promote social change (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001). What is new is the fact that these champions are not necessarily activists nor are they consistent in their communication approach. They make use of whatever tactics and channels of communication are most appropriate at a given moment to reach a desired audience. In the hybrid media system the voice of the public and the voice of activists may not be as easily disentangled as it once was.

Beyond the disconnect between the data and the kind of public opinion that can be gleaned from those traces of digital communications opinion leaders contribute to, there is also a potential disconnect between what an opinion leader thinks they are contributing and what the political elite interpret. Opinion leaders tend to think their online political chat with the politically aware and/or political elite,

contributes to shifts in perspectives. For example, opinion leaders may bring points of view otherwise unknown to the journalists or add new, timely information. In other words, opinion leaders believe they are nudging the political elite in small increments at a time. The opinion leader may imply they represent the general public opinion, an important population or opinion yet to be considered. They may present themselves as an expert. In all cases the active mechanism for influence is based on the content rather than the opinion leader's personal social relationship with the political elite.

When it comes to producing content and reaching people online, it may be easy to speak but is much harder to be heard. For example, only a small portion of highly popular political blogs are read widely (Hindman, 2008). Further, many, even opinion leaders interviewed, have described online political chat, particularly on Twitter, as "noisy." In communication theory noise is that unnecessary extra data or information that comes along with a communication. Noise is the opposite of signal. Signal is what one needs to interpret the meaning of a message. When trying to understand what Twitter "thinks" of a given policy, for example, many people tweeting about other policies using the original policy's hashtag might be considered noise. Or, if #CDNpoli is used to find interesting news articles to read, someone's opinion can be perceived as noise.

Opinion leaders believe that they are not producing noise when bringing in new and tangential information or when presenting opinions. Instead they believe that they are slowly shifting the perspective of readers, nudging them toward an alternative point of view. They believe their posts will be interpreted as relevant pieces of information that will help the political elite develop their agendas. Indeed, opinion leaders do not believe they can (or should) strive to sell a particular idea. Rather, they want to offer different perspectives, set the stage and/or join in a chorus of many others in order to express some perspective or opinion. The problem is, for the opinion leaders who participated in this study, there is little evidence to suggest

this occurs.

While digitally enabled opinion leaders believe they can be most influential by presenting interesting and relevant new facts and perspectives to political elite, in practice evidence of such interaction is limited. This also calls into question earlier suggestions that there is a reverse flow of information and influence (Weimann, 1994). That said, the reliance on a content-based mechanism of influence is most successful when opinion leaders interact with other politically aware citizens, generating discussion and debate. It is possible that political elite choose to listen to those conversations to garner a sense of public opinion. In either case, the main mechanism of personal influence is content-based.

Let us consider the implications of this approach. When opinion leaders make "noise" in an attempt to nudge the elite, they rely on their knowledge and the content of their messages to exert influence. Only those who opt in and participate in online political conversations are likely to encounter these messages. Again, it is possible that some audience members may not have opted into political communication, for example, they may be following an opinion leader who tweets about both politics and cats (Alex, a Halifax-based opinion leader reported these two uses of Twitter). The follower may have initially followed Alex in order to see his posts about cats but Alex assumes that the follower will un-follow him if they are not also interested in politics. Nevertheless there is clearly potential for some unintended political communication to non-political audiences.

Ultimately, individuals will normally, albeit potentially not necessarily, opt in due to personal interest and an appetite for political information - not because they have been drawn in through social pressure and social support. Remember, when the citizenry is informed just-in-time, opinion leaders strategically avoid those who do not actively opt in on a regular basis. As discussed, the implication of this is that the gulf widens between those who are and are not politically aware.

In attempting to present a certain view of public opinion or to nudge the agen-

das of the political elite, opinion leaders rely on the underlying assumption that the political elite can use their public standing to influence more widely, drawing in the general public. The problem is, the uninformed do not opt in to receiving messages from the political elite. Instead they rely on their assumption that important information will be driven to them via their online and offline social networks. Of course opinion leaders are not the only source of political information, but they are an important one for those who do not otherwise self-select into receiving political information. There may also be other opinion leaders who continue to rely entirely on traditional mechanisms of personal influence and are not dissuaded from political communication with the unaware, given the opportunities afforded by new channels of communication. That said, the pervasiveness of digital tools and channels of communication continues to increase and so today's digitally enabled opinion leaders may simply be the early adopters of what will become the status quo.

Digitally enabled opinion leaders believe they are contributing to an information chain that runs from them to the elite to the public, through their content-based influence. These opinion leaders are not aware they are, in part, breaking the chain by avoiding traditional personal influence with the uninformed public. As such, political information remains restricted to the "in-crowd" as the uninformed, rarely a target audience, become increasingly divorced from that crowd. The distinction between the uninformed and those who hold extremely firm beliefs (which have been tested over and over through opinion leader's everyday chat) once again suggests a just-in-time informed citizenry.

7.5 Advancing research methods in political communication in a hybrid media system

By considering the flows of information and the social context of political communication across many channels, this study adopts a holistic view of opinion leadership

in a hybrid media system. The strategies of opinion leaders and implications of those strategies for the general public and political elites were identified through a mixed-methods approach, including two phases. Phase one included social network analysis of #CDNpoli and an online survey disseminated through that network. Phase two included trace interviews with opinion leaders and follow-up interviews with some of their social connections called alters.

By incorporating multiple methods this study has overcome one of the biggest challenges of digital data driven approaches to understanding political communication. Data science or 'big data' approaches to political communication research tend to focus on large scale flows of information. These studies of political communication are valuable for understanding general patterns of communication but are limited in critical ways. Due to technical constraints these studies tend to focus on one type of digital data at a time which means only one - or at best a select few - channels of communication can be considered in a given study. Further, the meaning behind and context of the data being analyzed is often inaccessible through data science techniques. While scholars can effectively and efficiently trace a political message from one Twitter user across a long chain of users it is much harder to explain why a user decided to re-tweet, what that re-tweet means, and whether or not that decision to re-tweet was impacted by outside factors such as communication via other channels.

In pairing quantitative analysis of tweets with in-depth interviews with individuals making those tweets, this study avoids such limitations. Interviewees were asked to describe their patterns of communication across multiple channels and to reflect on how their use of one channel is or is not related to use of other channels. Using a trace interview approach, interviewees were asked about their decision making process leading up to communicative acts, as well as the context in which those communications occurred. Robust data, appropriate for a complex hybrid media system, was generated by showing the interviewee visualizations of the trace data

they them self had left behind.

Indeed, the trace interview approach is novel and was designed specifically to address the unique needs of a hybrid media system which is inclusive of many digital channels of communication. Where a hybrid media system exists in which communicators may choose from a wide range of channels, tools and tactics of use, a holistic research design is required. In order to understand the complex nature of political communication patterns and interactions among political players it is necessary to understand how and why channels of communication are used and to what extent there is overlap.

Further, when citizens, journalists, politicians, and organizations can all share tactics of channel use and when their patterns of communication intersect, then new ethical challenges present. For example, while it may be acceptable to collect and analyze the data left behind as public figures communicate online is it similarly acceptable to collect and analyze the data left behind by private citizens? If these groups should be treated differently, is it even possible to conclusively differentiate between public figures and private citizens? In a hybrid media system when each is borrowing from the repertoire of the other, it is hard to know.

The trace interviewing approach adopted for this study is a first step toward detangling this complex issue. Inviting the participant into the data interpretation process makes it possible to fully understand the context in which the data was originally created. Knowing who left the traces and for what reason can help the researcher understand the most ethical way to treat the data they have collected. Increasingly citizen communicators are becoming producers and creators of content (Bruns, 2008; Chadwick, 2013). In this context it is important to treat users as creators/authors of data during the research process. Participants should be seen as "amateur artists" rather than "human subjects" (Bruckman, 2002) in order to respect the fact that they have used their creative energies to produce the content being analyzed. Similarly, Berry's (2004) conception of an "open source approach

to ethics" is helpful. As Ford and I (2015, p. 2085) explain,

> Using trace data as a way to mutually explore research questions with users represents a significant advancement in the traditional power relations between the observers and the observed. It necessarily involves a dialogue between the researcher, the participant, and the data rather than between the researcher and the data or between the researcher and the participant.

The research project becomes a collaborative effort wherein there is a triangulation of perspectives that can be teased out, differentiated and aligned throughout the process. Particularly in the context of studies making use of digital data, as is likely to become more common as researchers aim to understand communication in a hybrid media system, the ability to query the creator of that data is very valuable. In studies which examine large amounts of data asking certain creators of that data to explain the social context of their acts, the motivations and/or connections to other channels can allow for more efficient and informative data analysis.

Trace interviews have so far been used in limited settings but there is potential for integration into a variety of research designs. For example, presentation of an individual's visualized trace data could be used as an experimental treatment to understand comfort level with data use or privacy concerns. Trace interviews with a small group of individuals who exhibit unexpected patterns of use of certain tools could be asked to test usability of those tools. More closely aligned with the work Ford and I conducted, trace interviews can be incorporated into ethnographic methodology in an effort to investigate communication and interaction in a hybrid media system.

In sum, trace interviews were essential for understanding both the informational and social aspects of opinion leadership in a multi-channel media system. The approach is new and will evolve as it is tested and refined in other settings but the underlying principles respond to the hybrid media system effectively. The hybrid

media system is complex, multi-faceted and overlapping. Research methods must be flexible, responsive and provide opportunity for reflection on how data is being interpreted in context. Trace interviewing is one such approach.

7.6 Limitations of this study and areas for future research

While the mixed-methods approach adopted here is both holistic and robust, limitations do exist.

First, the approach offers limited sample sizes. In-depth interviews generally, and trace interviews paired with participant-aided sociograms particularly, are extremely resource heavy. The researcher must collect and visualize trace data in advance and have the technology available to present that data to the participant. The researcher must also bring a large piece of paper and post-it notes that have been pre-arranged in order to conduct the participant-aided sociogram. Following each interview, in addition to the expected transcription of the interview recording, data entry and analysis for the trace data and sociogram are required. The interview is long and in person, and it is at times challenging to ensure the participant understands the basic principals underlying the sociogram and trace data visualizations.

Locating and coordinating with willing alters for interviews is work intensive. Moreover there is, with this process, a sampling bias in that opinion leaders must agree to the alters chosen and the alter must demonstrate interest. In this study this resulted in many alters who are highly politically aware and engaged despite an explicit attempt to interview alters who are not necessarily politically savvy. That said, the multi-step process produces for the researcher, rich data born of multiple opportunities to reflect on the findings and refine interpretations.

Second, generalizations cannot be made conclusively. The work intensive nature of Phase Two dictated a sample of 21 opinion leaders and 27 alters. However, the

rich detail gleaned from this approach will allow for future studies to hone in on specific factors and develop a research design that could be generalizable to a wider population.

Third, as technology advances and as people begin to incorporate new channels into their political communications, the process of opinion leadership could change - quickly. The media system is not static. This study covered a two year period, but even this extended time frame can only address shifts over what is a relatively short time period. The pace of technological innovation produces an abundance of channel use options for opinion leaders. As long as new channels are introduced, practices will change.

The finding that digitally enabled opinion leaders are in fact making use of the channels they have available to them in a strategic way is important for the future of opinion leadership research. It can no longer be assumed that opinion leaders use only the traditional mechanism of influence wherein they exert social pressure and social support to change the opinions, attitude and behaviours of their everyday associates. Digitally enabled opinion leaders in the hybrid media system are strategic. They make use of a range of channels in order to connect to varying audiences, some of which are everyday associates and some of which are strangers.

Future studies need to investigate, for example, the utility of the just-in-time informed citizenry concept, what other factors play into a just-in-time informed citizenry, if it is a viable way forward for modern democracies, and/or any implications for policy development, communication strategies and voter engagement. Similarly, this study represents a first step toward understanding the ways in which digitally enabled opinion leaders strategically engage with political elites. Future studies might consider implications for our understanding of public opinion given that opinion leaders strategically attempt to contribute to it via digital channels. This also raises important issues for those who may wish to make use of trace data and digital tools to conduct public consultations or carry out public engagement initiatives.

This study has drawn us closer to understanding the political role of citizens who opt in to political chat in their everyday lives. These opinion leaders are among the most politically aware citizens and are an important link between the political elite and the general public. Opinion leaders may now rely on more channels of communication but at the same time they effectively avoid those whom they are best placed (socially) to influence.

7.7 Conclusion

In sum, this investigation into the practices, motives and impacts of digitally enabled opinion leaders in a hybrid media system illuminates a strategic approach to personal influence. Opinion leaders demonstrate the utility of two mechanisms of personal influence. The first is in line with traditional notions of personal influence wherein social pressure and social support allow the opinion leader to benefit from their social connection in order to change the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of their associates. This kind of interpersonal influence is used when engaging in political chat with social connections who are already interested in politics regardless of political climate and during times of heightened political tension by champions when engaging with the uninformed. The second kind of influence is content-based wherein the opinion leader borrows from the tactics of political elites to self-present as highly knowledgeable, interesting and eloquent. This kind of influence is used when engaging with the already politically informed and the political elite via quasi-personal or impersonal channels of communication.

The strategic approach of enthusiasts and champions and use of this added mechanism of influence has notable consequences for how the citizenry becomes politically informed and how the political elite interact with the public. This is summarized in the concept of a just-in-time informed citizenry. Since enthusiasts avoid the uninformed at all times and champions only reach out to the uninformed at moments

of political tension, those who do not self-select into receiving political information only become informed as a scandal is breaking or at the last minute, before an election. This works in tandem with political parties and mainstream media. They are also ignoring the uninformed, a group unlikely to have many voters or subscribers. Outside scandal or an election, the relationship between the political elite and the public is altered, particularly when it comes to online engagement. Opinion leaders drive discussion online which is increasingly interpreted as indicative of public opinion by political elites. Further, opinion leaders expressly attempt to nudge members of the political elite in hopes of influencing their agendas. This leads to limited views of what the public opinion is, champions driving specific issues, and an uninformed public that is far removed from everyday online political chat.

Digitally enabled opinion leaders, in making strategic use of channels of communication may be filtering themselves out with the population they are best placed to influence: those of their social connections who are not informed. They are able to engage more regularly and intensely in political chat with those who are aware and interested. Here opinion leaders capitalize on the kind of content they can produce instead of the kind of social pressure or support they can exert in order to influence those who do opt in to political chat as well as the political elite.

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A Internet and social media use summary

Table 1: Comparison of Internet and social media use: Canada, US, UK, Australia

Country	Population	Internet penetration	Social media penetration
Canada	35.7 million	93%	56%
US	320 million	87%	58%
UK	64.1 million	89%	59%
Australia	23.7 million	89%	57%

Note: Information collected from (Kemp, 2015).

Table 2: Percentage of social media users: Platform by country

Country	Canada	US	UK	Australia
Facebook	47%	42%	43%	40%
Facebook (messenger only)	19%	20%	23%	18%
Twitter	23%	19%	19%	14%
Google Plus	15%	14%	12%	13%
Instagram	12%	13%	8%	10%

Note: Information collected from (Kemp, 2015).

B Survey questions

A copy of survey questions is provided. Italics highlight differences between the 2013 and 2014 deployments. A few questions, noted in italics, were removed from the 2014 version for the 27 Alters.

1. Informed consent statement to be read prior to beginning survey.

   Role: Public figure, opinion leader or follower *Questions derived from (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).*

2. Have you tried to convince anyone of your political ideas recently?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don't know
3. When you and your friends discuss political issues, what part do you play?
   - Mainly listen
   - Try to convince them of your ideas
   - I don't know
4. Has anyone asked your advice on a political question recently?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don't know
5. Compared with your social circle (friends, family, acquaintances) are you more or less likely to be asked for advice about political issues?
   - More likely
   - Less likely
   - Depends on the issue
6. Are you a public figure (e.g. politician, journalist, celebrity)?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure (please explain:)

   Media consumption *Questions modified from (Dutton et al., 2013).*

7. Do you read any newspapers? This includes online and/or offline versions. *Only asked in 2013 version.*

- Please list all that apply:

8. When seeking information about current affairs, what sources do you regularly consult? This includes online and/or offline versions. *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Please list all that apply:
9. How often do you use Facebook? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Never
   - Less than monthly
   - Monthly
   - Weekly
   - Daily
   - More than daily
10. How often do you use Google Plus? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Never
   - Less than monthly
   - Monthly
   - Weekly
   - Daily
   - More than daily
11. How often do you use Instagram? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Never
   - Less than monthly
   - Monthly
   - Weekly
   - Daily
   - More than daily
12. How often do you use LinkedIn? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Never
   - Less than monthly
   - Monthly
   - Weekly
   - Daily
   - More than daily
13. How often do you use Pintrest? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
   - Never
   - Less than monthly

- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- More than daily

14. How often do you use Reddit? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
    - Never
    - Less than monthly
    - Monthly
    - Weekly
    - Daily
    - More than daily
15. How often do you use Twitter? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
    - Never
    - Less than monthly
    - Monthly
    - Weekly
    - Daily
    - More than daily
16. How often do you use YouTube? *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*
    - Never
    - Less than monthly
    - Monthly
    - Weekly
    - Daily
    - More than daily
17. Do you make use of any other social media? If so, please list: *Only asked in 2014 version, excluding Alters.*

Demographic information

18. In what year were you born?
    - *select from drop down list*
19. What is your gender?
    - Male
    - Female
    - Prefer not to disclose

Contact details

20. If you are willing to participate further in this study (e.g. be interviewed, provide feedback) please answer the following questions: *This line was only included in 2013 version.*
    (a) What is your email address?
    (b) What is your location? (Please provide either your postal code or city of residence over the next 6 months). *Prompt for residence over next 6 months not included for Alters version.*
    (c) What is your Twitter handle (e.g. ResearcherLiz)?

C Information for interviewees

This appendix provides copies of the tweets, emails and webpages provided to interviewees describing the study.

Tweet Requests 2013 and 2014

Elizabeth Dubois
@ResearcherLiz

Help @researcherliz understand the #CDNpoli community. Take 1 min to fill out this survey: cdnpolisurvey.ca pls RT

Elizabeth Dubois
@ResearcherLiz

Hi ███████, I'm researching everyday pol. chat in Canada, interested in helping out with an interview? elizabethdubois.wordpress.com/cdnpoli/for-in…

Webpage to request people share the survey in 2013 and 2014

A Call for Help.

French version not included here.

Hello,

My name is Elizabeth Dubois and I am a PhD student at the University

of Oxfords Internet Institute. Currently I am investigating the role of political communication in the everyday life of Canadian citizens. Part of my research includes a short online survey which I am sending out via Twitter. I am wondering if you would be able to share the link to this survey with your Twitter following? Below are a number of suggested tweets, you are of course free to change the wording as you see fit.

Help an Oxford researcher learn about the #CDNpoli community with this 30 sec survey: www.cdnpolisurvey.ca pls RT

Please take 30 sec to help @researcherliz learn about the #CDNpoli community with this survey: www.cdnpolisurvey.ca pls RT

Hey #CDNpoli, please help an Oxford researcher learn about our community, 30 sec survey: www.cdnpolisurvey.ca pls RT

The survey is available online. The goal is to attract respondents from across the country, across party lines, and across age groups and so any help you can provide in spreading the word would be much appreciated.

I will also be happy to share my initial findings with you in the form of a short report in September if you are interested.

If you would like more information about my work or background please do not hesitate to ask. You can also find more detail about this research project here: https://elizabethdubois.wordpress.com/cdnpoli/

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Dubois

Text of webpage linked to in 2014 to request people complete the survey

As a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxfords Internet Institute, I am looking at how digitally enabled opinion leaders (that is you!) chat about politics both online and offline.

The first part of my research included a survey of Twitter users in the #CD-Npoli community. The second part is where you come in! I want to interview you. Include your email address when you fill out the #CDNpoli survey or contact me directly to let me know you are interested!

If I tweeted or e-mailed you this link, you qualify as a digitally enabled opinion leader and I think your story is worth telling. I want to know things like what social media platforms you use to talk politics, who your favourite political conversation buddies are, and what drives you to communicate the way you do (whether that is talking about politics 24/7 or simply re-tweeting a politician once every few months).

I am traveling across Canada over the next few months to conduct interviews with 20 individuals from varying backgrounds and geographic locations. Your input would be invaluable to this project.

Why participate?

- Find out who is most central in your social networks, on and offline.
- Learn the basics of interpreting social network graphs.
- Get a copy of your graphs to keep!
- Help researchers better understand the role of technology in political communication.

This research represents a step toward understanding how Canadians use technology to participate in their democratic system. With a better understanding of how things like Twitter, Facebook, telephone, and face-to-face communication are employed to transmit political messages and exchange political ideas, we can develop better engagement strategies and communication policies.

What to expect:
If you are willing to be interviewed the first step is to fill out the #CDNpoli survey if you havent already (if you have but did not include your email address please contact me letting me know).

Next, Ill send you an email which includes an Informed Consent Statement for you to review and sign. This is to assure you know exactly how any personal data or information from the interview will be used, stored and protected.

I will also propose a few dates and times for our interview. The face to face interview should take 1 to 1.5 hours. There are two main components to the interview. The first is creating your offline social network. I bring in a big piece of paper, some markers, and lots of post-it notes. Most people find this part both enlightening and fun. Here is a sneak peek at what one in progress looks like:

Sociogram (*See Appendix F.*)

The second part of the interview involves comparing your online social networks to your offline one. If you are active on Facebook, for example, we will take a look at who is most central in your Facebook network; if you like to tweet, we will look at who mentions you most and how your followers are (or are not) connected.

Below is the full #CDNpoli network. Your personal network will likely be much smaller but this should give you an idea of what a network graph looks like:

#CDNpoli network (*See Appendix F.*)

Thank you for reading this proposal. I look very forward to meeting with you and thank you in advance for your participation! If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanks in advance!
Elizabeth Dubois — @lizdubois and @researcherliz
Doctoral Candidate, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

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Text of email to selected opinion leaders

Hello *name*,

I wanted to thank you for completing the #CDNpoli survey and for indicating interest in participating in an interview.

Would you be available for an in-person interview lasting 1 to 1.5 hours to be held during *time and date*? I will be in *city* starting *date* and can arrange to meet you at a time an location convenient to your schedule.

You can learn a little more about the interview on my website [LINKED] but please do not hesitate to ask me if you have any further questions.

I am also attaching an Informed Consent Statement which I would like you to review and sign. Informed Consent is standard research practice and ensures that you (the participant) and I (the researcher) both understand exactly how any data or information collected during the research process will be treated. In short, I will keep all data and information protected in a password secure database, I will not share it with anyone, and when any information collected is used for publication I will remove all identifying information in order to preserve your anonymity.

Next steps: Please email me letting me know the day(s) and time(s) during the *time period* preferred for your interview. Return the signed consent form to me, if you do not have access to a scanner an email indicating that you have read and agree to what is stated in the form will be sufficient for now. I will bring a hard copy to the interview.

Again, thank you very much for all of your help.

Elizabeth

Text of email to selected alters

This email was normally sent after the alter had already agreed to participate. The opinion leader emailed or called their alters and provided them with a basic introduction.

Hello *name*,

Thanks so much for agreeing to participate. Would you be available at *time* on *date* for a call?

Before we chat could you also please take about 1 minute to fill out this form [LINKED].[2] It goes over a few details of the study and speeds up the call. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have any questions or concerns.

All the best,

Elizabeth

Introductory text sent to Alters via Google Form

You are invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the ways in which citizens communicate political messages to their social networks (e.g. friends, family, and acquaintances). Specifically, this study examines online and offline social networks and content of politically aware Canadians. After data from online sources is collected, interviews provide remaining information. This research is being carried out by Elizabeth Dubois, PhD student at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford for her Thesis.

You have been invited to participate because one of your acquaintances participated in this study.

[2]This form includes the informed consent statement for alters found in Appendix D and survey 2014 questions found in Appendix B.

D Informed consent

Two different forms were used to obtain informed consent one for the survey and the other for interviews. Notably, the interview form was modified slightly for Alters and was sent via a Google Forms rather than as an email attachment.

Survey Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the ways in which citizens communicate political messages to their social networks (e.g. friends, family, and acquaintances). This online survey should take less than 2 minutes to complete.

Participation is voluntary and responses will be kept confidential. You are free to not respond to any questions you choose with no penalty.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact Elizabeth Dubois: elizabeth.dubois@oii.ox.ac.uk.

By clicking Start survey you are stating I have read the above information and agree to participate in this research project. I am at least 18 years of age.

Start survey

Interview Informed Consent Form

April 5, 2014

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

The new opinion leader? Personal influence and political networks in a hybrid media environment.

You are invited to participate in a research study aimed at understanding the ways in which citizens communicate political messages to their social networks (e.g. friends, family, and acquaintances). Specifically, this study examines online and offline social networks and content of politically aware Canadians. After data from online sources is collected, interviews provide remaining information. This research is being carried out by Elizabeth Dubois, PhD student at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford for her Thesis.

INFORMATION

This study involves the following procedures:

1. Online screening survey (sent to users of the Twitter hashtag "#CDNpoli");
2. Personal interviews (one per-participant);
3. Collection of Twitter posts containing "#CDNpoli" and news articles about Canadian politics;
4. Collection of information from the online social networks of each person interviewed.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of research.

RISKS

No risks are foreseen from this research.

BENEFITS

This research will contribute to academic understanding of political discussion and engagement, uses of social media, and the ways in which personal influence is exerted in a hybrid media environment.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide for this research will be kept confidential and when reported will maintain your anonymity unless you specify otherwise. When the information you provide is reported it will not be identified with you and your identity will not be reported in the research report. Identifying data linking you to your responses will be maintained in secure, password-protected files and only made available to researchers working on this project.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact Elizabeth Dubois: elizabeth.dubois@oii.ox.ac.uk.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read this form and received a copy of it. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed name: ____________________________________ e-mail:______________________

Signature: _______________________________________ Date: _________________

OPTIONAL

I would rather be identified in publications and wave my right to anonymity.
I would like to be identified as: __________________ (e.g. @Bob, Jill Smith)

Printed name: ____________________________________

Signature: _______________________________________ Date: _________________

1 of 1

Note: The phrase '(excluding "alters")' was added to the line 'Collection of information from the online social networks of each person interviewed.'

E Interview schedules

Two different interview schedules (one for opinion leaders and one for alters) were used to guide semi-structured interviews.

Opinion Leader Interview Schedule

Sociogram

1. Please list those who are very close and somewhat close [see props]:
2. Please categorize according to this list [see props]:
3. Can you please mark those with whom you have had a discussion about a political issue in the last 6 months, this could be online or offline. If you need to add new people that is fine.
4. For each social media used at least monthly: Can you please mark those with whom you are connected. If you need to add new people that is fine.
5. Imagine you are in the centre, place those you are closest to one the inner ring and least close to you on the outer ring.
6. Can you please draw a circle around any social circles?
7. Can you please draw lines between each alter and anyone they are also connected to? *After above steps are complete*
8. It is possible you talk to some people about politics you do not consider very close or somewhat close, can you think of any? Please create other tags for them and place them on the sociogram.

Channels of Communication

Based on list of channels used determined in survey plus common channels, channels added to all include: face to face, telephone, SMS/Text message, email.

9. Do you ever talk politics using these tools/channels (access and/or post)? Are there any tools missing from this list? (ask for quantifiable political use for access and dissemination, e.g. several times a day, daily, several times a week, weekly, several times a month, monthly, less than monthly, never).
10. You seem to make use of a lot of tools, why is that? OR You don't seem to use many different tools for communication, why is that?
11. Who do you talk to (about politics) most using [for each channel]?
12. Can you point them out on your sociogram?

Social Media

For every social media used at least monthly, for most this was Twitter and Facebook.

13. What is your persona on *media*?
14. (Personalized question regarding posts made, what):
15. (Personalized question regarding posts made, who):
16. (If applicable) This is your network graph, can you identify the clusters? (Briefly explain interpretation if they have not seen a network graph previously)
17. Do you feel you are part of a community or communities?

Influence

18. Where do you get most of your information about *issue*?
19. Do you think you are an expert on *issue*?
20. Do you think others might consider you an expert?
21. Who is most likely to ask you for advice on *issue*?
22. Do you think of yourself as influential?
23. How do you define influence?

Alters

24. We've talked about a number of people in your social network now, I'd like to contact a few of those people to understand better their role. Would you be willing to put me in contact with (identified based on the interview):

Closing

25. Is there anything you expected me to ask but didn't?
26. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Alter Interview Schedule

1. How do you get political information or information about current affairs? *(Several times a day, daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly)*
   - TV (online?)
   - Radio (online?)

- Newspapers (online?)
- Newsletter and e-newsletters
- Events, rallies, other in-person
- Friends, family, other individuals
- Other?

2. What is your relationship to *name*?

   List of potential prompts:

   - How many years have you known each other?
   - Are you part of any shared groups?
   - How often do you communicate?
   - How often do you talk about politics/political issues?
   - What kind of political issues do you discuss?

3. I now want to ask you about your communication and media use:

   (a) Do you use *media* to communicate with each other? About how often? If yes, about how often? Is it ever political?

   (b) Do you access their page/posts?

   (c) Do you comment, like or share their content? If no, why not?

   (d) Do they comment, like or share your content? If no, why not?

4. Considering your social media use, how often do you use each of the following? For accessing political information?

   (Several times a day, daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly)

   - Facebook
   - Twitter
   - Other social media?
   - Chat on newspaper sites?
   - Phone
   - SMS
   - Offline
   - Other? e.g. Skype, snapchat

5. Would you ever go to *name* for advice on a political issue? If so, which issue(s)? How would you make contact (face to face, phone call, SMS, FB, Twitter, other)? Why and why not others?

6. Are there any political issues that you would consider *name* an expert on?

7. Can you think of any examples of times *name* influenced your political thoughts, opinions, or behaviors?

8. Would you consider *name* to be politically influential?

9. This is a speculative question, I was wondering if you have any ideas about how to measure influence online?

F Interview coding schedule

The interview coding schedule included here provides an outline of the final coding schedule. In **bold** are pre-determined codes, all others emerged through coding. Nvivo was used to cross-reference across codes.

- **Personal Qualities** (cross-referenced by individual)
  - **Issue expert?**
    - Opinion of self
    - Alter's opinion
  - **Supplement survey**
- **General Communications**
  - **Access**
    - **Source**
      - Direct
      - Filter
    - **Channel**
    - Combined use
  - **Dissemination**
    - **Channel**
    - **Audience**
      - Open
      - Closed
    - Combined use
- **Specific Channels** (Later re-analyzed in terms of drivers)
  - Facebook
    - Audience
    - Community
    - Content
    - Motive
    - Role
  - Twitter
    - Audience
    - Community
    - Content
    - Motive
    - Role

  - Instagram
    * Audience
    * Community
    * Content
    * Motive
    * Role
  - YouTube
    * Audience
    * Community
    * Content
    * Motive
    * Role
  - SMS/Text
    * Audience
    * Community
    * Content
    * Motive
    * Role
- **Drivers of Channel Choice**
  - **Technical**
    * **Fact**
    * **Opinion**
    * Discuss
  - Normative
    * What it is *for*
    * Other
  - Political Climate
    * Change in quality of content
    * Change in quantity of content
  - **Community**
  - **Tie strength**
  - **Audience**
    * Quality of audience
    * Quantity of audience
  - Social Risk
- **Impact**
  - **Goal of chat**

        - Set the stage
        - Strengthen arguments
        - Personalize
    - **Influence**
        - Followers
            - Tie strength
            - New information
            - Discussion
        - Opinion Leaders
            - Tie strength
            - New information
            - Discussion
        - Political Elite
            - Discussion and chat
            - Campaign
            - Collective
        - Influenced by...
    - Unsolicited exposure

G Content analysis coding schedule

This appendix provides the coding schedule used during content analysis of tweets.

- Type of chat
  - Not political
  - Fact
  - Opinion
  - Discussion
- Mentions
  - Journalist or media outlet
  - Politician or political party
  - Other political elite
  - Other study participants
  - Non-elite
- Entities (computational coding based on json received from Twitter)
  - @Replies (mentions)
  - Hashtags
  - URLs
    - Mainstream media
    - Political website
    - Other social media including blogs
    - Other
  - Retweets

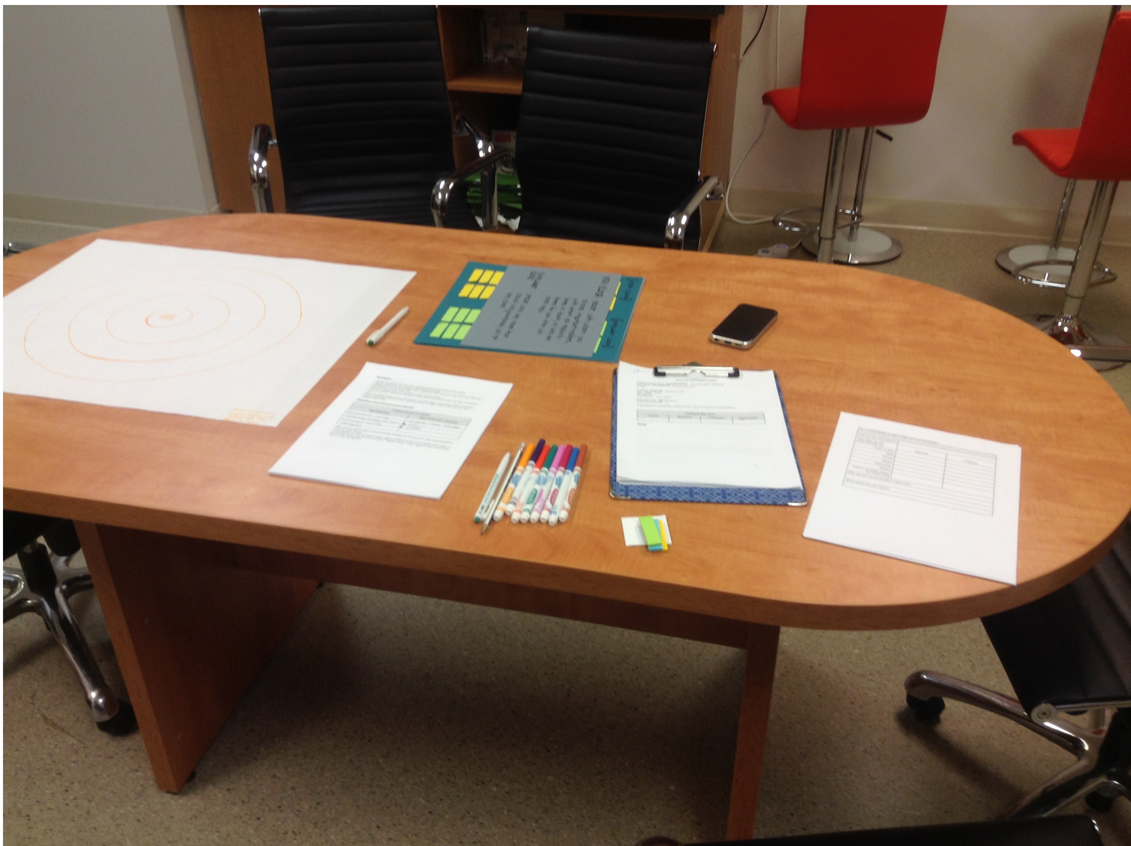
H A visual guide to the participant-aided sociogram

The participant-aided sociogram requires participants to list their social ties and then organize them on a large piece of paper in terms of social relationships among ties. The approach also asks participants to categorize and label their ties in terms of their personal relationship and channels of communication.

Figure 1 depicts the supplies used. From left to right:

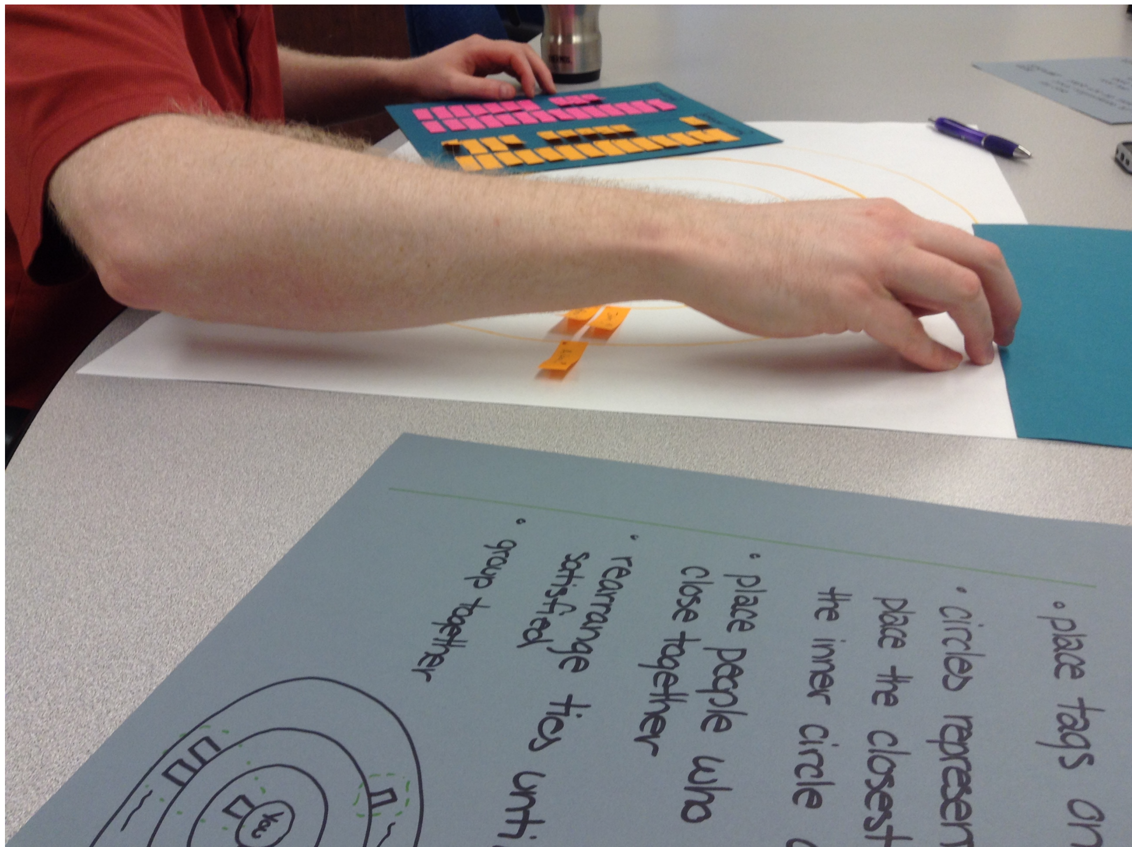
- Large paper with four circles and participant's name in the centre.
- Grey instruction sheets and green card with colored post-it notes (called tags) to list social ties.
- Voice recorder.
- Consent Form.
- Markers to be used to indicate social relationships, groups and channels of communication (colors defined on instruction sheets).
- Researcher notepad.

Figure 1: Participant-Aided Sociogram Supplies



Participants were asked to list their social ties (one per tag) and once complete they were instructed to place them on the large piece of paper imagining the circles represent closeness with themselves being in the centre. Figures 2 and 3 depict two participants placing their ties.

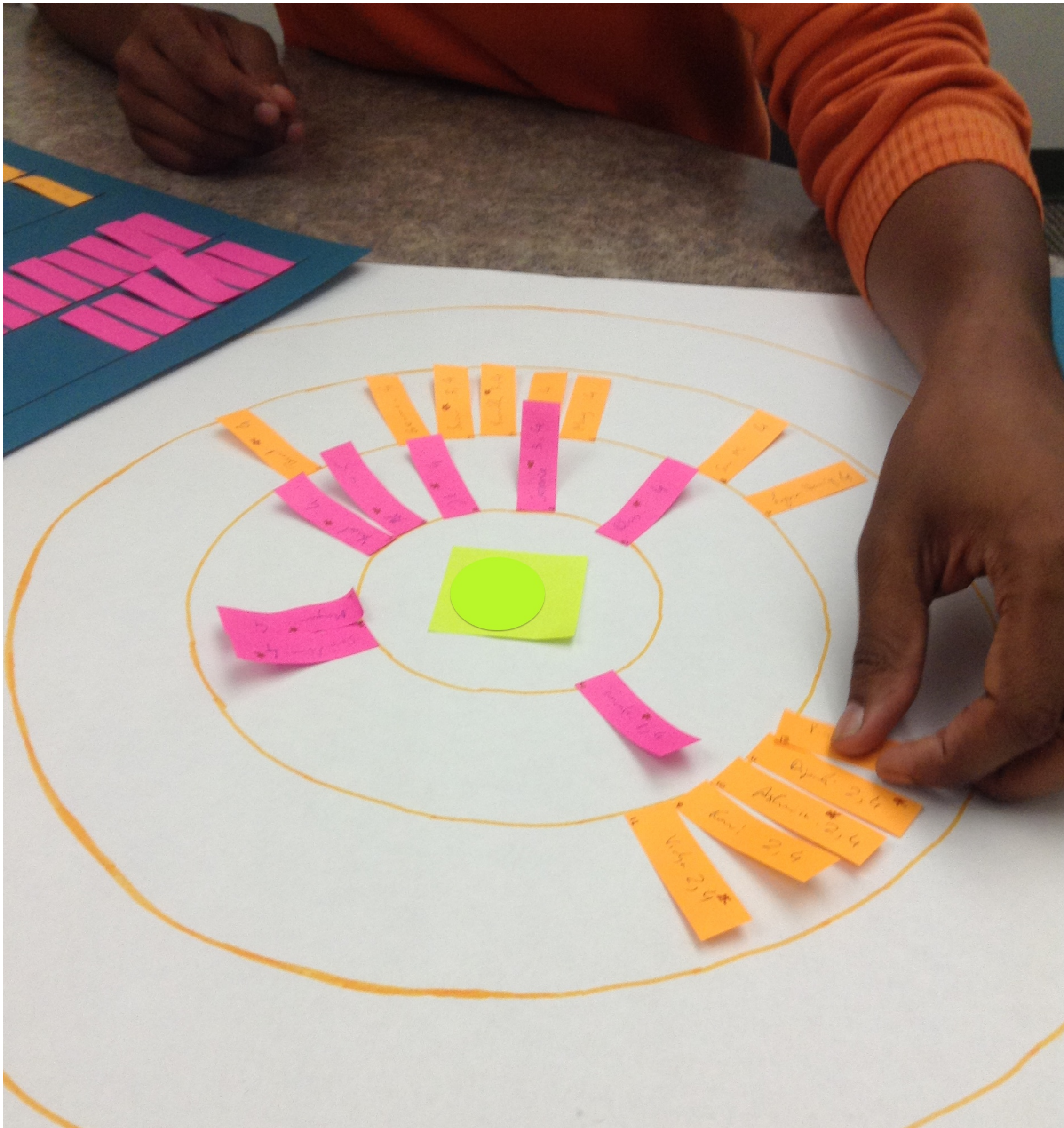
Figure 2: Placing Ties 1



On each tag the participant wrote a number(s) which indicate their relationship (e.g. immediate family = 1). They also used markers to indicate channels of communication used when interacting with the particular tie and whether or not they had engaged in a political interaction with that person in the past six months. Figure 4 provides a closer look. **A** shows how participants labeled social groups. **B** shows an example of categorizing ties using pre-assigned numbers. **C** shows three colored dots which means this tie and the participant are connected on Twitter (red), Facebook (blue) and Instagram (pink). **D** reads 'purple FB' which means that this tie is also found in the purple cluster of friends depicted in the participant's Facebook network visualization.

Each resulting sociogram is unique to the individual who created it. Figures 5 and 6 provides a sparse and a dense example. In both pink tags are very close ties,

Figure 3: Placing Ties 2



orange tags are somewhat close ties and blue tags are very weak ties with whom the participant is not socially close but does engage in regular political communication.

Figure 4: Sociograms Details

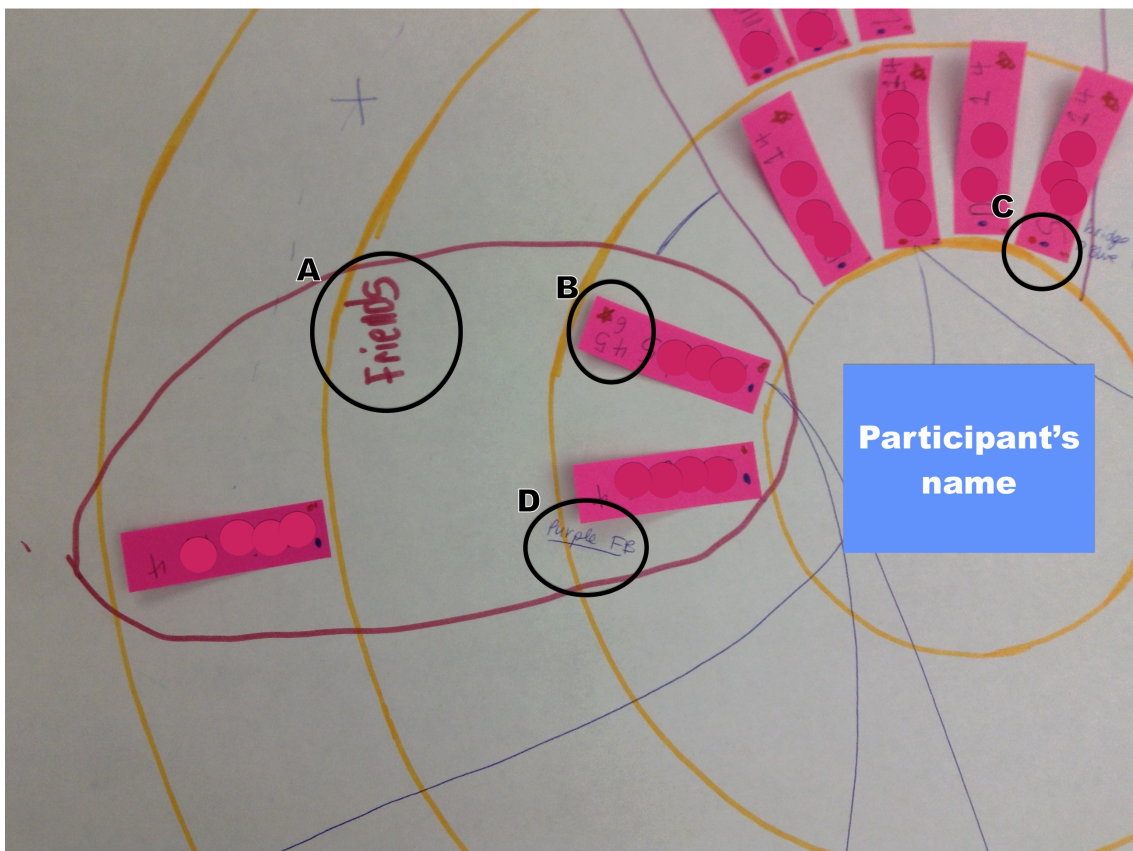
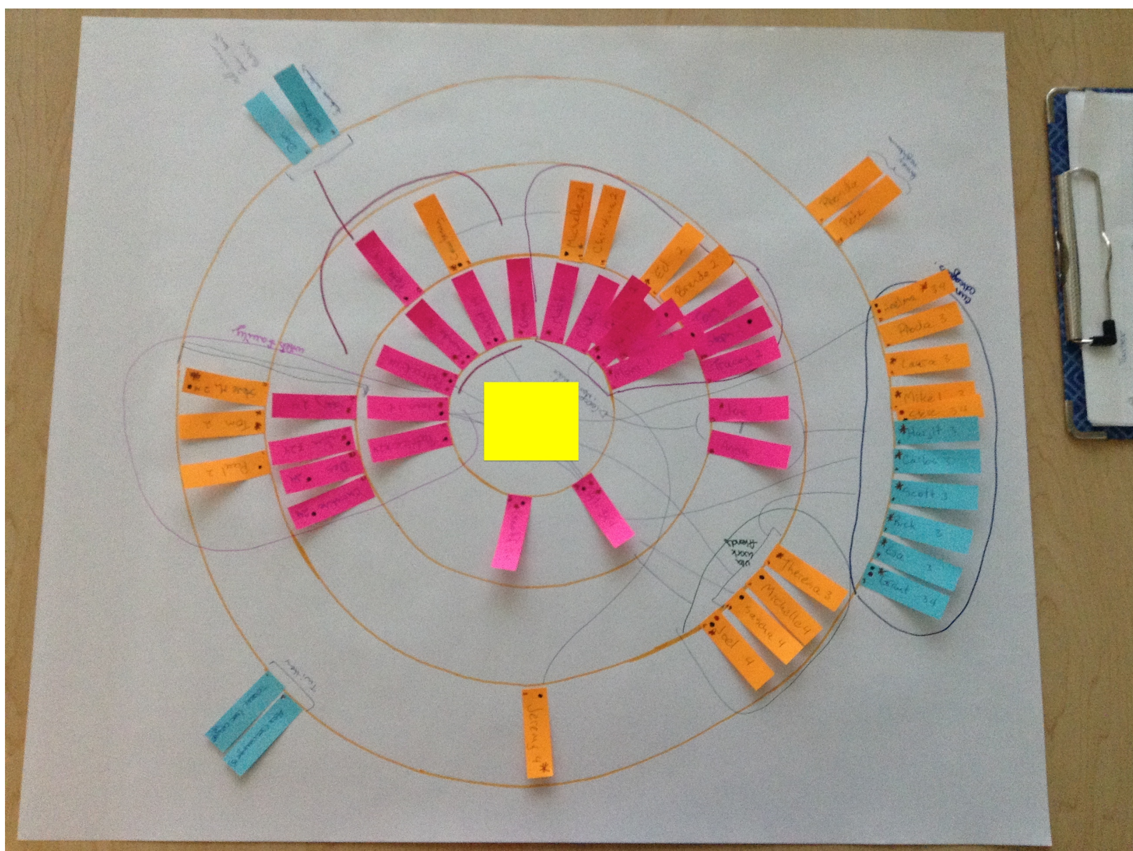


Figure 5: Full Sociogram: Sparse

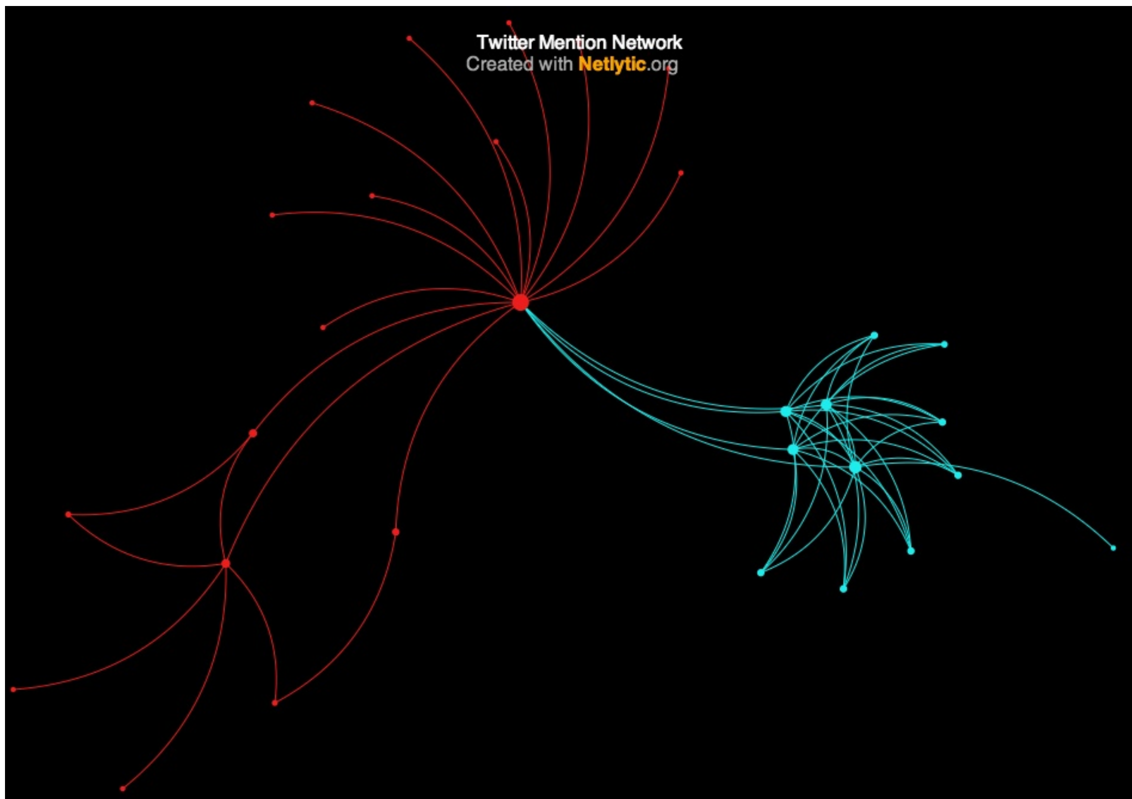
Figure 6: Full Sociograms: Dense



I Visualizations of trace data examples

Visualizations of participants' trace data were brought into the interview for joint analysis. For all participants a Twitter mention network was created using Netlytic. Figure 7 shows an example of a simple network. During the interview participants were invited to mouse-over nodes (dots) which highlighted the name of the Twitter account that node represents. Notes were taken on screen using the built-in note taking function.

Figure 7: Twitter Mention Network with Netlytic



The majority of participants are also active Facebook users and as such NameGen-Web was used to visualize the friendship network of the participant. Figure 8 provides an example of one participant's network. During the interview participants were invited to mouse-over nodes which highlighted the name of the Facebook user represented by that node. Notes were taken by hand on a piece of paper since no built-in function exists.

Figure 8: Facebook Friendship Network with NameGenWeb