IJoC | Opinion Leadership

Parasocial Opinion Leadership
Media Personalities' Influence within Parasocial Relations:
Theoretical Conceptualization and Preliminary Results

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Personalities in the media both influence and restrict topics of discussion and the amount of information available, thus exerting a substantial influence on the formation of the audience's political opinion. The present study examines this impact by integrating the theoretical concepts of *parasocial relationship* and *opinion leadership.* The resulting phenomenon, *parasocial opinion leadership*, is based on viewers' perceptions and emerges if (a) a media user ascribes certain attributes to a media communicator based on a parasocial relationship, which (b) allows for a gradual influence of the media personality on the user's opinions and attitudes by fulfilling at least one of three functions: *information and reduction of complexity, orientation*, or *arousal of interest.* A qualitative survey among TV users confirms the main assumptions of the concept.

Keywords: opinion leadership, parasocial relationship, formation of political opinion, media effects

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Introduction

So far, the opinion-leader concept serves as an explanation for the effects of information and persuasion that cannot be attributed to media coverage. In general, it is assumed that interpersonal communication with opinion leaders is an alternative channel of influence that may interact with mass media communication. However, we suggest that a particular type of opinion leader actually influences followers directly through the mass media, because, we propose, mass media communicators such as journalists, politicians, and comedians can function as opinion leaders as well.

Mass media communicators provide information about political and social topics, discuss them, and represent certain points of view within the media framework. Consequently, as those communicators influence and restrict the topics of discussion and the available information, they can be attributed a potential to influence the individual processes of shaping opinions. Therefore, numerous studies on media effects have focused on communicators and their persuasive potential by examining the presentation, perception, and effects of media communicators. Various studies on personalization of politics, for instance, found that people's judgments about political issues can be affected by individual politicians, including their personal characteristics (e.g., physical attractiveness or assertiveness) and private lives (Adam & Maier, 2010). However, politicians are not the only ones able to influence audiences' political attitudes with their personalities and appearance. In recent years, an increasing number of celebrities have also campaigned for candidates and given political statements with the intention of influencing the opinions and behavior of their audiences. In fact, Jackson and Darrow (2005) found that some celebrities are able to influence the political thinking of young adults. Which celebrities have persuasive powers depends on characteristics such as credibility and physical attractiveness. Moreover, current research on parasocial interactions and relationships indicates the potential of popular media characters to influence social attitudes. Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2005) suggest that parasocial contact with mass media characters may reduce the prejudices of majority groups toward minority groups.

Nonetheless, neither of these studies is able to explain the occurrence of such influences or disclose the components of the process. Because communication research lacks a theoretical model to understand exactly how media personalities exert influence on the attitudes of their audiences, this article aims to return to the main idea of opinion leadership—a concept that focuses in particular on the influence of individuals within their communicative relationships. It is based on the assumption that some people are considered competent within their social networks in certain areas, and they diffuse information and opinions, give advice, and thereby influence others in the course of interpersonal communication (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Weimann, 1994). We adopt this concept and transfer the main idea—that individuals exert influence—to mass media communication. For this purpose, we use the theory of parasocial interaction and relationship, which explains the interactions between media users and mass media communicators. By integrating the concepts of interpersonal opinion leadership and parasocial relationship into a model of *parasocial opinion leadership*, we aim to explain how mass media communicators are able to function as opinion leaders and influence media users. To test our theoretical assumptions, we carried out an exploratory study that provided results about the existence and the potential consequences of this reception phenomenon.

Theoretical Foundations of Parasocial Opinion Leadership

Influence Through Mass Media Communicators

People use the media to meet different needs. Beyond the needs for entertainment, social integration, and social interaction, the needs for personal identification, including with role models, and information should be emphasized (McQuail, 1983). From media coverage, users expect to receive information about relevant events, advice on practical matters, and opinions on social and political orientation.

According to the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), individuals strive for a cognitive equilibrium. Cognitive dissonance will motivate them to dissolve the conflicting perceptions, and this is why media users prefer attitude-consistent messages and avoid counter-attitudinal content. Consequently, the users' media exposure is highly selective (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). In view of current tendencies toward personalization in media reporting (Adam & Maier, 2010), information and opinions are primarily communicated by individuals through their statements. Mass media communicators are able to reduce uncertainties and thereby influence the opinions and decisions of media users.

Schiappa et al. (2005) have produced clear evidence for media communicators' ability to influence users' attitudes. In their study about the perception of homosexual men in TV series, they claim that under certain conditions (such as when users perceived similarity with or attractiveness in the men on TV), majority groups' prejudices toward minority groups can be eliminated through parasocial contacts. They state, "when parasocial contact is of sufficient quantity and quality to allow the sort of judgments to be made about mass mediated characters that people make with direct interpersonal contact, prejudicial attitudes may be reduced" (p. 105).

Similar results are also reported by Jackson and Darrow (2005), who empirically confirmed the potential of celebrities to influence the political opinions of young adults. In a study about parasocial interactions with newscasters, Levy (1979) provided the first indications of such mechanisms: Respondents stated that they compared their ideas with the statements of their favorite newscasters. According to Levy, these cognitive effects indicate that mass media personalities can also adopt the role of opinion leaders.

German scholar Klaus Merten (1988) also assumed that mass media personalities may serve as a certain type of opinion leader. He coined the term *fictive influentials* to describe media personalities who exert their influence primarily on people who remain communicatively inactive. Interpersonal communication is not part of these individuals' opinion-building processes, and they are particularly receptive to influences by the mass media and its individual communicators.

Later, these considerations were taken up by Eisenstein (1994) and Peters (1996), whose studies defined media personalities as *virtual opinion leaders*. They obtained findings about the characteristics and functions of these virtual opinion leaders (see section on Theoretical Concept: Parasocial Opinion Leadership); however, they did not provide a model that explains how and why mass media personalities can exert opinion-leader functions. This article aims at providing this theoretical concept of mass media personalities as opinion leaders based on considerations and results of traditional opinion-leadership research that will be briefly reviewed in the following section.

Interpersonal Opinion Leadership

The assumption that individuals can advise others issues was initially formulated by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet in 1944. Their study "The People's Choice" claimed that personal influence exerted by others plays a more crucial role in everyday decision making than does information obtained from the mass media (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The authors assumed that mass media content first reaches opinion leaders—i.e., people who are active media users and who in turn collect, interpret, and diffuse those media messages to less active media consumers. Since its formulation, this *two-step flow of communication* has been tested and modified by numerous studies (Davis, 2009). Inconsistent findings frequently encouraged reformulations of the hypothesis and led to the development of other concepts of how communication flows among members of a group. Besides the one-directional two-step flow of communication, some studies found a *one-step flow,* for example, for those who are less interested and involved in a topic (Robinson, 1976) or for the diffusion of news with major importance for society (Deutschmann & Danielson, 1960). *Multistep flow* models, on the other hand, show direct and indirect courses of influence that affect both opinion leaders *and* followers. Troldhal and Van Dam (1965) indicated that leaders and followers switch roles according to specific social situations (*opinion sharing*). Because of the application of different approaches and changing research interests, our understanding of the process is still limited. However, it is possible to identify some characteristics of opinion leaders in terms of their demographics and socioeconomic status, media exposure, social positions, and personality traits, all of which enable them to exert influence on others. As Katz (1957) noted, being an opinion leader is connected to three attributes in particular: "Broadly, it appears that influence is related (1) to the *personification of certain values* (who one is); (2) to *competence* (what one knows); and (3) to *strategic social location* (whom one knows)" (p. 73).

First, opinion leaders display personal characteristics ("who one is") qualifying them to function as opinion leaders in the course of interpersonal communication. These characteristics include self-confidence (Nisbet, 2005), intelligence (Weimann, 1994), risk preference (Weimann, 1994), a high level of interest in various areas (Noelle-Neumann, 2000), and credibility (Weimann, 1994).

A second criterion for being an opinion leader is a high level of expertise and knowledge ("what one knows") resulting from great interest and enduring involvement in specific issues (Weimann, 1994). As Nisbet (2005) stated, opinion leaders not only provide information, but they also actively seek it. Various studies suggest that opinion leaders use media, especially print news, more than the general population (Keller & Berry, 2003; Shah & Scheufele, 2006). Furthermore, Katz (1957) confirmed that across spheres of interest (and influence), opinion leaders pay more attention to media reports and news specific to that sphere. For example, political opinion leaders pay more attention to political news, whereas fashion leaders turn more strongly toward fashion news. Opinion leaders also pursue their topics of interest over a longer period and develop a high level of domain-specific knowledge.

Third, opinion leaders are highly integrated and socially active ("whom one knows"). They exhibit a very high level of social gregariousness (Nisbet, 2005) and "have more social ties, more friends, and more social contacts" (Weimann, 1994, p. 80) than nonleaders. Furthermore, they maintain contact with people outside their social group (Katz, 1957).

Beyond such specific characteristics, interpersonal opinion leaders distinguish themselves from others in two essential functions: (a) the transfer of and (b) the evaluation of information spread by the mass media.

(a) Opinion leaders pick up information from the media and pass it on to less active and less interested people via interpersonal communication. Katz and Lazarsfeld defined this pattern as a *relay function* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). However, opinion leaders transfer only *some* information from the media—for instance, information they consider particularly important or useful to ensure the stability of their social network. In doing so, they *select* the information and fulfill a gatekeeper function (Turnbull & Meenaghan, 1980).

(b) Even more important than transferring the information is its classification and evaluation. Interpersonal relations between an opinion leader and his[2] followers serve not only as mere channels of information. As Katz (1957) noted, "interpersonal relations are also sources of pressure to conform to the group's way of thinking and acting, as well as sources of social support" (p. 77). In cases of behavioral uncertainties (e.g., due to innovations or controversies within a social group), opinion leaders provide social guidance and orientation (Eurich, 1976) by legitimizing a decision or an innovation (Grewal, Mehta, & Kardes, 2000).

Research on opinion leadership in general points out that opinion leaders are able to influence their followers cognitively and emotionally and shows how they can change their attitudes and actions (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Nevertheless, most of the studies on opinion leadership do not provide clear definitions of *opinion* or *attitude*. Given that such definitions are a necessary prerequisite for exploring the effects of interpersonal and media communication, we define an *attitude* as a construct of three combined dimensions: a *cognitive*, an *affective*, and a *behavioral* component (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). Consequently, an *opinion* is only the verbally expressed part of attitude based on the knowledge that is cognitively accessible. However, despite what the term indicates, opinion leaders are able to exert influence along these three dimensions and on the attitude as a whole.

Linking Media Communicator Influence and Opinion Leadership:
Parasocial Interactions and Relationship

The apparent difference between interpersonal opinion leadership as described above and parasocial opinion leadership is that with the former, the influence on another individual is based on an immediate personal relationship between two communication partners. In the context of influence from a media personality, this condition is usually not met. Therefore, each theoretical model has to be based on a clarification of the relationship between the media user and the mediated opinion leader. The interpersonal opinion leader exerts his influence within an *orthosocial* relationship. In contrast, we propose

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[2] Of course, opinion leaders can be male or female. For the sake of readability, we exclusively use male pronouns when referring to individuals who may be female or male.

that the a media personality exerts his influence within a *parasocial* relationship, which is why we chose the term *parasocial opinion leadership* (see Theoretical concept: Parasocial Opinion Leadership).

The starting point for research on parasocial interactions and relationships with media personalities was the publication of the essay "Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance" by Horton and Wohl in 1956. Since then, the concept has been examined and further developed in various studies (see Hartmann, 2008). Several researchers have tried to shed light on the psychological processes that underlie parasocial interactions and relationships. Schramm and Hartmann (2008) summarized these processes using the term *parasocial processing*, which captures all kinds of users' reactions toward a media character. According to this concept, every parasocial process of character perception starts automatically, as soon as a mediated object is identified as "social" (Hartmann, 2008, p. 187). These spontaneous processes are expected to set in immediately and unconsciously (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Depending on the intensity of parasocial processing, users experience a parasocial interaction (Hartmann, Schramm, & Klimmt, 2004), which stands for users' subjective feeling of being part of an "immediate, personal, and reciprocal" (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 580) social interaction with a media person during exposure (although, in reality, it is one-sided and not interactive). According to Chory-Assad and Yanen (2005), users may experience a parasocial interaction similarly to a real social interaction.

The psychological basis for parasocial experiences are processes of perspective and role-taking which occur in both communication partners: the mediated character and the media user. Horton and Wohl (1956) assumed that a media personality is always aware of the audience's presence and tries to orient his actions to the possible expectations and reactions of media users. This results, for example, in a certain style of address (physical and verbal) that fosters users' impressions of a social interaction. The user also interprets the meaning of the media personality's behavior, anticipates this partner's responses and actions, and reacts to them (Hartmann, 2010). Parasocial interaction may manifest itself in forms such as rising interest, intensive thoughts about the media personality, body movements, expressions, and gestures (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, users evaluate media personalities, attribute characteristics to them, and classify them according to social categories (Hartmann, Schramm, & Klimmt, 2004).

Past research has tended to treat parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships interchangeably (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), but we need a clear distinction of these constructs. According to Schramm and Hartmann (2008), this can be made with regard to time: A parasocial interaction is restricted to the situation between the media personality and user for the duration of media exposure. However, a parasocial relationship can also endure beyond an individual experience of exposure and can be considered a long-term result from frequent interactions (Schramm, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2002). Consequently, a parasocial relationship is a cross-situational constellation between a media personality and a user that may include particular cognitive, affective, and behavioral components— exactly the dimensions that characterize opinion leaders' influence (see Interpersonal Opinion Leadership; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). During a parasocial interaction, users store, evaluate, and integrate the information they perceive from the media personality into a relationship schema. This mental representation includes the characteristics of the media personality, how the user evaluates those characteristics, and information about how the user sees himself within the relationship and the quality of

the relationship itself (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Consequently, a parasocial relationship may also affect future parasocial interactions (Gleich, 1997): The expectations of the media user concerning the media personality's way of thinking and acting are oriented toward earlier "meetings" with this parasocial partner. Individual interactions are based on the relationship schema and include past experiences, characteristics, and role assignments.

Summing up these findings, it seems very likely that parasocial-relationship partners in the media are able to influence the opinion-making processes of members of their audiences. A media user develops a relationship schema concerning the media personality in order to maintain a parasocial relationship. We also assume that because of this schema a parasocial opinion leader's messages are processed and classified more quickly. In this case, the communicator of the message might have more relevance than other input factors, such as the media outlet or the content of a message. Perse and Rubin (1989) found that the reduction of uncertainties fosters media users' perception of intimacy with their parasocial communication partners, pointing at a prospective interaction: A parasocial relationship can be reinforced through a media personality's influence on users' opinions, and, we suppose, influence in the context of a parasocial relationship is particularly effective. Within a parasocial relationship, a user's should be more willing to pay particular attention to a media personality's statements and to evaluate them positively. However, this needs to be clearly distinguished from a situational, short-term influence where the power of persuasion is based on the quality of a communicator's arguments or the medium rather than on the communicator as a person himself. Only within a parasocial relationship characterized by trust does the long-term and sustainable influence of a mass media communicator seem possible. In our view, this special case of influence exerted by a media personality can be compared to influence based on *interpersonal opinion leadership,* considering that similar processes take place: Both phenomena are based on a relationship of confidence, and the interpersonal opinion leader and the parasocial opinion leader fulfill the same functions for their followers.

Theoretical Concept: Parasocial Opinion Leadership

As mentioned earlier, in 1988, the idea of opinion leaders influencing their followers through mass media emerged in communications research for the first time. Merten (1988) labeled opinion leaders "fictitious influentials" (p. 631) and assumed they had an impact mainly on communicatively inactive recipients.[3] Likewise, Schenk (1989) supposed that these "inactives" often remain excluded from interpersonal communication and are thus particularly influenced by the mass media. Furthermore, he stated that they will try to compensate for this lack of interpersonal communication through parasocial interaction (see also Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although Merten and Schenk anticipated that media personalities could function as opinion leaders and that this could somehow be a parasocial phenomenon, they did not provide a theoretical model for this concept.

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[3] We recognize that the term *recipient* is uncommon in English; we use it, however, to address a media user who actively processes the actions and statements of media personalities.

Comparing interpersonal opinion leadership based on an orthosocial relationship with media personalities as opinion leaders within parasocial relationships, we propose such a theoretical model and suggest calling it *parasocial opinion leadership.*[4] The underlying process is visualized in Figure 1; its elements and their relationships are explained in the following text.
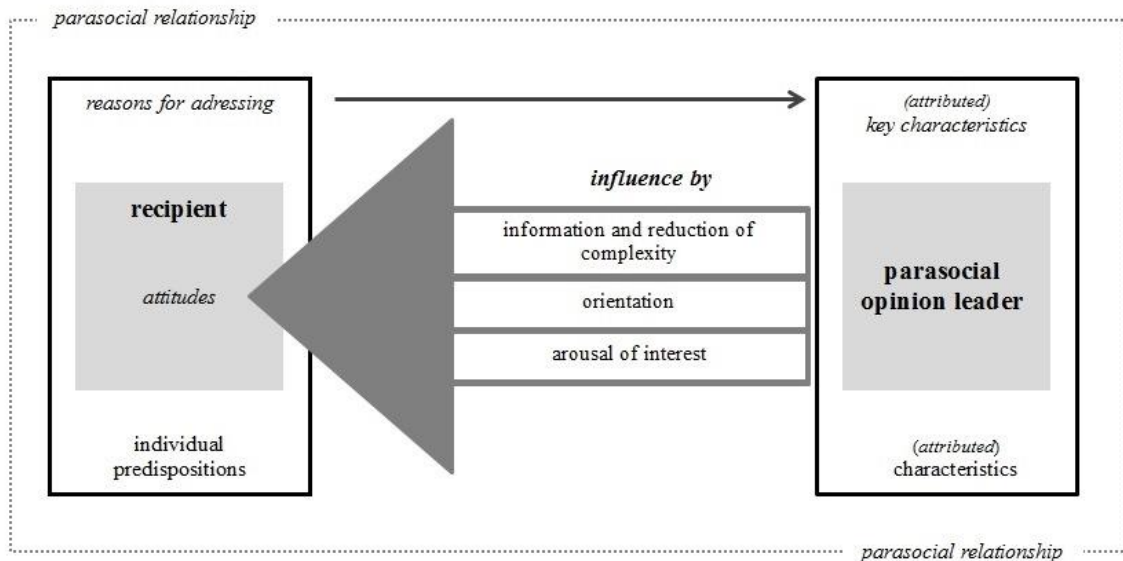
Figure 1. Process model of parasocial opinion leadership.

We assume that a quintessential opinion leadership process comprises (a) an opinion seeker turning toward (b) a person he considers competent and to whom he has built up trust in the course of a (parasocial) relationship, and therefore (c) the opinion seeker getting influenced by this other person. Then, opinion leadership can be exerted not only by personal contacts but also by parasocial partners. While Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) ruled out celebrities as opinion leaders because they are usually not part of interpersonal networks, other studies on media personalities as opinion leaders have suggested that this concept could apply to politicians and scientists as well as to media professionals such as news anchors or TV hosts (Eisenstein, 1994). Given that selecting and transferring mass media information is often one main function of opinion leaders (see Interpersonal Opinion Leadership), it may seem questionable that both media professionals and politicians can take the role of parasocial opinion leaders. But our wider definition of opinion leadership that focuses on the trusting relationship between the opinion leader and the follower indicates that opinion leadership can be exerted not only by journalists but by all

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[4] German authors who first dealt with media characters as opinion leaders called them "virtual opinion leaders" (Eisenstein, 1994; Peters, 1996; Merten, 2000; Schenk, 2007; Dressler & Telle, 2009). This term is no longer appropriate, as it is used today to refer to interpersonal opinion leaders who also exert their influence also through the social Web (e.g., van der Merwe & van Heerden, 2009).

media personalities. Considering the logic of media and society as social systems, politicians and scientists certainly play a different role than other media personalities, but exactly how their position is defined in recipients' perceptual processes seems of little interest at this point. However, essential for the concept of parasocial opinion leadership is the fact that a person appears regularly in the media, repeatedly addressing recipients. That is the case not just for genuine media personalities but also for politicians, for example. Accordingly, the possibility that fictitious media characters may exert influence within parasocial relationships must be taken into account as well.

Slater, Rouner, and Long (2006) have proved the persuasive potential of fictitious media content and have indicated how controversial political issues communicated within TV shows may influence the attitudes of audiences. Given that the values and political views transmitted in TV programs are most likely presented through the comments and actions of the characters on screen, this can be interpreted as a first hint that fictitious parasocial opinion leaders may exist.

Parasocial opinion leaders are characterized not only by a high level of media representation (Merten, 2000) but also by some important features that their recipients attribute to them. These features will be analyzed now in comparison to the characteristics of interpersonal opinion leaders according to Katz's (1957) classification of (a) who one is, (b) what one knows, and (c) whom one knows.

(a) A basic precondition for the ability to exert influence is that the media character displays a positive, charismatic image (Peters, 1996). Moreover, to serve as a parasocial opinion leader, a media character needs to be perceived as reliable and needs to inspire confidence. In addition, he has to exude authority and be a highly skilled communicator (Eisenstein, 1994). These findings are consistent with the results of earlier studies on persuasive messages and the relevant qualities of their communicators: McGuire (1969) already named credibility, attractiveness, and power as the three components that favor the influence on attitudes; according to Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), reliability and expertise are two more aspects of the very quality that is central to communicative success—credibility.

(b) The true expertise of a parasocial opinion leader is probably not a crucial feature, as the audience cannot verify it easily. Jackson and Darrow (2005), whose study about celebrities' influence on forming political opinions has been mentioned above, support this conclusion: In fact, it seems to be an interaction of credibility, attractiveness, and perceived homogeneity with followers' characteristics that enable parasocial opinion leaders to influence their followers.

(c) Generally, interpersonal opinion leaders are well integrated into their social networks and know the valid norms within them. A certain similarity between opinion leaders and opinion seekers increases the possibility of leaders' influence (Weimann, 1994; McGuire, 1969). Correspondingly, Peters (1996) discovered that it is relevant for the establishment of parasocial opinion leadership that media users perceive conformity between media characters' and their own political and ideological views—although the

parasocial opinion leader cannot be integrated directly into the media users' social network.

Not every parasocial relationship to a media character can also be described as a constellation of parasocial opinion leadership—otherwise, the concept would be redundant. The parasocial relationship between a media user and a media character is a necessary condition for parasocial opinion leadership but not the only one. We argue that only if the qualities attributed to a media personality relate to a set of *key characteristics*, the media personality will fulfill particular functions for the user and, therefore, exert an influence on his attitude (by becoming his parasocial opinion leader).[5] There are, however, no universal characteristics that enable the opinion leader to exert influence (as will be shown in section on Substantiating the Concept: Preliminary Empirical Findings). Instead, the individual set of key characteristics depends on the recipients' reasons for addressing their opinion leader (see Figure 1).

Although a recipient may establish parasocial relationships with all kinds of media personalities to whom he ascribes positive qualifications or whom he has positive feelings for, he may not ascribe those characteristics that enable the fulfillment of particular functions. Thus—according to our assumption—the recipient will *not* be substantially influenced by these media personalities over time, and thus no parasocial opinion leadership develops. The media personality engaged in a "regular" parasocial relationship will not exert a major influence on a recipient (at least not on his attitudes) because the key characteristics are lacking. This is different from the case of a parasocial opinion leader, but, of course, more permutations in intensity of influence and in how many of the key characteristics are present exist apart from these prototypes.

But how exactly can this influence on opinion formation be described? Which functions does the parasocial opinion leader assume that ultimately lead to an impact on the media user? Eisenstein (1994) believed this influence to be a result of the opinion leader's giving a combination of information and advice; Peters (1996) argued that—besides the function of advice-giving—parasocial opinion leaders serve as role models for their followers. Hence, parasocial opinion leaders are expected to exert similar functions as interpersonal opinion leaders (see section on Interpersonal Opinion Leadership): They relay information and opinions to media users. But, in contrast, parasocial opinion leaders can create media information and mediated opinions themselves, while interpersonal opinion leaders adopt those from the media and process them with their individual mix of information and opinions. In detail, we ascribe the following potential functions to parasocial opinion leaders (cf. Figure. 1):

- *Information and reduction of complexity:* Parasocial opinion leaders inform their followers by making complicated topics comprehensible for the audience. This function, which earlier research referred to as the relaying function of opinion leaders (see e.g.,

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[5] Of course, these key characteristics may also be appear within a short-term parasocial interaction and cause an influence. However, in this case, the appearance of the key characteristics will not last beyond the singular communicative episode, leading only to a situational influence rather than to long-term opinion leadership.

Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955), seems crucial, especially with regard to media coverage about political issues and questions of particular social relevance.

- *Orientation:* In communicating information and views related to controversial issues, parasocial opinion leaders orient their followers to certain values, norms, and political attitudes (see, e.g., Gnambs 2010).

- *Arousal of interest:* We assume that parasocial opinion leaders may be able to broaden followers' horizons and get them more involved in new or previously unnoticed topics.

We believe that beyond the mere existence of a parasocial relationship, the second precondition for parasocial opinion leadership is that least one of these functions is fulfilled.

Thus, parasocial opinion leaders may influence their followers' attitudes (opinions, emotions, and actions; see section on Interpersonal Opinion Leadership). Over the course of the relationship between a parasocial opinion leader and his follower, it is likely that not only the single components opinions, emotions, and actions are influenced but also the attitudes behind them. We do not expect an immediate connection between the fulfillment of a certain function and the impact on a certain component, and neither can one reasonably differentiate between the mere relaying of information by the opinion leader and the conveying of an opinion: Although some researchers distinguish between informing and persuading, they admit that this distinction is rather subtle (e.g., Robinson, 1976). As an opinion leader does not relay all available information but rather selects certain pieces, he already acts according to his personal evaluation of relevance, which is further determined by the way he presents the information.

Until now, multiple authors (e.g., Eisenstein, 1994; Peters, 1996) have assumed a general impact of parasocial opinion leaders across fields, arguing that these leaders' influence is based mainly on followers' attribution of nonspecific competence to them due to their status as celebrities. However, a monomorphic influence seems more likely: Due to the strong segmentation of the mass media, an opinion follower will probably receive statements from the media personality concerning those topics that correspond with his role in public and within the media.

To sum up the previous considerations briefly, parasocial opinion leaders are—in contrast to interpersonal opinion leaders—known to their followers primarily through the mass media. These communicators may influence their followers within a parasocial relationship and at varying intensities. The first precondition of this influence is the recipient's attribution of the relevant key characteristics (such as credibility, capacity, authority) within this parasocial relationship. The second precondition is that these key characteristics permit the media character to assume certain functions according to their individual reasons for addressing the media user. The result may be an impact on the recipient's opinions, emotions, actions, and attitudes.

Recipients establish a parasocial relationship with a media person by transferring information into a relationship schema when they attribute certain personality traits to the media character. A parasocial

opinion leadership based on this kind of relationship has to be distinguished from interpersonal opinion leadership in regard to one crucial point: *Parasocial opinion leadership is a psychological phenomenon of media reception rather than an apparent social constellation.* The status of a media person as a parasocial opinion leader is solely attributed by an individual recipient—neither a reciprocal relationship nor a change of roles is possible. In contrast to an orthosocial relationship, the only way the recipient can leave the constellation is to break up the parasocial relationship (Cohen, 2004) and, consequently, lose the media character as a parasocial opinion leader. As already noted, a parasocial relationship is not reciprocal, which is why it lacks some psychological advantages of orthosocial relationships outlined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), including flexibility and immediate reward. Thus, the potential to influence people within parasocial relationships might be limited compared with orthosocial relationships. But, we assume that a parasocial communication partner still holds a high potential for influencing a media user and becoming an opinion leader because a parasocial relationship leads to extraordinarily high levels of trust and credibility, just as orthosocial relationships might not.

Substantiating the Concept: Preliminary Empirical Findings

To substantiate our assumptions about the concept of parasocial opinion leadership, we present selected results of a qualitative survey designed to collect preliminary evidence on the phenomenon. Because such a relationship always originates from an individual recipient (as mentioned earlier), the usual method of collecting self-assessments from possible opinion leaders would not produce valid results. Instead, it was necessary to conduct a survey of media users who were potential followers of media opinion leaders. This approach is centered around a single recipient and allows us to analyze how a parasocial opinion leader may or may not affect media users' attitudes.

We conducted qualitative guided interviews lasting an average of 40 minutes with 24 German television viewers of different ages, sexes, and educational level in the winter of 2011–12.[6] Researchers identified potential parasocial opinion leaders by asking open questions and next by describing their characteristics and functions. While we asked all initial questions regardless of a topic or media format, a second part of the interview focused on political topics. We transcribed and coded all responses following Mayring's (2000) approach to qualitative content analysis. We generated the categories either in advance from the theoretical background or while coding the interviews. Finally, we interpreted the category system and organized our selection of findings with regard to the major aspects of the proposed process model.

Does the presumed link between the concept of parasocial relationships and the influence of media personalities actually exist?

The qualitative interviews indicated that, from recipients' point of view, parasocial relationships are well suited for the exertion of influence. Having bonded with a media personality over the course of several parasocial interactions and continuously ascribed particular characteristics to that person, the user

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[6] We focused on television, since TV personalities are particularly likely to evoke parasocial relationships (cf. Horton & Wohl, 1956). The sample consisted of 10 males and 14 females aged 16 to 72 years.

forms a stable relationship that seems an ideal ground for an impact on opinions. This is expressed by a respondent's statement about German journalist Dieter Kronzucker: "I know from past experiences that Kronzucker has always, or whenever possible, told the truth. He is someone I would trust" (male white-collar worker, 59 years).

Which of the attributed characteristics qualify as key characteristics and distinguish parasocial opinion leaders from ordinary media personalities?

The interviews indicated that there are presumably no universal characteristics qualifying all media personalities as parasocial opinion leaders for a recipient. Instead, the recipient's individual reasons for addressing a media personality (and not a general perception of the media personality or his image) determine which characteristics are decisive key characteristics for this particular relationship. Against this background, we defined different types of parasocial opinion leaders and determined how to distinguish the types from one another.

For political topics, we identified (a) the personalized and glamorous politician, (b) the critical and provocative opinion leader, (c) the experienced and charismatic opinion leader, (d) the objective and informing opinion leader, and (e) the competent and likeable opinion leader. These prototypes were identified from respondents' answers regarding the professional background of the people named as a possible parasocial opinion leaders; respondents' individual perceptions of these people's personal characteristics, communicative styles, and media presence; and respondents' assessments of their performance. To give an impression how these types can be distinguished from one another and to further explain the process of parasocial opinion leadership, we will describe two types of opinion leaders as examples:

1) The *glamorous and personalized politician* particularly appeals to female media users with less interest in politics and an average level of education who are looking for comprehensibly presented information. Followers of this type also tend to spend a lot of time (more than 4.5 hours a day) consuming TV. Although they occasionally watch TV to gain political information, they are primarily interested in entertainment programs. Given their weak interest in politics, the glamorous and personalized politician has to attract their attention with nonpolitical content. Consequently, key qualifications of this type of opinion leader are not only his ubiquity in the media but also his diverse and likeable appearances on screen. As an example for this type of opinion leader, interviewees named former Minister of Defense Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg.

2) A critical view on political topics, paired with honesty, credibility, moral integrity, and professional competence were named as key characteristics of a *critical and provocative opinion leader*. Given his frequently denounced role in the political process, we assume that for a parasocial relationship with this type of personality to be effective, recipients must share his fundamental attitudes. Otherwise, such a media personality would simply be perceived as overly critical. "Politically, he was just like me. To put it this way, I

unconditionally agreed with him," a respondent (female civil engineer, 48 years) said about German journalist Klaus Bednarz. This shows that even though it appears as if the recipient was gaining broad and objectively presented information from this personality, the recipient actually desired an affirmation of her beliefs from him.

Are parasocial opinion leaders actually able to assume the three expected functions for their followers and thereby influence them?

Similar to the key characteristics, the functions parasocial opinion leaders assume vary according to recipients' individual reasons for addressing media personalities. The results of the qualitative study confirmed a prevalence of the functions *information*, *reduction of complexity*, and *social orientation*. Furthermore, the results also suggest a new opinion leader function that has not been explicitly described previous to this study and that we label *arousal of interest*. Referring to German astrophysicist and TV host Harald Lesch, a respondent explained how, on the one hand, he appreciated Lesch's *reduction of complexity*: "He has a good sense of humor and tries to explain everything for you to understand it" (male student, 28 years). On the other hand, Lesch *aroused his interest* in new topics: "Well, I would say he broadens what I don't pick up in my spare time. You could rather say he broadens my horizons concerning this topic."

To what degree is such influence possible?

In contrast to the many existing operations of opinion leadership, we did not consider it a dichotomous variable ("opinion leader" or "not opinion leader") but, rather, a polytomous one. Accordingly, we understand the influence exerted in a parasocial relationship as a stratified process where different parasocial opinion leaders cause varying degrees of attitude changes among their recipients. Following McGuire (1989), we developed a staged model of influence highlighting this relationship's gradual nature. The qualitative study suggested six stages of potential influence, which ascend in intensity: (a) attention, (b) comprehension, and (c) trust; (d) agreement, (e) integration, and (f) action. The recipient's *attention* toward the media personality, the *comprehension* of his statements, and *trust* in him constitute basic influence. At the next stage, the recipient actually *agrees* with the parasocial opinion leader's messages. Once they are permanently *integrated* into a recipient's relationship schema, the opinion leader's messages might even influence the recipient's *actions*—for example, the recipient might use his arguments in discussions, as a respondent described doing with the statements of Klaus Bednarz: "If the reports persuaded me substance-wise and were comprehensible and acceptable to me, then, of course, I used them in discussions with others" (female civil engineer, 48 years). Another respondent even indicated that his behavior had been influenced by his parasocial opinion leader, journalist and TV host Dieter Kronzucker: "For example, I recognize it in my purchasing patterns. I don't go to Schlecker, for instance, and my wife doesn't go to Schlecker[7] because they screwed up so much. Treated their employees like scum, for example" (male white-collar worker, 59 years). The respondent directly links his

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[7] Schlecker was a German drugstore chain that went bankrupt in the summer of 2012 but was still in business at the time of the interviews. Schlecker had frequently made headlines for excessively spying on customers, wage dumping, and extensively employing temporary workers.

information about the chain's business practices to arguments made by Dieter Kronzucker. He attributes his behavioral change to Kronzucker's enlightening statements.

Conclusion

The potential impact of media personalities on their audiences' opinions, emotions, behavior, and underlying attitudes was the main subject of this study. The combination of the opinion leadership approach and the concept of parasocial relationship enabled us to establish a theoretical foundation and definition of the phenomenon we termed *parasocial opinion leadership.*

Our theoretical reasoning emphasized how classical interpersonal-communication theories can be applied to a mass media framework. Pointing out that mass media communication might be perceived in a personal manner ("masspersonal communication")—instead of simply looking at the nature of the channel, we centered our approach on the user and focused on users' personal media diets to understand communication as a whole (cf. O'Sullivan, 2005). Crucial to our concept that the proposed theoretical approach exceeds existing explanations of persuasive effects of mass media communicators. By concentrating on parasocial relationships, we sketched one possible communicative frame shared by a media user and a communicator. Based on this idea, we identified necessary preconditions and reasons for persuasion. In contrast to various communicator-orientated models of persuasion, the concept of parasocial opinion leadership explains why certain communicator traits have an impact on some media users but not others. We also suggested that attributes of communicators that increase their impact are not universally valid. Both our theoretical concept and our empirical study are grounded in research on long-term shifts in attitudes, distinguishing our concept from situational approaches and explaining why a media user turns to his media "friend" for information and advice on certain topics and thereby forms opinions about them.

The concept presented in this article is linked to several other approaches in the field of communications research: on the one hand, emphasizing that attitudes and opinions can be influenced within a parasocial relationship, we shed new light on the analysis of parasocial phenomena. On the other hand, the multistep flow of communication model is complemented by the addition of the parasocial opinion leader. Traditional research on opinion leadership often collects self-assessments from possible opinion leaders. This study, as it deals with opinion leadership as a reception phenomenon, focused instead on the opinion follower. This approach could be useful for further research on opinion leadership, as it permits measuring the actual impact of the exerted influence. Furthermore, our study provides a staged model that qualifies this influence by degrees.[8]

In the future it will be rewarding to observe how the changing media environment, particularly with the emergence and diffusion of social media, may confirm or alter our ideas of opinion leadership (see, e.g., Campus, 2012, about the blogosphere). With regard to parasocial opinion leadership, the

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[8] Following the qualitative study presented here, the authors completed a quantitative study based on a standardized questionnaire and developed two scales (in the German language) for measuring degrees of parasocial opinion leadership in the political realm (see Stehr et al., 2014, and Stehr, 2014).

crucial question is whether a communication partner in the social media acts as an individual using interpersonal communication or as a media personality pursuing mass communication. We are aware that the boundaries between these types of communication are blurred and that any distinction may be highly misleading. For our followers-centered approach, however, it is only relevant whether the individual *perceives* that this message is being directed at him personally. If the communication situation suggests an intimate conversation, processes of traditional, orthosocial opinion leadership may apply; but social media applications with an approach tending toward mass distribution of messages (e.g., Twitter) or famous bloggers with numerous followers (Campus, 2012) might initiate processes of parasocial opinion leadership. This idea opens up a promising field of research.

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