

Self-styled opinion leaders share more news, useful or not

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Journalism has always depended on people sharing news, whether by word of mouth or clipping an article out of the paper. Today, all it takes is the click of a button to pass news along. A new study by a University of Kansas professor explored the effect that individuals' personality, combined with perceived usefulness of the news, has on the likelihood people would share that news with their peers.

Peter Bobkowski, assistant professor of journalism at KU, wanted to find out if a specific personality trait, in addition to the value of a [news](#) story, determine whether someone will share the story.

The study showed that while people generally share news that's useful to them or to their friends, people who consider themselves opinion leaders share news regardless of how useful it is.

"One thing that's always struck me is that some people are more likely to share things, both news and otherwise, than other people," Bobkowski said. "Studies have asked why people choose to read a story, but my study extends that to whether or not people will share the story. Once someone has read an article, what is the likelihood they will share it?"

The research, published in the journal *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, surveyed more than 500 people online in two studies. Respondents were asked to read two articles from two different content categories and then asked their likelihood to share the news. They were then asked a series of follow-up questions to determine

whether they considered themselves opinion leaders.

Bobkowski theorized that people who consider themselves opinion leaders would be more likely to share news and that stories with high information utility, stories that contained information likely to affect the reader, would be shared more often.

The hypothesis was proven partially right. Respondents read articles in technology and household categories:

In the first category, they read a fictional news article stating that Google would implement service fees that would affect all users. A second article claimed Google would implement fees, but they would only affect large companies. As expected, people reported they were more likely to share the first article, which had more value to individuals.

In the household category, one article about bedbugs reported the problem was quite likely to affect nearly all households in a community. A second reported bedbugs had been detected in a community but were not likely to spread. Again, the [article](#) stating the problem was more likely to affect all was the one people were more likely to share.

However, the findings took a somewhat unexpected turn when examining the people who considered themselves to be opinion leaders. Bobkowski said he expected self-styled opinion leaders would be more likely to share the high-utility news. They were, in fact, more likely to share all the news. The inverse was also true; people who did not consider themselves opinion leaders were likely not to share any news at all, including that with high personal information utility.

While news organizations depend upon people sharing their news, the findings suggest that it would be wise to consider who is sharing this news and the value that has for the news organizations.

"The idea for a while now has been that social media allows anyone to be an opinion leader, which allows anyone to be of value to an organization such as a media outlet because they can share their information," Bobkowski said. "But that doesn't take into account that some people are more likely to share than others. Social media tends not to make opinion leaders out of people who don't consider themselves opinion leaders."

The findings also suggest that if certain people are sharing large amounts of news regardless of how valuable the content is, their audience may start tuning them out, which could lessen the effect of sharing any news, Bobkowski said. He hopes to undertake research in the future to examine whether too much electronic sharing of news could lead to people ignoring it or if it diminished value of the actual news.

In the meantime, Bobkowski said the findings show it is a good idea for [news organizations](#) to focus on the quality of the news and realize that while sharing can take their content to new readers and be positive in some ways, it is limited in scope and shouldn't be the primary focus of news outlets.

"This study suggests that because some people are sharers and perceive themselves as well-informed, and because they share large amounts of information, their audiences may actually tune them out," Bobkowski said. "It's linked to credibility. If people share everything all the time, does that have a positive effect?"

Provided by University of Kansas

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