The Roles of Interpersonal Communication in Mass Media Campaigns


Social scientists began writing in earnest about social media soon after social networks sites such as Facebook emerged in the early part of the 21st century. What much of that work overlooked, however, were the myriad ways in which interpersonal connections have long played a role in understanding information flow through society. With this 2007 Communication Yearbook piece, we attempted to articulate a theoretical perspective on the ways in which interpersonal communication matters in understanding mass media effects, particularly as they relate to health. The authors synthesize various literatures on interpersonal communication and consider the implications for health and science communication campaign design and evaluation. The paper picks up threads of thinking that trace back to Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) Personal Influence and beyond that to Gabriel Tarde at the end of the 19th century. The paper also goes beyond 20th-century thinking to explore a variety of different possibilities. (In writing the piece initially, the authors consulted with Katz, who noted that much of what they outlined had not been explored theoretically or empirically in the decades since Personal Influence.)

The paper was well-timed. It coincided with the rapid transcendence of social media in popular consciousness and so was of interest to many people for that reason. The central focus of the paper, nonetheless, is not just social media, but rather social networks—real-world connections between people—as they have existed for generations. Numerous scholars have cited the piece in the years since it appeared and, in 2012, the paper was recognized as a Distinguished Article Award from the National Communication Association because of its 5-year impact.

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