Prologue: Opinion Leaders in the Wilderness

One of the earliest appearances of the two-step flow of communication is not to be found, as commonly cited, in the studies conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the Bureau of Applied Social Research of Columbia University, but thirty-three centuries earlier, in the thirteenth century B.C. in the Sinai Desert, with the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

According to the book of Exodus, 600,000 people followed Moses into the desert, guided by God's message: "Depart, go up hence, thou and the people that thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land of which I swore unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying: Unto thy seed will I give it" (Exodus 33:1). The narrative depicts Moses facing an impossible challenge: he was ordered to command a collection of slaves, a forming nation that lacked any political institution and tradition, across the desert, to a land they had never seen. He had to lead this expedition for forty years, replete with starvation, thirst, disaster, war, and crisis. For most of them the promised land was a promise never to be fulfilled. The long period of wandering was supposed to bring to the promised land a new generation that knew no slavery, a new and free generation.

The forty years in the wilderness was, by the biblical account, a period that the anthropologists call "liminality," a sort of in-between state (here between slavery in Egypt and a new existence through the covenant and the eventual new state in Eretz Israel).[1] Later tradition considered the passage a time of trial. The desert became the proving ground where God acquired a people.[2] The obstacles were many, creating constant grumbling and rebellion.[3] As soon as difficulty occurred, the people began to hedge their faith, question Moses's authority and even call for a return to the "fleshpots" of Egypt. The need to transform a community of ex-slaves into a nation was

accompanied by the presentation of rules and laws that created an additional source of pressure and crisis. The introduction of the Ten Commandments was followed by rules outlining how the people whom God had chosen for himself ought to live.

A modern political leader would certainly be confused if not shocked by the obstacles facing Moses. But a modern leader will at least have one advantage: he will have modern means of communication to assist him. For Moses, in the desert, there were no media, no means of amplifying his and God's messages to the huge public. There was no television, no print, no commercials, no campaigns, and no broadcasting. Lacking any means of amplification Moses could not speak to a crowd of 600,000. Moreover, he had many complex messages and a highly diversified audience: the Israelites were divided into twelve tribes, each represented by a named elder. Each tribe was further divided by families and households.

The circumstances themselves required a constant flow of information and directions. It was not only the need to spread God's laws and rules: it was the daily execution of leadership during a persistent fight with nature and with human enemies. Moses was not an uncontested leader either. The grumbling and complaints often led to direct confrontation and series of rebellions (e.g., Korah, Dathan, and Abiram). Under these pressures it comes as no surprise that Moses almost broke down and expressed his frustration to God:

> Wherefore hast Thou dealt ill with thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favor in Thy sight, that Thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? Have I brought them forth, that Thou shouldest say unto me: Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing-father carrieth the sucking child, unto the land which Thou didst swear unto their fathers? Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? For they trouble me with their weeping, saying: Give us flesh, that we may eat. I am not able to bear all this people myself alone, because it is too heavy for me (Numbers 11:11–14).

God answered with a suggestion that centuries later was termed by social scientists as the "two-step flow model of communication," highlighting the communicative role of the so-called "opinion leaders." Immediately after Moses's bitter complaint, God responded with the first introduction in history of the opinion leaders concept:

> And the Lord said to Moses: Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the

people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with thee. And I will come down and speak with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone (Numbers 11:16–17).

Moses followed God's instructions and gathered the selected men who thenceforth were the personal channels of communication, in a multi-step flow of information from God to Moses, from Moses to the seventy chosen elders, and from them to the entire community. Moses himself describes the circumstances of the choice of the mediators: "How can I myself alone bear your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife? Get you, from each one of your tribes, wise man, and understanding, and full of knowledge...." (Deuteronomy 1:12–13). One should note the social characterization of these chosen men, so similar to the attributes related to opinion leaders in twentieth-century studies. And God often activates this step-wise flow by commanding Moses "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say unto them...." (e.g., Exodus 3:16). By activating the influential, selected persons Moses could have his messages spread, as described by the Bible: "And Moses gave commandment, and they caused it to be proclaimed throughout the camp" (Exodus 36:6). Thus, the Bible may be regarded as the first documentation of the multi-step flow of communication where personal networks and social positions are used for disseminating the messages from a single source (God in the Bible, the media in the Columbia studies) to the vast public.

Between 1940 and about 1960, from the first study entitled *The People's Choice*,[4] Paul Lazarsfeld and his troops at the Bureau of Applied Social Research were occupied with a series of panel studies on the role of mass communication in the making of decisions in various areas (voting, consumption, public issues, and others). The researchers focused on the impact of campaigns in the media (radio and print at that time) and were surprised to find that interpersonal communication had more effect upon the attitudes of the individual than the mass media alone. Moreover, they found certain individuals who were more central and influential in their groups, often acting as intermediaries between the mass media and the public: they acted as filters or mediators through which the persuasive messages of the mass media had to pass. These intermediaries, called opinion leaders,[5] could allow messages to pass through (backing them with their own personal authority), strengthen or weaken them, or block their passage.

Consequently, the flow of information and influence from the mass media to their audiences would be perceived as taking place in two steps: from the media to the opinion leaders and from them to the public. This became the two-step flow of communication model.

This book examines the history of the opinion leadership conceptualization, from early discoveries, through the emergence of the empirical evidence, to modern remodifications and methodological sophistication. Part one presents the first stage: the early studies of the flow of information and influence and the roles of personal networks and opinion leaders. It explains how the idea of influential individuals was first suggested and supported by empirical research. Part two is devoted to the "Golden Age" of the opinion leaders' research. It describes the various attempts to categorize and identify different types of opinion leaders in various spheres of social life, the various methods used to identify and measure opinion leadership, and the dominant characteristics of opinion leaders. It also examines the leaders' sources of information and influence, thus answering the question: who leads the leaders? Part three is a systematic review of accumulating empirical evidence of the opinion leaders concept in various areas. This part is categorizing hundreds of opinion leadership studies according to domain or subject area. The various domains include marketing and consumer behavior, fashion, politics and voting, family planning, science and scientific innovations, agriculture, and health care. In each area the main ideas, measures, findings, and practical implications of personal influence and opinion leadership are discussed. Finally, part four is devoted to the stage of the concept's fight for survival. It examines the growing criticism of the model, based on theoretical and empirical weaknesses of the original concept and measures. As a result of this criticism, new measures and modifications of the original model have emerged. This part presents some of the modification attempts, including a new measure of personal influence, namely the Strength of Personality Scale, introduced by the German public opinion researcher Professor Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and later developed into a validated method for measuring the influenceability and identification of the influentials. These influentials are compared with the original opinion leaders, a comparison that reveals the differences as well as similarities between the two concepts and measures of personal influence. The last chapters focus on the influentials, their social characteristics, media consumption, sources of information, and modes of operation. It reveals the relationship between the agenda-setting function and the communicative role of the influentials: are they the agenda-setters, mediating between mass media agendas and public

agendas? The answers are based on a series of studies conducted during the 1980s and the 1990s in three countries—Germany, Israel, and the United States—and so facilitates testing the universality of the concept, the measurement, the findings, and their implications. The wide range of implications relate to theoretical as well as practical areas like persuasion, political and commercial communication, the formation of public opinion, the flow of mass communication, social networks and their communicative functions, media effects, and others.