



REVISITING ONE-STEP AND TWO-STEP FLOW THEORIES IN MASS COMMUNICATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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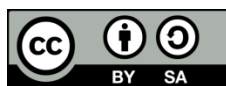
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ABSTRACT

This study revisits the one-step flow and two-step flow theories to examine their relevance in contemporary mass communication within the digital era. Using an integrative literature review with a comparative-analytical approach, the study analyzed 28 selected sources, consisting of foundational and contemporary publications on media effects, opinion leadership, digital communication, and platform-based interaction. The findings show that the one-step flow model remains useful for explaining rapid, direct, and large-scale message dissemination, particularly in situations requiring consistency and immediacy. However, it is limited in explaining how audiences interpret, negotiate, and respond to messages within complex social environments. By contrast, the two-step flow model offers a more flexible explanation of mediated influence, especially where credibility, interpersonal communication, and social legitimacy shape message acceptance. In digital contexts, both models remain relevant but need to be reconsidered alongside multi-step flow, networked influence, algorithmic curation, and hybrid media ecologies in contemporary Indonesian communication research and practice.

Keywords: one-step flow, two-step flow, mass communication, opinion leaders, digital communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has changed the way media messages are produced, distributed, and received by audiences. In the contemporary media environment, media influence no longer operates solely through a linear relationship between sender and receiver, but rather through a communication ecosystem characterized by platform logic, algorithmic curation, many-to-many interactions, and competition among actors to gain public attention. The concept of the hybrid media system shows

that old and new media are now interconnected within complex information circulation, while the idea of networked publics emphasizes that digital public spaces enable the distribution, reproduction, and aggregation of information in ways that are more open yet simultaneously more fragmented. In this context, the question of how media shape public opinion, attitudes, and behavior remains highly relevant, but it must be reconsidered by taking into account the role of algorithms, platform architecture, and the dynamics of digital visibility, which may amplify certain messages while marginalizing others (Ciszek et al., 2023; Duffy & Meisner, 2023; Gümüşay et al., 2022).

In the early tradition of mass communication studies, one of the most influential models was the view that messages flow directly from the media to audiences. In the literature, this perspective is often situated within the early tradition of direct media effects theories associated with the hypodermic needle or magic bullet concepts, although the two are not always conceptually identical. On the other hand, the development of research later showed that the process of media influence is not as simple as this assumption suggests. The classic work of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, later reinforced by Katz, demonstrated that information from the media is often first received, filtered, and interpreted by individuals who hold influence within their social environment before reaching broader audiences. It is from this point that the two-step flow model gained its relevance, as it positions opinion leaders as crucial mediators in the formation of public opinion and audience decision-making. Thus, the difference between one-step flow and two-step flow lies not only in the number of stages through which messages pass, but also in the way each model understands the role of audiences, interpersonal communication, and social mediation in the mass communication process (Dalimunthe et al., 2025; Sohn, 2022).

Although these models emerged from the classical tradition, debates surrounding them have regained significance in the digital landscape. A number of recent studies indicate that figures once understood as opinion leaders now appear in more diverse forms, such as social media influencers, content creators, digital commentators, and actors who gain high visibility through platform-based algorithmic mechanisms. However, contemporary literature also reminds us that not all influencers can be simply equated with opinion leaders in the Lazarsfeldian sense. Some possess high

credibility within certain domains and are able to build audience trust, while others merely enjoy visibility without strong interpretive authority. Cross-national studies even show that news consumption through social media influencers does not always replace mainstream media, but often coexists with news consumption from legacy digital media. These findings confirm that discussions of media influence in the digital era cannot be separated from issues of platformed opinion leadership, credibility, authenticity, and the relationship between digital interpersonal communication and the broader media system (Ritonga et al., 2024; Suhendar et al., 2023).

In the Indonesian context, studies of digital communication have developed quite rapidly, although their focus tends to remain fragmented across certain issues. Some studies highlight the role of influential actors in digital opinion networks, for example in discussions of personal data protection regulation on Twitter, while others examine the role of buzzers in shaping public opinion during the 2024 election, or evaluate the use of social media in digital government communication. This line of research is important because it shows that the formation of public opinion in Indonesia takes place through digital networks influenced by mediating actors, rather than solely through media messages moving directly to audiences. Nevertheless, compared with studies focusing on digital actors, buzzers, or platform communication strategies, research that explicitly re-examines one-step flow and two-step flow as theoretical frameworks for understanding mass communication in Indonesia's digital era remains relatively limited. In other words, there is still academic space to reassess the extent to which these classical models remain adequate, need revision, or should be complemented when confronted with communication realities now shaped by algorithms, platforms, and digital social networks (Kane et al., 2025; Oliveri & Carpenter, 2024).

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze and compare one-step flow and two-step flow theories in mass communication by examining their underlying assumptions, mechanisms of influence, strengths, limitations, and relevance within the contemporary digital communication environment. The contribution of this study does not stop at merely comparing two classical models, but extends to the effort to reposition them within current debates on digital communication. More specifically, this study offers a comparative reading that places one-step flow as a model that

remains useful for explaining the rapid and direct dissemination of messages, while two-step flow is understood as a more flexible framework for interpreting social mediation, digital opinion leadership, and the construction of meaning within hybrid media ecosystems. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its theoretical reinterpretation linking classical communication models with platform logic, digital mediating actors, and the contemporary context of mass communication in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study employs an integrative literature review method with a comparative-analytical approach to examine the basic assumptions, mechanisms of influence, and relevance of the one-step flow and two-step flow theories in mass communication, particularly within the context of contemporary digital communication (Al-Twal, 2023). This approach was chosen because the study does not merely aim to describe two classical models of mass communication, but also to synthesize foundational and recent literature in order to reassess the analytical capacity of these two models in explaining the dynamics of media influence in the digital era.

The literature search was conducted from January to February 2026 through several academic databases, namely Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and accredited national journal portals. The search used a combination of keywords: “one-step flow,” “two-step flow,” “mass communication,” “media effects,” “opinion leaders,” “digital communication,” “social media influencers,” “networked communication,” and “Indonesia.” These keywords were used both individually and in Boolean combinations, such as “one-step flow AND mass communication,” “two-step flow AND opinion leaders,” “media effects AND digital communication,” and “opinion leaders AND social media AND Indonesia.” The primary focus of the search was on publications issued between 2010 and 2025 in order to capture developments in contemporary digital communication; however, classical foundational works were also selectively included to explain the historical roots and theoretical development of both models.

The inclusion criteria for this study were: (1) journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings that substantively discuss one-step flow, two-step flow,

media effects, opinion leaders, or their transformation in digital communication; (2) publications in Indonesian or English; (3) sources published by academic publishers, reputable journals, or accredited national journals; and (4) works containing conceptual explanations or empirical findings relevant to comparing the two models. The exclusion criteria included: (1) publications that only briefly mention the two theories without substantive discussion; (2) popular articles, opinion pieces, blogs, or other non-academic sources; (3) duplicate documents; and (4) works not directly related to mass communication or digital communication. The initial search yielded 76 documents. After removing 12 duplicates, 64 documents remained for title and abstract screening. At this stage, 23 documents were excluded due to substantive irrelevance. Subsequently, 41 documents were read in full, and after assessing their content eligibility, 28 sources were selected for in-depth analysis in this study. The final corpus consisted of 8 foundational works and 20 contemporary publications.

The use of these two groups of literature was undertaken deliberately and methodologically. Foundational literature was used to trace the origins of the theories, their early assumptions, and the conceptual construction of one-step flow and two-step flow. Meanwhile, contemporary literature was used to reassess the relevance of the two models within the context of digital media, characterized by platformization, algorithmic curation, influencer culture, networked communication, and hybrid media. Thus, the combination of classical and recent sources does not represent a methodological inconsistency, but rather an analytical strategy to maintain a balance between historical accuracy and contextual relevance.

The data were analyzed through two main stages, namely content analysis and comparative analysis. In the content analysis stage, all sources were critically read to extract units of meaning related to the focus of the study. The coding process was carried out thematically using six main categories: (1) theoretical assumptions about the mass communication process; (2) patterns of information flow from the media to audiences; (3) the position of audiences in receiving and interpreting messages; (4) the role of mediators, opinion leaders, or intermediary actors; (5) the effectiveness and limitations of media influence; and (6) the relevance of the models in the context of digital communication. From these main categories, several analytical

subcategories were then derived, such as model strengths, model weaknesses, application contexts, forms of social mediation, message dissemination logic, and practical implications for communication strategy.

The next stage was comparative analysis, which involved systematically comparing the one-step flow and two-step flow theories based on the coded categories. The comparison was conducted to identify similarities, differences, weaknesses, and the capacity of each model to explain the dynamics of contemporary mass communication. Through this procedure, the study does not stop at describing the theories, but produces an argumentative synthesis regarding whether the two models remain adequate, need revision, or should be complemented by newer perspectives such as multi-step flow, networked communication, and platform logic.

To ensure interpretive rigor, this study employed cross-source verification and source comparison across the literature, rather than triangulation in the sense used in field research. Arguments, concepts, and findings from one source were compared with those of other sources in order to assess consistency, differences in theoretical position, and the explanatory strength of each work. Through this procedure, the findings were developed as a structured and traceable scholarly synthesis, so that the study does not remain merely a conceptual essay, but instead stands as a literature review with a clear methodological foundation.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of the One-Step Flow Model

The one-step flow model represents an early tradition in media effects studies that positions mass media as the primary channel with the capacity to deliver messages directly to audiences (Dalimunthe, 2022; Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024). Within this framework, communication flow is understood as proceeding linearly from the media to the audience, with relatively limited room for social mediation. However, it is important to emphasize that this assumption emerged mainly from the early stage of media effects theory and cannot be treated as a universal description of audience behavior in all contexts. In other words, the view of audiences as relatively passive should be understood as a historical assumption within the early tradition of

mass communication, rather than as a position that fully represents the development of contemporary communication theory.

The main strength of this model lies in its ability to explain communication situations that require the rapid, broad, and uniform dissemination of messages (de Curtò et al., 2024; Kagai et al., 2024). In certain contexts, such as public information campaigns, emergency warnings, or communication emphasizing the standardization of message content, the one-step flow model still retains analytical value. This model helps explain how the media can generate mass exposure in a short period of time without having to rely first on networks of social intermediaries. Therefore, the strength of this model does not lie in its ability to fully control the meaning of messages, but rather in its capacity to maintain consistency in message formulation at the initial stage of distribution.

Even so, the assumption that direct communication means full control over message reception is clearly too absolute. The literature review shows that even when messages are delivered directly by the media, the process of meaning-making remains influenced by the audience's social background, experiences, values, and interpretive frameworks. This means that the media may control the production and distribution of messages, but it cannot fully control how those messages are understood, negotiated, or even rejected by audiences. At this point, the limitations of the one-step flow model become apparent, especially when it is confronted with complex and plural communication environments.

Another limitation is its minimal attention to interpersonal communication and social influence. This model tends to focus on the media-audience relationship, but it is less capable of explaining how interpersonal discussion, social authority, or community structure shape message reception. Therefore, the one-step flow model is better understood as an effective model for explaining initial reach and speed of distribution, but less adequate for explaining depth of persuasion, negotiation of meaning, and socially mediated opinion formation.

Characteristics of the Two-Step Flow Model

The two-step flow model developed as a response to the limitations of the direct effects approach (Lai & Hsiao, 2022; Ritonga et al., 2023). If one-step flow emphasizes the linear relationship between media and audiences, then two-step flow shows that media influence often operates through social intermediaries, especially opinion leaders, who receive, interpret, and then retransmit information to other groups. In this model, media influence is not understood as an immediate process, but rather as one mediated by social relationships, credibility, and interpersonal communication.

One of the important contributions of this model is its positioning of opinion leaders as actors who do not merely relay information, but also provide meaning, selection, and context to media messages. In many situations, trust in these intermediary actors becomes the determining factor in whether a message is accepted, debated, or ignored. Therefore, the strength of two-step flow lies not merely in the existence of two stages of message dissemination, but in its ability to explain that media influence operates within social networks grounded in interpretive authority and interpersonal legitimacy.

However, the use of the term opinion leaders in contemporary contexts needs to be distinguished carefully from digital influencers (Harff et al., 2025; Korzynski et al., 2025). Not all influencers automatically function as opinion leaders in the classical sense. Some influencers possess high visibility, but do not always have sufficient credibility to shape lasting opinions. Conversely, there are also actors who are not highly prominent in digital metrics, yet exercise strong influence because of social proximity, professional reputation, or moral authority within certain communities. Thus, the distinction between visibility and trust becomes important in understanding the transformation of the two-step flow model in the digital era.

Nevertheless, this model also has several limitations. First, message flow becomes more complex and is not always efficient in terms of time because it involves a mediation stage. Second, the greater the interpretive space given to intermediaries, the greater the possibility for adjustment, shift, or even distortion of meaning. Third, in highly fluid digital societies, identifying who truly functions as an opinion leader is often not easy. Therefore, two-step flow is stronger than one-step flow in explaining

social mediation and trust-based persuasion, but it is not always the most efficient model for every communication context.

Comparative Analysis of the Two Models

Comparatively, the difference between one-step flow and two-step flow concerns not only the number of stages through which messages flow, but also the underlying logic of how media influence operates (Jensen & Neuman, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). The one-step flow model is based on the assumption that media possess a high capacity to reach audiences directly, whereas two-step flow emphasizes that media influence is more often mediated by social actors who possess credibility in the eyes of their followers. In this review, it would be inappropriate to claim that one model is entirely “more superior” than the other, since both operate differently and their relevance depends greatly on communication goals, message type, and audience characteristics.

In terms of speed and standardization of messages, one-step flow has a relative advantage. This model is suitable for situations requiring the simultaneous dissemination of mass information, such as policy messages, official announcements, or emergency communication. However, speed of distribution does not always correspond to depth of influence. Messages that spread quickly do not necessarily produce understanding, acceptance, or profound attitude change. At this point, two-step flow offers a stronger explanation because it takes into account the role of social interpretation and interpersonal relationships in building message legitimacy.

Conversely, in terms of persuasion and opinion formation, two-step flow tends to be more analytically flexible because it is capable of explaining how messages become more convincing when rearticulated by trusted actors. Even so, this advantage is contextual rather than absolute. In some cases, direct official messages are still necessary to maintain informational authority, whereas in other cases, social legitimacy becomes the main determinant of communication success. Therefore, the relationship between the two models is more productively understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Table 1. Review Matrix of Selected Studies

Dimension	One-Step Flow	Two-Step Flow
Audience assumption	Audiences are positioned as relatively passive within the early tradition of media effects	Audiences are influenced through social interaction and mediation
Channel logic	Linear, direct, one-way	Staged, mediated, involving interpersonal relations
Role of mediator	Not prominent	Very important through opinion leaders
Speed of distribution	High	Relatively slower
Depth of persuasion	Tends to be limited to initial exposure	Greater potential to shape acceptance and attitude change
Feedback	Limited	More open through interpersonal communication
Risk of distortion	Low at the initial distribution stage, but still present at the reception stage	Higher because there is room for reinterpretation by intermediaries
Digital relevance	Useful for explaining rapid dissemination and mass visibility	Useful for explaining trust, recommendations, and network-based influence
Main limitation	Oversimplifies the audience meaning-making process	Difficult to identify mediators, and not all influencers are credible

Based on this synthesis, the Indonesian context is better understood as a social illustration of the importance of mediation rather than as a specific regional empirical claim. In a society that still positions religious leaders, traditional leaders, community

figures, experts, and certain digital figures as points of reference, media influence often operates through social legitimacy. However, because this study is not a regional field study, this argument must be understood as a conceptual reading based on literature, rather than as an empirical generalization to a particular area.

Relevance in the Digital Era

Within the digital ecosystem, discussion of one-step flow and two-step flow can no longer be maintained rigidly in their classical formulations (Nguyen et al., 2023; Rasyidah et al., 2025). Social media, platform algorithms, influencer culture, and the circulation of viral messages indicate that media influence now operates within a more complex architecture. On the one hand, digital technology enables direct communication from institutions, media organizations, or brands to audiences on a large scale, so the logic of one-step flow remains relevant for explaining rapid, broad, and real-time message distribution. On the other hand, the same messages often gain stronger persuasive power only after being mediated, interpreted, or recommended by specific actors within digital networks, demonstrating the continued relevance of two-step flow logic.

However, contemporary digital reality seems no longer fully explainable by the classical two-step model alone. Many cases show that messages can move through multiple layers simultaneously: from institutional accounts to influencers, from influencers to online communities, from communities to interpersonal conversations, and then back again to mainstream media. Such patterns are closer to the logic of multi-step flow, networked communication, or platform-mediated flows. Thus, the relevance of two-step flow in the digital era lies not in literal fidelity to two stages, but in its basic idea that media influence is mediated, layered, and strongly shaped by social relations.

In this context, influencer figures need to be positioned more selectively. Not all influencers have substantive influence on the formation of public opinion. Some are more effective in shaping consumption preferences, lifestyle choices, or short-term attention, but do not necessarily have the same authority in political issues, policy matters, or complex public affairs. Therefore, the statement that audiences tend to

trust influencers more than mass media or brands should be limited contextually. Such trust depends greatly on the issue, the type of audience, the influencer's reputation, and the level of perceived authenticity.

The phenomena of echo chambers, filter bubbles, and algorithmic amplification also show that media influence in the digital era is not only about who communicates the message, but also about how platforms regulate the visibility of that message. This means that digital communication is more accurately understood as an interaction between media logic, social logic, and platform logic. This is where rereading classical models becomes important: one-step flow remains relevant for explaining direct distribution, two-step flow remains important for explaining social mediation, but both need to be supplemented by more recent perspectives in order to capture the complexity of digital communication more adequately.

Practical Implications for Communication Strategy

The review results indicate that effective mass communication strategies should not choose absolutely between one-step flow and two-step flow, but rather adjust the use of both according to communication goals. For initial dissemination needs, especially when messages must reach broad audiences quickly and uniformly, the logic of one-step flow remains highly useful. However, when communication goals shift from mere exposure toward acceptance, trust, and attitude change, the involvement of mediating actors becomes much more important (Artoni et al., 2026; Shahzad et al., 2024).

This implication shows that an integrative approach is more relevant than a single-model approach. Media organizations or institutions can use direct channels to build message visibility at the initial stage, then strengthen its legitimacy and acceptance through parties who have credibility within the target community (Fong, 2026). In this context, the selection of opinion leaders cannot be based solely on popularity or follower counts, but must also consider issue suitability, substantive authority, social proximity, and the level of trust possessed by the actor.

The literature review in this study also indicates that the use of approaches such as social network analysis becomes relevant not merely as a technical

recommendation, but as a logical consequence of the finding that communication influence often moves through networks rather than solely through formal channels. Therefore, the identification of central actors, nodes of influence, and patterns of inter-user relations can help communicators determine who is more likely to function as an effective mediator in message dissemination.

In the Indonesian context, these practical implications become even more important because diverse social and cultural structures make message effectiveness highly dependent on community context. For religious issues, religious leaders may be more influential; for technical issues, experts or professionals may be more credible; for lifestyle issues, particular digital influencers may be more relevant. Thus, an effective communication strategy is not only about crafting a good message, but also about selecting a path of message circulation that aligns with the audience's structure of trust.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that one-step flow and two-step flow represent two different ways of understanding media influence in mass communication. One-step flow remains relevant for explaining communication situations that require the rapid, direct, and wide dissemination of messages, particularly when consistency in information distribution is a priority. However, this model has limitations in explaining how messages are interpreted, negotiated, and shaped by social relations. In contrast, two-step flow appears to be more adaptive in explaining mediated media influence, especially when credibility, interpersonal communication, and the role of intermediary actors become important factors in the formation of opinion and message acceptance. In the context of digital communication, the findings of this study also confirm that these two classical models remain useful, but they need to be reconsidered in relation to the dynamics of multi-step flow, networked influence, algorithmic curation, and hybrid media ecologies. Therefore, effective mass communication strategies should not rely exclusively on a single model, but rather combine direct dissemination with social mediation according to the characteristics of the message, the audience, and the communication context. Going forward, empirical research should be directed toward

testing these two models in digital communication campaigns in Indonesia, particularly to examine how intermediary actors, platform logic, and communication networks influence the success of message dissemination and reception.

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