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On retiring concepts

Katz and Fialkoff have a provocative proposal. They assert that it is time to retire six concepts that communication scholars have studied for decades. This is not how we typically think about advancing theory—scientific progress is more often made by building on the foundations laid by earlier scholarship than by tearing those foundations down. But rejecting ideas that do not stand up to empirical scrutiny is an essential part of the scientific endeavor. Katz and Fialkoff's contribution is an important reminder that left uncorrected, flaws in a field's intellectual foundations are a serious liability, potentially jeopardizing future scholarship.

I do not agree with Katz and Fialkoff's recommendations, but welcome the opportunity to join this conversation. I begin by reflecting on what it means to retire a concept, what we might gain from it, and what cost doing so might entail. Then, I examine each concept nominated for retirement, focusing on aspects that cause me to question the call to retire it. I conclude by suggesting that retirement may be the wrong metaphor. These ideas may not always be used in ways that substantively advance the field, but each one tackles a complex and important phenomenon, and *abandoning* them comes at too high a price. Instead, we should seek to interrogate these ideas and their assumptions vigorously, with an eye toward renewal. There is significant risk in being too deferential to long-standing concepts, a tendency to fiddle at their edges rather than to engage their substance. Nevertheless, opportunity lies in delving more deeply into these concepts, rather than casting them aside.

What does it mean to retire a concept? This action has two critical implications: abandoning research intended to enhance our understanding of the concept, and refraining from using the concept to explain communication phenomena past and present. As a consequence, retirement promises to free resources that can be focused on other, presumably more promising concepts, and it forces scholars to find new ways to explain communication processes previously understood through the (distorted) lens of the retired theories. Retirement, then, is a powerful act, which promises to reshape the discipline in fundamental ways.

Given the magnitude of these consequences, this decision is not to be taken lightly. Articulating the conditions under which we should retire a concept is critically important. The reasons Katz and Fialkoff give for *nominating* concepts for retirement include poor naming, a lack of empirical evidence, a lack of precision in conceptualization or operationalization, and obsolescence. I suggest that these features are not all equally important, and see Katz and Fialkoff as advancing three more fundamental justifications for retirement.

First, a concept should be retired if it is demonstrably false. For example, the idea that there are key individuals who are uniquely influential and who consistently and powerfully shape the opinions of those around them misrepresents the opinion formation process, and inaccurately portrays both the “leaders” and their purported “followers”. Similarly, the idea that media influence is relayed through simple two-step flows is naïve, artificially constraining the social paths over which messages travel. To the contrary, sometimes media influence is direct, while at other times the networks through which influence is embodied are massive.

Second, a concept should be retired if it is incomplete, or because it is inconsistently supported by empirical evidence. For instance, the spiral of silence thesis ignores the seemingly contradictory fact that media do not always lead those in the minority to censor themselves; to the contrary, they sometimes lead those in the minority to break their silence. Similarly, the authors appear to suggest that cultivation theory’s greatest weakness is the lack of consistently strong media effects.

Finally, Katz and Fialkoff propose that even accurate concepts should sometimes be retired if their consequences are trivial. In their account, selective exposure and cross-pressure both illustrate this flaw. Selective exposure “only holds true for a small portion of the population,” while the authors conclude that evidence for it is weak or inconsistent. Similarly, cross-pressure “only applies to small minorities”, presumably meaning that its consequences are similarly trivial.

Retiring long-standing concepts is a double-edged sword, with one edge representing the opportunity it presents and the other its risk. Retirement redirects attention, but this begs the question of whether the alternatives are more promising. Wrongly foreclosing on valuable conceptual tools disadvantages scholars, and is difficult to correct; breathing new life into a discarded concept is no small feat. Furthermore, conceptual tools—even those that are imperfect—can have value. Scholars can gain traction on important problems using, and refining, theories that have known limitations so long as they do not lose sight of those boundaries.

The other risk is that in directing research away from select concepts, we may also inadvertently direct attention away from important phenomena. Rather than take up the challenge to formulate new explanations for communication processes previously understood as expressions of the retired concepts, scholars may shy away from these topics altogether. Neither of these outcomes is inevitable, but they do represent real risk and our decisions about retirement should attend to both the potential benefits and the potential costs.

With these reflections in mind, I turn now to consider more carefully the fate of the concepts named by Katz and Fialkoff. Do these six concepts merit retirement, or would this action be premature?

Opinion leaders and two-step flows

In an era in which almost half of all Americans report that they regularly get their news through recommendations from their Facebook friends (Pew Research Center, 2016), it seems strange to imagine abandoning the idea that other people's attitudes and beliefs shape news media's influence. Indeed, a number of scholars have explicitly argued that the concept of the two-step flow is more relevant than ever (Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015).

Certainly our understanding of these concepts has changed in the decades since Katz and Lazarsfeld's landmark book (1955). Hearing news from a friend and seeing some part of that news are practically inseparable online. Technological changes also make it unlikely that individuals rely on a single person for their information recommendations. Despite these changes, however, the importance of the fundamental insight about the interacting influence of mass media messages and interpersonal communication remains (Southwell, 2014). Who shares information shapes whether individuals will look at it (Messing & Westwood, 2012) and whether they will trust it (Turcotte, et al., 2015).

Perhaps the most striking evidence of the robustness of these concepts comes from recent research conducted with massive datasets representing real-world interactions over social media. Analysis of data representing 42 million Twitter users and five billion tweets collected over a nine month period yielded results that have remarkable fidelity to Katz and Lazarsfeld's original conceptualization of the two-step flow. Wu and colleagues write, "Given the length of time that has elapsed since the theory of the two-step flow was articulated, and the transformational changes that have taken place in communications technology in the interim—given, in fact, that a service like Twitter was likely unimaginable at the time—it is remarkable how well the theory agrees with our observations" (Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011, p. 711). This does not sound like a theory in need of retirement.

This is not to say that our understanding of these concepts is perfect. Although the underlying sensibility holds remarkably well, the concepts do need continued refinement. A separate analysis conducted on a sample of one billion tweets collected over a two month period is revealing in this regard. Some individuals are, on average, more influential than others, but the factors that make a message influential are highly variable. Individuals that we would not typically call opinion leaders—those who do not have a large sphere of influence, and who do not tend to have much influence within their social networks—can have considerable influence from time to time (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). When and why these individuals become momentarily influential remains an open question. Again, this suggests that there is important work left to do on these concepts, not that they should be abandoned.

Spiral of silence and cultivation

Katz and Fialkoff express some ambivalence about retiring both the spiral of silence and cultivation. It has been almost fifty years since Noelle-Neumann first asserted that the fear of social isolation, coupled with doubt about one's own capacity for judgment, was enough to lead individuals to misrepresent their conclusions in order to fit in (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 43).

Although these effects tend to be small (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997), research on social influence more generally shows that the mechanisms responsible are not weak. Social conformity effects, which are motivated by the same underlying concerns (gaining approval and being correct), often have very powerful influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Understanding when the concept operates as predicted, and when it does not, is likely to be a useful path forward.

More speculatively, I suggest that the same mechanisms that contribute to the spiral of silence may help us make sense of post-truth politics. When those whose views are in the minority censor themselves, the absence of these alternative perspectives can harm democracy. However, self-censorship may also be an important guard against the dissemination of falsehoods. It is possible that Americans' startling willingness to endorse unsubstantiated claims over the past decade (e.g., YouGov Staff, 2014) may derive, at least in part, from the dwindling threat of social isolation associated with expressing minority beliefs. When conspiracy theorists are isolated, the spiral of silence suggests that they will remain silent about their beliefs. But no one is alone in their beliefs online, no matter how far they fall from the majority or how disconnected they are from the relevant evidence (e.g., see Friggeri, Adamic, Eckles, & Cheng, 2014; Silverman, 2015). Without the threat of being socially ostracized, individuals are free to express beliefs regardless of whether they can defend them (for related arguments, see Del Vicario et al., 2016; Kahan, 2015; J. E. Katz, 1998).

Selectivity and cross-pressures

The suggestion to retire selectivity and cross-pressures is ironic. As Katz and Fialkoff note, cross-pressures were already retired once, only to be revived through forceful new scholarship pioneered by Mutz (2006). The same could be said of selective exposure: Sears & Freedman's (1967) trenchant critique half a century ago brought relevant communication research to a stop for decades. Although work continued at a modest pace in psychology (Frey, 1986), it took the rise of the Internet and fears of the dangers of hyper-personalization (Sunstein, 2001) to catapult the topic back into the limelight.

Katz and Fialkoff do not suggest that these concepts are wrong, only that their influence is limited to small subsets of the population. There are two flaws with this logic. First, although selective avoidance of counter-attitudinal media may be relatively rare (Chaffee, Saphir, Graf, Sandvig, & Hahn, 2001; Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013), there is ample evidence that people do select content based on their attitudes (Hart et al., 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Stroud, 2011). Similarly, the presumption that discussion network homophily is the rule and that conversations rarely include disparate viewpoints is empirically suspect (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Huckfeldt & Mendez, 2008), but there is ample evidence that individuals' attitudes influence their decision about whom they interact with. This leads directly to the second flaw with arguing to retire concepts based on their perceived lack of influence. Although selectivity and cross-pressure may not be as extreme or as prevalent as they are sometimes characterized, they are consequential, having important implications for how citizens engage with the political process.

(Mutz, 2006), what they know (Garrett, Weeks, & Neo, 2016), and how they view one another (Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2015). Thus, these concepts are not as narrowly applicable as the authors suggest, and their social significance is large.

I have spent considerable time and energy studying selective exposure, which may bias my assessment of the topic's importance. But it also affords me a unique perspective on how this concept has evolved, what lesson we might learn about how mature concepts continue to develop, and what opportunities remain. Changes in the media environment can be credited with renewing interest in selectivity, but this is not, in my view, what has made the research area so rich.

First, the resurgence was facilitated by theoretical innovation that both enhances our understanding of how these concepts operate and what their implications are. The debate over whether individuals' media choice is shaped by their attitudes and beliefs has been settled. Today, key questions center on what mechanisms drive these preferences, how they are embodied, and under what conditions. For example, attraction to pro-attitudinal content and aversion to counter-attitudinal content were for too long treated as two sides of the same coin. Distinguishing between selective approach and selective avoidance allows scholars to consider both the similarities and differences between these complementary behaviors (Garrett & Stroud, 2014). Selective exposure has also been integrated into larger theoretical frameworks, such as Slater's Reinforcing Spirals Model (Slater, 2014). The development of such models would certainly be hindered by efforts to dismantle one of the fundamental concepts on which they are built.

Our understanding of these concepts has also been advanced by a variety of powerful new methodological tools (see Clay, Barber, & Shook, 2013). Large-scale observational data, capturing the day-to-day behavior of huge number of users (e.g., Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016); experimental designs that account for the range of content available and the context in which exposure decisions are made (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013); studies that use sophisticated psychophysiological measures (Wang, Morey, & Srivastava, 2012)—each create significant new opportunities to advance these long-studied topics (Clay, et al., 2013). So long as we do not allow ourselves to be dragged down by a debate over which method is best, the opportunities are immense (Garrett, 2013).

As I stated at the outset, I believe that we need an alternative to the retirement metaphor. Following Katz and Fialkoff's economic imagery, I suggest that we should instead reinvest the dividends generated by these concepts. The returns on even the best investments vary over time, but ultimately we stand to gain more than we lose. It is true that as concepts age, scholarship can stagnate. For example, if scholars focus their energies on studying trivial variations while ignoring fundamental challenges to the theory, then the field will pay the price.

The solution in these cases, however, is not to walk away from the concepts, but to reinvest in them through critical and innovative theorizing and empirical work. If these concepts are to thrive, and to continue to allow scholars to understand the profound new problems facing us today, we need to do more than replicate and extend at margins.

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