DIFFUSION OF NEWS OF THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION*

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The rapidity with which news of the assassination of President Kennedy reached virtually every adult in the United States is an impressive demonstration of the influence of the modern news media. Here is a study of the diffusion of the news in a northern California city.

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RARELY are all channels of communication—both the mass media and person-to-person channels—focussed at the same time on the same event. Even more rarely are events of great magnitude unanticipated. Generally, the media are able to prepare for extraordinary events, as with national election results or manned space flights. In such situations, the predominant mode of diffusion of information is from the mass media directly to the public, and then into interpersonal channels. For unanticipated events, as well, some mass medium provided the first source of information for 9 of every 10 adults across three major events studied by Deutschmann and Danielson.[1] After initial awareness from the mass media, much supplementary personal communication occurred. Comparable studies of the diffusion of news of Eisenhower's decision to run for a second term,[2] Taft's death,[3] and the Sputnik success,[4] confirm the prime role of the mass media.

These studies of events of national consequence have attributed a secondary or reinforcing role to interpersonal channels in the transmission of information. They are in contrast to the expected primary

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1 Paul J. Deutschmann and Wayne A. Danielson, "Diffusion of Knowledge of the Major News Story," *Journalism Quarterly,* Vol. 37, 1960, pp. 345-355.

2 Wayne Danielson, "Eisenhower's February Decision: A Study of News Impact," *Journalism Quarterly,* Vol. 33, 1956, pp. 433-441.

3 Otto N. Larsen and Richard J. Hill, "Mass Media and Inter-personal Communications in the Diffusion of a News Event," *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 19, 1954, pp. 426-433.

4 "Satellites, Science and the Public," Ann Arbor, Mich., University of Michigan, Survey Research Center, 1959.

role of interpersonal contacts in the transmission of influence, for example.[5]

The present study describes the process by which news of the assassination of President Kennedy was diffused throughout the general public. The results of this study are considered in the context of previous and potential research on the more general process of diffusion.

METHOD

The data were collected over a four-day period by telephone interview from adults in a northern California city of approximately 200,000 population. Respondents were selected from telephone directory listings for the city, excluding suburban and area listings. The method of selection was to choose every *n*th listing after a random beginning. Of 639 numbers selected, 79 were no longer in service. Of the remaining 560, 419 (75 per cent) were interviewed, 65 (12 per cent) refused, and 76 (13 per cent) were not at home after a minimum of two calls to the designated numbers at different times of different days. No major differences existed between the obtained sample and 1960 census data for the study site on selected demographic characteristics—sex, marital status, age, and occupation. Some bias exists, of course, because people who have telephones are more likely to hear news than people who do not.

RESULTS

These findings will examine what, when, and how people first found out about the assassination of President Kennedy and the respondents' communicatory behavior subsequent to initial knowledge of the day's events.

What did people first find out? The news of Friday morning was conceived of as two distinct events: (1) the announcement of the shooting at approximately 10:30 A.M. (PST), and (2) the announcement of the President's death at 11:30 A.M. (PST). A screening item determined which event was first heard by each respondent. Those who heard of the shooting prior to the death announcement were questioned separately about each event. In this manner, 88 per cent of the respondents (N=367) were classified as Early Knowers (EK); the remaining 12 per cent (N=52), whose first knowledge of the events was after the death announcement, were considered Late Knowers (LK).

When did people find out? The distinction between respondents made above indicates the striking speed with which this news was disseminated—almost 9 in 10 knew of the events within 60 minutes after

[5] Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications,* Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1955.

the first announcement. The actual rate of diffusion was examined separately for the EK and LK. Among EK, nearly one-half heard of the shooting within the first 15 minutes, and more than 70 per cent were informed within 30 minutes. Nearly 90 per cent of the EK were accounted for within 45 minutes of the first announcement. The rate of finding out anything about the events was much slower among the LK—even considering that they knew nothing at all until at least one hour after the first announcement. About one-third of the LK first heard of the assassination within 15 minutes of the second announcement, stating that the President was dead. Seventy per cent of the LK heard of the death within 45 minutes after it was announced. The total range in time between the first and last person informed was about three hours, but the vast majority heard early.[6]

Where did people find out? The location of the respondent when he first heard the news differentiated the early from the late knowers. Among the EK, who reported where they were when they heard of the shooting, 41 per cent were at home at the time, 38 per cent were at work, and 21 per cent were "out someplace," e.g. shopping, visiting, in a car. Among the LK, who reported where they were when they heard of the President's death, 46 per cent were at home, 19 per cent were at work, and 34 per cent were "out." Access to a communication source, whether a mass medium or some other person, is necessary for the diffusion of information to occur. The EK had more apparent access to some mode of communication on the basis of their more convenient location at the time of these events. Principally, more were at work, where access to other persons or to a radio facilitated earlier awareness of the events.

How did people first find out? Respondents were asked how they first found out the President had been shot and/or how they first found out the President was dead. All were informed by the broadcast media or by other persons. For the EK, exactly 50 per cent were first informed by other persons. Their reaction was to use radio and television as a means of confirming what they had been told and to obtain further information; 84 per cent of the EK reported that they then heard of the death itself through radio or television. Among the LK, who were slow in finding out about any aspect of the assassination, 68 per cent obtained their first information from another person. Their initial reaction also was to get to a radio or television set as quickly as possible for additional news. For both groups, the broadcast media were serving a supplementary or secondary role in the flow of

[6] One respondent, aboard a ship in the Pacific Ocean on Friday, remained uninformed for eight hours.

information at the outset of the day's events.[7] This result is of course affected by the time of day when the shooting occurred. It was late morning on the West Coast and early afternoon in the East. Had it occurred at some other time, e.g. 8 A.M. or 8 P.M., the diffusion pattern probably would have been different. In this instance, the principal first mode of diffusion was person-to-person communication.

Relative access to other people and to the mass media makes one or the other more likely as a first source of information. Therefore, it is essential to examine the first source of information in terms of where the respondents were when they first heard. Table 1 presents the cross-tabulation of first source by location of respondent. Two-thirds of the respondents who heard about the shooting at home were informed primarily by the mass media: television was the predominant medium. For those at work, three-fourths were initially informed by

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE LEARNING NEWS FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES, BY LOCATION OF EARLY AND LATE KNOWERS

	First Source				
Location	*Radio*	*TV*	*Personal*	*Total*	*(N)*
Early knowers:					
News of shooting:					
Home	22	44	34	100	(147)
Work	22	3	75	100	(136)
Out	49	9	42	100	(78)
News of death:					
Home	25	69	6	100	(159)
Work	63	3	34	100	(131)
Out	66	18	16	100	(74)
Late knowers:					
News of death:					
Home	13	33	54	100	(24)
Work	22	0	78	100	(10)
Out	20	13	67	100	(17)

other persons. For those out, personal and mass media channels were nearly equally active. For all these early knowers, the radio or television set was quickly turned on by all who could get to one. For those at home, television was accessible and heavily favored; for those at work or out, radio was more accessible. For all the late knowers, personal transfer of information predominated. Cut off from direct access to the media, these individuals were dependent largely on others for first knowledge. Although speculative, it seems likely that many of the 13 per cent who were not interviewed because they were not at

[7] A second paper in preparation will examine the relative role of the mass media and personal contacts in the diffusion of knowledge of both major and minor events.

home when called twice were likely to have been absent from home, i.e. at work or out, when the initial announcement was made. Hence, the dependence on personal sources for the first diffusion of information about the day's events would have been further accentuated.

Who first told you? Respondents who indicated that the first source of information was a personal one were asked to specify their relationship to the person who informed them, e.g. spouse, some other relative, a friend or neighbor, a co-worker, or a stranger. Location when they first heard was highly correlated with the type of person who told them. These results are in Table 2. Those at home learned primarily from some relative, neighbor, or friend; persons at work heard from co-workers; those out someplace were informed for the most part by strangers. The magnitude of this particular event activated what would normally be rather inactive interpersonal channels for those at work or out—talking with strangers. For all concerned, proximity was the overriding consideration in informing other persons.

TABLE 2

PERSONAL SOURCE OF RESPONDENTS WHO FIRST HEARD FROM OTHERS, BY LOCATION
(*in per cent*)

	Location		
Personal Source	*Home* (*60*)	*Work* (*96*)	*Out* (*36*)
Spouse	12	3	3
Other relative	35	2	6
Friend or neighbor	49	2	27
Co-worker	3	77	0
Stranger	1	16	64
Total	100	100	100

The sex, marital status, age, and occupation of the respondents informed by each mode of communication were examined. Sixty-two per cent of the men and 44 per cent of the women reported receiving the news from other persons ($p<.001$), principally co-workers. Marital status was unrelated to first source of information. Among individuals under fifty years of age, 54 per cent first heard from other persons; among those over fifty, 42 per cent first heard from other persons ($p<.10$). Finally, those in higher occupational classifications—the professionals (70 per cent), proprietors and managers (56 per cent), and the clerical, sales, and technical people (59 per cent)—were more likely to hear first from personal sources ($p<.02$) than were workers (45 per cent) or the retired and unemployed respondents (41 per cent). The

very high rate of learning from personal sources among the professionals indicates that such occupations facilitate access to others.

Whom did you tell first? The respondents' first choice of an individual with whom to discuss the assassination also was highly correlated with their location when they first heard the news. Table 3 describes the first personal contact made by all respondents after they learned of the shooting or death of the President. People at home turned to their primary group—their spouse or some other relative. Workers spoke initially with co-workers. Those respondents who were cut off from normal interpersonal channels because they were out someplace were more varied in their choice. They spoke in equal proportions to strangers, friends, and neighbors, or they got in touch with their spouse. Again, access to other individuals dictated the direction of early personal communication about the assassination.

TABLE 3

FIRST PERSONAL CONTACT MADE BY RESPONDENTS, BY LOCATION
(*in per cent*)

	Location		
First Contact	*Home*	*Work*	*Out*
Spouse	38	15	26
Other relative	30	6	16
Friend or neighbor	11	1	23
Co-worker	16	72	8
Stranger	5	6	27
Total	100	100	100

What was the magnitude of interpersonal communication? The channels of interpersonal communication were used heavily on Friday. Only 2 per cent reported talking to no one at all about the assassination, while one-third reported conversations with 15 or more different individuals. Frequency of interpersonal contacts was cross-tabulated with the available demographic information. In this manner, the most frequent talkers—those who cited at least 20 interpersonal contacts —were identified as: 36 per cent of the males and 17 per cent of the females ($p<.001$); 37 per cent of those in their twenties, 23 per cent of those in their thirties and forties, and 15 per cent of those over forty ($p<.01$); and 33 per cent of the professionals and 34 per cent of those with technical and clerical occupations, in contrast with 18 per cent of the managers, 23 per cent of the workers, and 11 per cent of the retired and unemployed ($p<.05$).

Those whose first source of information was personal and those who

reported numerous discussions of the assassination had similar demographic characteristics. This suggested that those who first heard the news personally were likely to discuss the assassination with a greater number of other persons. Such a relationship was obtained: 31 per cent of those whose first source of information was personal reported twenty or more conversations, whereas only 17 per cent of those whose first source was a mass medium reported that amount of supplementary talking. This relationship remains after controlling for both the sex of the respondent and his location on Friday morning. For example, among the male respondents whose first source was personal, 39 per cent reported twenty or more subsequent conversations; for the men whose first source was radio or television, 27 per cent reported that many conversations. Among the women who first heard the news from someone else, 22 per cent recalled twenty or more conversations; among the women who learned through radio or television, 12 per cent were that active. Individuals who first heard the news through personal channels were heavier users of personal channels the remainder of the day. It seems plausible that access to other persons is not solely a matter of physical location but that a certain amount of "social location" exists as well. Some persons appear to locate themselves—rather than to be in a location accidentally—where they can reach others for personal discourse and themselves be reached. The data suggest that this is a facet in the diffusion process worthy of more vigorous investigation.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Interviews with 419 adults regarding the diffusion of knowledge of the assassination of President Kennedy indicated: (1) almost 9 in 10 heard of the shooting of the President prior to the announcement that he had died; (2) among those who heard of the shooting, two-thirds heard within a half-hour; (3) location at the time of the shooting dictated the means by which adults heard of the events—those at work were told primarily by others, those who were out were evenly divided between the mass media and personal sources as the first means of knowledge, those at home were informed primarily by radio and television; (4) those informed by personal sources immediately turned to radio and television for confirmation and additional information; (5) those informed by personal sources were likely to talk to a greater number of other persons about the events.

Study of the initial diffusion of knowledge about the assassination of President Kennedy and subsequent use of mass media and interpersonal communication channels does more than replicate previous studies. First, there is the *event* itself. Very few events disrupt normal

patterns of daily activity, change work schedules, alter weekend plans, and bring an entire nation, save the mass media, to a slow walk. The study of an event that elicits such widespread and immediate responses yields valuable insights into individual reactions to perceived stress or crisis. The communicatory aspects of these reactions have been explored here.

Second, all *channels* of communication had a single focus. There was a maximum opportunity to receive information about the assassination. In previous studies of the diffusion of information, competing events, competing messages, and competing channels were present. In the present case, only the physical isolate could avoid hearing of the assassination on the day it occurred. This saturation of the communication channels created the maximum opportunity for diffusion to occur by either mass media or interpersonal means.

Third is the *time* element involved in this particular incident of news diffusion. Earlier studies, including the more general diffusion of influence,[8] or of innovation,[9] have been concerned with events transpiring over much longer periods. Diffusion of knowledge of the assassination was a matter of minutes for most of the population. In this rapid flow of information about the day's events, personal communication was far more critical in an initial *and* supplementary manner than previous studies would have indicated.

Together, these factors established a set of conditions for this event that made it possible to study the relative role of the mass media as a first source of information without concern for the length of time of the diffusion process or the availability of information. The natural conditions were *sufficient* for diffusion to occur either by word-of-mouth or the mass media. It was not necessary for one mode to be paramount as a first source of information. Although the assassination is in one sense a "limiting" case of the process of diffusion of information—all communication systems were operating optimally and immediately on a single event—knowledge of the process under just such conditions is essential to the probing of more general problems of diffusion.

[8] Katz and Lazarsfeld, *op. cit.* See a➞ Elihu Katz, "The Two-step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-date Report on an Hypothesis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 21, 1957, pp. 61-78.

[9] Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1962. See a➞ Elihu Katz, Martin L. Levin, and Herbert Hamilton, "Traditions of Research on the Diffusion of Innovation," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 28, 1963, pp. 237-257.