

WHO IS REALLY IN CHARGE HERE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FORMATION AND
EMPOWERMENT OF OPINION LEADERS IN A REDDIT GAMING COMMUNITY

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In an attempt to shed light on the further sophistication of opinion leadership in online communities, this study examined the forces and structures that affect their formation in the League of Legends subreddit. By investigating what users thought about the various types of individuals with which they communicate, the researcher hoped to begin to understand and record how those forces work both on this particular subreddit and in mass media beyond. Opinion leadership continues to be an integral force in deciding what information is consumed by a public and under what frames and agendas it is contextualized. If researchers can operationalize formal definitions for the influences and structures that occur online, they can better navigate the deep waters that are global communication on the internet.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Ben Eisenkop, an ecologist with a soft spot for birds became popular on a popular website called Reddit. Under the pseudonym Unidan, Eisenkop would pop into science-related threads to offer advice, corrections, or context to questioning minds. He was largely unknown on the sight at large until he took part in an Ask Me Anything post on one of the site's larger pages. His celebrity skyrocketed in the aftermath, and people would often attempt to summon him to threads by quoting his username, hoping to receive little known facts about grackles, penguins or anything else from "the excited biologist." His telltale exuberance and seemingly bottomless well of knowledge had him well regarded by fans, who created a page on Reddit just to track his comments and mentions, all of which began with a trademark "Biologist here!"

But then he was banned.

Eisenkop had been caught manipulating his posts and comments in threads using a method called sockpuppeting, which involves one person creating multiple accounts for the purpose of upvoting the original accounts content. This makes it more visible and therefore more likely to receive more upvotes and interaction. It was never proven how long Eisenkop had been using this activity on his content, but the administrators of the site banned his and any other account thought to be owned by him. The legend and fame of Unidan soured overnight, and the community opinion had shifted against him. If users didn't outright despise him for manipulating the system, they talked about the events as a cautionary tale. Popular opinion on Reddit shifts quickly and sometimes with little provocation, and the spotlight can be harsh.

Very few other social media sites operate like Reddit's forums. Their focus on information and community over the construction of an online self shifts the focus from the

individual user to a shared interest clan. And where information and news is shared, communication theory says that opinion leaders are present to help guide the community to what should and should not be trusted (Katz 1957; Jin, 2015). Yet, as Eisenkop's story shows, even that trust can be quickly undermined. Therefore, it is the opinion of this researcher that understanding the environment and mechanism by which opinion leaders emerge and operate on Reddit is vital to piecing together the complete picture of information dissemination online. Additionally, providing media companies, as well as scholars, the ability to accurately predict how and why shifts in opinion leadership occur within these insular, homophilous communities provide opportunities to better serve their customers and the online public at large (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015; Frobenius and Harper, 2015; Weber 2014).

Reddit as a Site for Communication Research

Despite being just a year older than Facebook (and older than Twitter), Reddit languishes as a subject for serious mass communication scholarship. The majority of research, where it exists, can be placed in the last half decade but still pales in comparison to the body of work concerning other social media and alternative news outlets including Facebook, Twitter and Yahoo News. (Roman and Zbucnea, 2010; Ovadia, 2015; Kennedy, Meese & van der Nagel, 2016). However, 70 percent of users take advantage of the platform as a news gathering tool, compared to 66 percent on Facebook and 59 percent on Twitter (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb & Mitchell, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016). Four percent of the U.S. adult online population still comprises significant membership, and comparison is important for understanding a more robust picture of the online media landscape online citizens traverse.

Furthermore, opinion leadership in gaming communities suffers a similar lack of research that examines social influence under a conceptual lens. Half of the country plays some form of video game, even if they don't self-identify as a gamer (Duggan, 2015). Opinion leadership theories indicate that communities of "others" who share common interests will be sought out (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1944). Studies that focus on such communities as they develop and grow do not exist in a substantive form and highlight a gap in the body of existing literature on gaming and mass communication.

Opinion leaders emerge differently depending on the platform and can have vast differences between them. The Facebook opinion leader fits along the classic model: they have connection beyond the normal count, post and share news constantly and other users for their beliefs and bias in part around what their own opinion leaders say and think (Karlson 2015, p. 314). With its high visibility and sharing qualities, Twitter opinion leaders tend to be either those with existing status to use as social media clout (e.g. film celebrities, comedians, personalities and web creators) or novelty accounts known for consistently producing a certain kind of content (Long Ma, et al 2013, p. 612).

Both of these cases rely on opinion leadership being viewed through the traditional model, but Reddit showcases a more nuanced and balanced set of interconnection that buck some of the traditional beliefs about how opinion leaders are formed, as seen in studies that the repercussions of false statements on Reddit help teach student good study and citation habits (Sanderson & Rigby, 2013; Howard & Magee, 2013). Studying the interaction of Reddit users, especially in cases where multiple forms of opinion leaders exist in a shared environment and therefore vie for the attention of a shared audience, can help researchers understand just how

opinion leadership has adjusted along the digital frontier. The public is expanding into modes of communication quicker than media companies can pace (Gandour, 2016; Cole et al., 2011).

About Reddit: “The Front Page of the Internet”

Reddit, a social networking site and the invention of two college friends at the University of Virginia, sprung onto the internet in June 2005. The students, Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, both 22 years old, built the site to promote the discussion of any subject imaginable by allowing users to band together over common interests and share news from across the internet to dedicated pages (Adams, 2005). Each community is largely self-moderated and self-governed; only explicitly illegal acts or gross misuse of power ostensibly leads administrators to enforce policy (Geuss, 2015). Moderators, chosen from the user base, help guide the collective vision of what their digital discussion space will look like and how it will operate. The moderator’s practical functions vary by the community. In certain cases, the balance of power is made more complex by the active involvement of third parties, as is the case with the community page for the globally popular online video game League of Legends. Along with users and moderators, employees of Riot Games – which owns League of Legends – frequently involve themselves in decisions and politics.

In an information landscape where companies increasingly strive to empower the user to shape how they consume media, from the cord-cutting movement to the ongoing fragmentation of traditional outlets (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012; Nelson-Field and Riebe, 2011; Lee 2007), understanding public opinion becomes ever more important. Unfortunately, the current landscape of research into newer outlets of media distribution, like Reddit, remain slim and focused mainly in the methodological realm of content analysis (Meese, 2014; Vickery, 2014; Wasike 2011).

Meese's focus on amateur media as a form of content communication doesn't attempt to answer questions of who is submitting them in the first place or why (2014), while both Vickery and Wasike explore the meaning derived from the stories and images a community or subreddit shares with each other. Wasike's focus on top-rated stories helps describe the traits of highly valued content shared between Reddit and Digg, an older website, but the study used a traditional definition of news and talked little about the motivations or needs that drove users to submit what they did. The analysis of communicating suicidal feelings and stories through the widely accepted means of memetic animal photos done by Vickery comes closer to what this study set out to find: why do users post or comment what they do, and what is the reaction of the community to which they appeal. Though important, these approaches ignore the processes by which the public choose what information to value in the first place, as first described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1944). Applying a more deterministic lens to Reddit and its unique communities could provide insight as to how a newer generation of media consumers go about selecting information and establishing credibility.

This study used in-depth interviews with users and members of the League of Legends subreddit, a message board where users can interact with each other, as well as with moderators and the game's employees. The findings of the research provide insight on how a consuming public, empowered by tools of interactivity (Gruzd, et al, 2011; Schröder 2015), curate an online space meant to provide news and salient information relevant to gameplay changes, professional teams, and the wider cultural impact of a specific subject. It also examined how select users within the group are socially empowered to set the agenda for discussions and popular opinion.

This research will contribute to existing literature on online opinion leadership by considering interpersonal interactions with rules and limitations particular to Reddit's emergent

social structure. Pinpointing where trusted sources of information and opinion fit into this new digital paradigm has not been given the exhaustive treatment of Facebook or Twitter, which tend to employ larger-scale quantitative approaches in order to spotlight global trends in digital communication (Schafer and Taddicken 2015). Additionally, considering how information use solidifies or disrupts power structures provides researchers with another tool by which to identify the social behaviors on platforms where facts and opinion are the currency and commodity (Scott 1990; Cole, et al. 2011; Cho, Keum and Shah, 2015). Finally, as platforms we use to communicate online become more nuanced and sophisticated, research must adapt to measure and report its effect on discourse and community formation. The inclusion of network gatekeeping as a lens in this research will attempt to find and describe the nature of this technological shift in discourse as it pertains to Reddit, along with any such features that exist on Reddit (karma and voting, tagging posts for content, etc.) that imperceptibly shape interest group discourse.

Like other social networking sites, Reddit employs a number of tools to support user interaction and dialogue. Among these are subreddits that break down the main page's topic threads into subpages dedicated to a narrower interest, from cat photos to space to retouched 19th century photography. Any user with a registered account has the power to create and name a subreddit focusing on the subject matter of their personal choice, no matter how broad or precise. Users can freely post and subscribe to this nested page so that it shows up as part of their "front page" experience. The front page is a customized list of subreddits that will automatically aggregate popular posts – those with the highest average positive feedback from users – from all subscribed subreddits into a single feed. The average Reddit user, statistically white, male and

between the ages of 18 and 29, likely views content and information submitted to the largest and most accessed subreddits: the default pages (Barthel, et al, 2016).

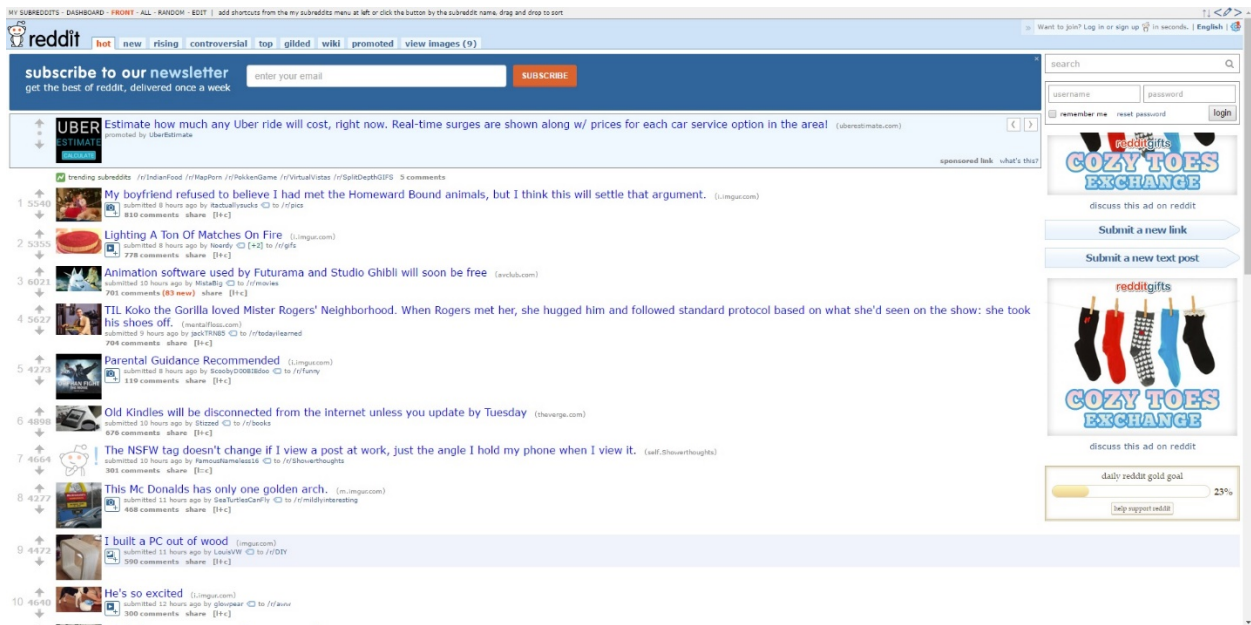


Figure 1. This is what a new user with no registered account will see when visiting www.reddit.com. The visible posts are a timely snapshot of popular content of the day.

In order to promote its vision as a democratically powered social site, Reddit gives all users the ability to vote on submitted links: “upvoting” shows a positive reaction to a post or general agreement with its intent, while “downvoting” does the opposite. The total number of votes are represented with a net number of points referred to as “karma” that determines how visible it is on a subreddit’s front page. As a link collects more karma, its place on the subreddit’s loadout moves up and becomes more visible in the cascading flow of links visitors see. The creator’s aim was for the website to flourish under the combined efforts of all users by empowering the community to choose what content rose like cream to the top of the website each day, promoting a marketplace of ideas mentality (The conversation starts on Reddit, n. d; Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1963).

Gaming Communities on Reddit

Among the default subreddits (automatically generated on the front page) is /r/gaming, which boasts 9.8 million subscribers and a daily average growth of new subscribers of approximately 8,000 since the beginning of 2015 (Reddit Metrics). /r/gaming ranks in the top 50 fastest growing communities out of 829,000 total subreddits tracked by the Reddit Metrics website (<http://redditmetrics.com/r/gaming>). Therefore, it can be assumed that video games and their culture matter to the average Reddit user, especially when considering that /r/gaming exists for general entertainment content and not the specific discussion of a particular game.

The site has become a favorite platform choice for fans of many media to find online community connections (Gibeault, 2016; Sköld, 2013). This is true for video games, especially when the game is played primarily online and requires interaction with other people. New connections are usually made with every session, and players continuously accrue more experiences and game-related acumen that they might wish to share with other fans. The players use game-specific subreddits to fulfill the U&G defined needs of connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication, aspects Ruggiero and other scholars tend to attribute to communities of high interconnectivity (2000, p. 15).

While League of Legends, one of the most popular entries in the multiplayer online battle arena genre, stopped officially publicizing their player numbers with 2016's reported 67 million monthly users, recent interviews with developers claim that numbers has grown to "over 100 million monthly players" in mid-2016 (Tassy, 2016; Kollar, 2016). The game is played professionally in national and international tournaments with cash prizes up to \$1,000,000 and coverage on cable network ESPN, as well as multiple online streams (Segal, 2014, Riot Games, 2015).

Mirroring this rise in popularity, the League of Legends subreddit has existed since January 2009, well before the official release of the video game on which it focuses. In the approximate seven-year interim, that community has mushroomed to over 900,000 subscribed accounts and a reported average 500,000 unique page views per day. While these numbers cannot contend with the daily connections made to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or larger aggregators like Yahoo News or Google, websites like Reddit fit the theorized “vehicle for the provision of very specific high-value information to very specific high-consumption audiences” (Abrahamson 1998, p. 15), offering loyal users a constant access point to the niche information they want without having to parse out unrelated content themselves.

The motivations sought and gratitudes obtained by users of /r/leagueoflegends presents a dynamic site for mass communication research on social networking. If social media sites that provide spaces for special interest groups continue to rise in popularity and use, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the Reddit model puts researches in a stronger position of understanding the wider digital landscape. Traditionally, an opinion leader was a known, constant entity within a community (Katz, 1957). Now, determined individuals work together under self-appointed moderators who enforce publicly agreed upon forms of governance – such a unique model vastly contrasts popular mass media’s system of trained professionals and pursuit of objectivity. Niche online communities serve individuals seeking spaces dedicated to narrow fields of interest, which give rise to a newer and less understood form of mediatized opinion leadership (Schafer and Taddicken, 2015). The close interconnectedness of members, along with the sheer number of specialized communities on Reddit alone (1.02 million as of April 2017 according to metareddit.com) provide mass media scholars unique opportunities to test and evaluate hypotheses about news and opinion dispersion on the internet.

The Shape of a Community

Conversations within the subreddit rarely digress beyond League of Legends, and users have, over time, developed a dialect suited to discussing the game's many nuances and features. Such language helps users identify and relate to one another, but can also set strict limits on how complex discussions can become (Meese 2014). Conversely, these same language constructions help individuals feel as if they belong to the in-group by more closely aligning to the perceived behavior expressed by those already "in" (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This social identification strategy helps foment emotional connection that might transcend traditional social ties such as age, gender and nationality.

A successful and competent opinion leader might use these memetic phrases as indicators of status, conveying an inherent knowledge of the subreddit's recent trends and popular beliefs (Trepte and Scherer 2010, p. 135; Schiffman 2012). Memes online have been defined as "contagious patterns of 'cultural information' that get passed from mind to mind", allowing users to convey and understand nuanced emotional responses with a single image or short sentence (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Users may recognize the use of memes and memetic speech as a sort of unofficial credential and will be more ready to accept anything else they say as coming from a place of authority and sound logic (p. 126). Alternatively, incorrect execution or poor timing of these phrases and unique speech idioms can be processed as pandering (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This activity shows that the average user is aware and complicit of the power memes and memetic language holds (Meese 2014).

Understanding the interplay of language and social interaction is key in exploring this study's assumptions of opinion leaders and their influence. Users, moderators and official employees coexist in a shared space, all using similar tools to communicate with one another to

share information and news regarding a common interest. Questions remain about whether the subreddit model used by /r/leagueoflegends is conducive to a fair distribution of power and responsibility.

A review of existing literature on opinion leadership provides models of how it might have worked on established, and sometimes outmoded, forms of communication: small towns, print journalism, television and radio. But a community of the size and interconnectedness of /r/leagueoflegends is fluid in terms of population, demographics and shared cultural backgrounds, and web-native dynamics like online personas and memetic symbols as a substitute for language introduce new factors researchers should account for.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Opinion Leadership

The term “opinion leader” was coined in the print era to help describe the process of information’s traveling between and within individuals and organizations (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1944). The media, they hypothesized, influenced the public directly, if not deliberately, and therefore played a large role in the decision-making process of voters. An unintended outcome of their research was discovering the seeming strength of interpersonal social effects over the direct media effects assumed to be powering public opinion at the time (Trepte and Scherer 2010, p. 120). Furthermore, the researchers saw the power inherent in certain people their respondents claimed as reliable sources of information. Different from the objective and removed agents of the Fourth Estate, these people did more than just select the information heard by the public. They acted as a filter, “selecting and transmitting information on the election as well as modifying and facilitating it” (2010, p. 120). Lazarsfeld and his fellows (1944) further noted the tendency for increased media usage, heightened sensitivity to opinion shifts and other characteristics that set them apart from their peers in the consuming public. Their discoveries led them to develop a theory for explaining this new link in the chain of information: the two-step flow of communication. Therein, opinion leaders received news and information from outlets and journalists which then flows from them to larger and less actively informed sections of the public.

From the results of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944), a number of future studies launched a closer examination of both the breadth of the role opinion leaders fill, as well as the limits of their power over shaping and sharing information. Taking place at roughly the same time as the voter survey research was Robert K. Merton’s examination of the inhabitants of the

small town of Rovere, New Jersey (1949). Its design was simple enough: starting with a relatively tiny pool of locals, Merton and his team interviewed each for the names of people whom they regarded as reliable sources of expertise, wisdom, and general advice. The more people that mentioned the name, the higher the team ranked them as a potential opinion leader. Eventually, out of a collected list of hundreds, Merton was able to contact his “local” opinion leaders within the community and attempt to trace the community’s shared knowledge back to its sources, effectively speaking “to 500 people in two hours” (Merton 1949, p. 193).

Though exploratory in design, his study differed from Lazarsfeld’s voter survey in its methodological attempt to work backwards through the two-step flow of information, using those influenced as a signpost to find the opinion leaders. The degree of influence wielded by those found in Rovere also differed from the previously discussed research, as they were determined to be the nexus for sometimes dozens of individuals’ opinions; Lazarsfeld defined a leader by their influencing only one other person (Katz 1957, p. 64). Merton’s definition closer fits the one this study uses for online opinion leaders, as the interconnectivity of the internet makes it virtually impossible to limit interaction and influence to a single person in most cases. Yet, the research on the citizens of Rovere is limited to the discussion of finding opinion leaders among a group and lacks context on “the *relationships* between leaders and followers” (1957, p. 64).

The 1940s was a watershed decade for communications research in this direction, and another study completed between 1945 and the following year by Lazarsfeld as a follow-up to his book *The People’s Choice*. In what can be viewed as a synthesis of the two preceding studies, individuals in the town of Decatur, Illinois, were interviewed to find whom they sought for information, but the researchers kept in mind the varying types and degrees of connection

between potential leaders and those they influenced. This allowed the study to focus on just how powerful a personal connection could be between what Katz would later call “the advisor-advisee dyad” (1957, p. 65). For the first time, research was attempting to delve into the specific reasons why these relationships form and the questions previous studies had raised about salience across class borders, gender, age and other demographics, along with whether subject matter or media conveyance altered the system. The Decatur study helped sophisticate processes of inquiry by opening the two-step flow theory to further refinement, specifically by adding another link to the chain. If one opinion leader could be inserted between the media and the public, why not another above or below? Were opinion leaders themselves influenced by others further up the communicative branch? Almost as the research was being conducted, Lazarsfeld and others at the time worked on changing the aim of their work to suit the growing picture of an expansive network of influence beyond simply one advisor and one advisee.

Further elaboration on opinion leadership as a role and not an inherent quality helped expand the definition into new directions. Initially, it was hypothesized that some people were inclined towards the role while others defaulted to being influenced by their nature. Research beyond *The People’s Choice* proposed a more elegant reality: individuals take up the role of opinion leader as a mantle depending on the group they are involved with and the subject matter being disseminated. The same person could be both an advisor and advisee in different group at the same time due to demographic factors, but also familiarity and comfort with the information content. Once this was understood, research could expand its hypotheses to anticipate for the more sophisticated connections now known to exist. *The Drug Study*, last considered by Katz in his report on early opinion leadership scholarship, did as much when it contacted doctors in the Midwest United States asking about the professional and personal connections within the field.

For the first time, a map of social interactivity could be drawn to showcase not just opinion leaders' place within the flow but "a true diffusion study", providing the most accurate timeline of specific information movement throughout a group (1957, p. 67).

Similarly, this research study focuses on individuals within a community bound by technological borders and shared social interests. The role of opinion leader is expected to take on more complexity unimagined by Katz. Identifying these thought leaders and the set of conditions that help them to emerge in a digital space is key for mapping the larger role leadership plays in the exchange of information and opinion in these new online communities.

Opinion Leadership in Online Communities

Researchers agree that the two-step flow of information, even at its most sophisticated, fails to accurately contain the intricacy of connectivity now seen in the post- Web 2.0 world. Its frameworks are still cited and appreciated as a starting point, but current studies have had to move beyond Lazarsfeld and Katz' horizons in their attempts to understand opinion leaders' role in online communities. Much of those changes hinge on the evolution of users' fundamental interactions with the internet. The term Web 2.0 itself was popularized by Tim O'Reilly in 2004, a few years after the bursting of the first dot-com bubble let companies such as Google, Flickr, and Wikipedia legitimize not just their success but their longevity in the next step of internet ubiquity (O'Reilly and Battelle, 2009).

In a 2005 article, O'Reilly defined the term Web 2.0 as a set of principles and practices that unite websites and application as a platform instead of a service. It exists beyond any one computer, and all content published on it does, too (O'Reilly, 2005). Such unification of means and ends relates to opinion leadership by providing the constant connectedness and emphasis on

users as creators that is core to Reddit's philosophy of providing a hub of discourse and idea exchange for any subject matter imaginable.

In terms of communications studies, and opinion leadership specifically, the most exciting advent of Web 2.0 was the user empowerment movement, boosting individual voices to new heights of salience and readability (Grossman, 2007). In a new light, Katz and Lazarsfeld's theories on the two-step flow of information could expand and attempt to wrangle the global internet beast. Towns and small communities first studied in the '40s and '50s burgeoned into something more closely resembling Marshall McLuhan's global village (Jin, 2015). And when the public consuming information changes so radically, the theories and definitions must follow suit. Social media's continued pervasive importance in the lives of people across the globe forces such a change, argues Schäfer & Taddicken (2015), and they borrow the term "mediatization" from other scholars discussing online interactions at the turn of the 21st century (Krotz, 2009; Lundby, 2009). In mass communication research, mediatization describes how media can reshape our discourse and processes of communication (2009). If more people are connecting via a rising number of channels, be it Facebook, Twitter, email, IRC chatrooms, or Reddit, and those users are spending an increasing amount of time connected to those channels, established theories would argue that the level of influence should also increase (Krotz, 2001; Lundby, 2009).

Increased mediatization only begins to explain the "complexity of interlinkages between the available channels that are likely to have a profound influence on the ways in which individuals find, select, and evaluate content" (Schäfer & Taddicken 2015, p. 962). But as authors have stated, the existing research limits itself by not being flexible enough to assess the changes in online community interaction in regards to the current understanding of opinion

leadership theories, even when examining social media sites (Choi, Cha, & Han, 2010; Gao, Zhang, Jiang, & Wang, 2005). An alternative is to view the interpersonal interactions online via social media outlets as a substitution or replacement of the more traditional in-person model conceived by early scholars. The various media effects (confirmation bias, feedback loops or echo chambers, cognitive dissonance, etc.) that normally occur in the historically posited model of opinion leadership are interrupted or dissipated when the individual, leader or follower either, engage in conversation and connections outside of the mediatized world (Gehrau 2011, p. 22).

Does this new horizon of densely connected interactions need opinion leaders more than ever to help navigate the complexity of communication that can occur even in a subreddit dedicated to one video game? An argument has been made for using social media networks and blogs as the ideal tool for this task (Kavanaugh et al., 2006; Kavanaugh et al., 2007; Said Hung & Arcila Calderon, 2011). Or, the media companies themselves may supplant the role of the opinion leader using sophisticated web tools and analytics to target even the smallest audiences with messages and products, reducing the conventional model into what Bennett and Manheim call the “one-step flow” (2006). This study is an attempt to explore a section of that new frontier, examining a specific online community and how its members navigate the evolving roles of opinion leadership. The determinants and situations that influence people to invest their trust in one person over another is not fully understood in a fully digital microcosm. Therefore:

RQ1: What factors empower certain users to emerge as opinion leaders within the League of Legends subreddit, and how do those factors compare to more popular online communities?

Reddit's fundamental structure of connectivity differs greatly from the more widely researched social media platforms. Studies into Twitter often rely on quantitative analysis of retweets, mentions, engagement and other explicit data to infer a sense of influence online (Xu,

et al. 2014). Or, they use existing measurement methods, such as self-identification or positional approach, to produce opinion leadership as a variable (Park 2013, p. 1644) Facebook offers a more nuanced field of potential connections, with the concepts of mutual friends, groups, and pages for private and/or corporate interests all co-existing in the same digital space. The platform also allows for much more sophisticated interaction between the user and the content via likes, sharing, and commenting. One can also link to sites or content from outside of Facebook and foment conversation there. Coupling this with the economic power and cultural ubiquity of the company, it comes as little surprise that the body of knowledge considering opinion leaders on the platform is more robust than others heretofore discussed, encompassing not just what information is shared, but how privacy settings affect it, for example. (Karlsen 2015; Butler et al. 2010). This study will then explore beyond the traditional conception of opinion leaders as points of influence in a stream of information by searching for other roles and duties inherent, and perhaps particular, to Reddit's subculture:

RQ1a: What additional roles do opinion leaders play in the subreddit's conversations?

RQ1b: How do those roles affect the leaders' perceived power and/or influence by the community?

RQ1c: Which role is most active, and with what kind of information/news/idea/opinion?

Hidden Transcripts

The writing of anthropologist and subaltern political scholar James Scott describes the ways in which cultures both with and without power communicate, often to each other. Though his subjects were often indigenous peoples, like Malaysians or Vietnamese peasants, the concept of hidden transcripts borne from his research holds weight when attempting to describe the specific and often exclusive language subreddits develop among their members. Such language

“represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant”, embodied by both the moderators and Riot employees in the case of /r/LeagueofLegends (1990, p. xii). Interestingly, Scott also contends that the powerful create languages of their own that are the result of their position above others along with the application of authority inherent to it (1990, p. xii). These modes of communication work separate and exclusive from the public discourse readily seen and analyzed, and therefore their messages carry wholly different meaning and consequence.

Scott makes it clear that each hidden transcript, whether it applies to the powerful or those below them, is "specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors" (1990, p. 14). Applying this concept to the digital world of emojis, text shorthand, memetic language and hashtags can be conceived as part of the native digital space (Vickery, 2014). Subreddits and their users fit the framework as well: users don't just create shorthand, but develop patterns of behavior and reaction to information from different sources while moderators are restricted by official language and their own rules when publically posting. This highlights the assertion that hidden transcripts can encompass far more than just speech or writing. Willful disobedience of subreddit rules, spamming, reporting and "witch hunting" (the intentional seeking out of the person behind an account, largely to accost them beyond Reddit) can be viewed as part of the hidden transcript of a group. Moderators abusing their power, banning popular but disruptive accounts, or changing the rules of the subreddit without the knowledge of the general user base might constitute as part of the unspoken language of the powerful in this scenario. Though it differs in every case, one must look beyond what is simply said to truly attempt to understand relationships.

Scott's last defining attribute of the hidden transcript argues that "the unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict" (1990, p. 14). The

struggle for power and control of information is unending and carried out via a multitude of small interactions, never blatant and rarely with the intention of upsetting the balance. It can be better understood as behavior that tests whatever present boundaries exist to better understand what is acceptable behavior within the community and what is aberrant or destructive.

Comparing subreddit users and players to the moderators or Riot employees necessitates investigating the nuances of their interactions within this governed online space. The rules dictate communicative discourse first and foremost, so acts of hidden rebellion or the bucking of the norm can be expected via what is shared between the groups. Therefore:

RQ2: What kind of information or expertise holds value within the community that also empowers opinion leaders?

RQ2a: What kinds of opinions, biases, etc. are most shared/propagated by opinion leaders?

Gatekeeping

In 1947, Karl Lewin had already begun conceptualizing new theories and methods to help researchers at that time understand the way society relays information to each other from the macrocosmic to individual within the home. Unlike those studying opinion leadership, though, Lewin sought to understand how less concrete and physically measurable constraints, such as cultural norms or shifting emotional states, affected the flow of information and ideas in what he would come to define as methods of "gatekeeping" (DeJuliis 2015, p. 7). Initially, his theory co-opted four terms to help describe the processes: channel, section, force and gate (1947).

Channels referred to the route taken by information or objects throughout the entire process of possible influencing, while *sections* pointed to specific points along the channel where decisions can be made that allow influence to work upon whatever travels along the channel. The ways in which influence manifests at sections were called forces and could be categorized along a moral

binary that are weighed by whoever carries out the decision. If the pros, or positive forces, are stronger than the cons, or negative forces, then the decision will reflect that and alter the kind of influence conveyed at that section along the channel. Finally, the gates in Lewin's model describe the points where a force can change direction from working against a certain decision to aiding it, or explained another way, deciding to let information or content into the channel or keep it out (2015, p. 7). The person or people who make these decisions are then, naturally, called "gatekeepers" (Lewin 1947, p. 145).

In the realm of mass media, David Manning White became the first to use Lewin's gatekeeping theory on the mass media when he wrote a paper for *Journalism Quarterly* describing the ways in which a man named only "Mr. Gates" controlled information at his assigned station (White 1950, p. 383). Out of the entire process that a story would go through at a newspaper during the time of the study, Mr. Gates was the last: an editor whose copy had been revised and changed multiple times before it touched his desk. His word on what made it into the paper was the final verdict, and White collected and analyzed the reasoning as to why Mr. Gates ultimately kept or rejected a story (1950, p. 387). His conclusions pointed to a huge amount of subjective influence being wielded at this particular gate that was the result of a single person's education, upbringing and circumstances. White gave little indication as to whether he agreed with such a setup, instead letting the enormity of his findings under Lewin's gatekeeping lens speak for themselves.

As the internet broadened the methods of communication and the potential audience, communication scholars took up Lewin and White's work and began stretching it across new subjects. Some attempted to outline a system of influence tiers based on the possible reach (Shoemaker and Voss, 2009) while others sought to retest the half-a-century-old Mr. Gates study

on a digital company that monitored and restricted what information the public texted in was shown on a television program (Enli 2007). The essential contemporary goal of most was to define the "process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person in a given day (Shoemaker 1991, p. 1). But application of the theory to newswriting online required something more focused and nuanced. Influence could not just be expressed at the individual level using the singular points at which forces move in and out of the channel. Modern gatekeeping requires that scholars widen their lens to "the whole construction of social reality" (DeJuliis 2015, p. 10) because mass media has shown the potential to reach an audience of that size on a daily occurrence, giving each piece of information a global potential for influence.

The audience itself must be considered as part of the gatekeeping process itself, now. News selection is the first step in audience consumption, and even the most insular individual has access to channels beyond the scope of news two decades ago. This fact was also considered in refining the theory for the digital age. News producers have shifted their role from offering the only trusted source of information to specializing in telling the public what is important to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1976). Even though they haven't been excised as a gate themselves, the traditional media have had to adjust in their new role of one of three gates, along with the source and the audience (DeJuliis 2015, p. 10). In this way, a subreddit can be viewed as one of the three gates, as blogs and websites commonly do, but the microcosm of a specific subreddit can also mirror the overall gatekeeping model. Links shared to the subreddit come from a source, and its sheer selection to be shared or not acts as a gate. Moderators can seem like the traditional news medium in this metaphor since they withhold the power to veto or allow material through to the community, mirroring the news selection aspect of newspapers and broadcast programs.

And the user is, of course, the consuming public who also flex the power of informed and active consumption native to other digital audiences via upvotes and downvotes, Reddit's own brand of democratic content curation.

Network Gatekeeping

The study would be remiss if the relatively recent advent of network gatekeeping, operationalized largely by Barzilai-Nahon (2009) and gaining traction as an urgently needed alternative to the Lewis and White model, was not considered as critical to investigating the power relationships between subreddits. Barzilai-Nahon's model (2009) specifically defines problems unique to digital communities. Instead of institutions or people acting as gates, an individual's ability to access both the internet and a specific website are the new gates. Those being gated broadened in definition to mean simply anyone experiencing one of ten operationalized mechanisms used to describe ways of gating access (2008, p. 1496). Of these ten, several apply to Reddit's structure: *search engine channeling*, along with links to content hosted beyond the website; *active censorship via moderation* and the umbrella *content policies* enforced by Reddit itself on all of the subreddits; account creation and login authentication measures; *customization of the experience* itself, either by native options or independently offered software; and the suite of "editorial mechanisms [that] govern content decisions in much the same way as traditional gatekeeping theory" (2008; DeJuliis 2015, p. 14). The network gatekeepers, then, would be the moderators of each subreddit most often, with Reddit administrators stepping in to deal with special cases that breach the short list of rules they apply to the site as a whole.

Scholars using Barzilai-Nahon's model can interpret the process of network gatekeeping as any alteration to information or content as it passes through a gate. Adding a headline or

comment, misconstruing its intention, altering when it is posted somewhere, and even the selection of a particular subreddit counts as gating in some capacity. If a user post content that they know will garner more karma, the upvote potential inherent to information becomes a gate through which all information must pass. A site feature changes the visibility of posts based on time (new, top this week, top this month, top this year and top all time) and allows users to browse specific submission over others. The individual profile, which shows a history of all posts and comments, along with a sum total of karma gained by that user for both comments and posts can be viewed, but "while most users strove for positive feedback and reinforcement...some, through racial and religious slurs, insults, and profanity, sought to become as little liked" as possible (DeJuliis 2015, p. 16). These are but a small handful of the technical options available to all users, and subreddits have the power to introduce more, culminating in a vast and tangled collection of possible gatekeeping mechanisms. Therefore:

RQ3: How do the rules and structure of Reddit, and by extension subreddits, limit or enable the role of opinion leaders, their forming, and their operation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods

In-depth interviews with 15 subjects personally involved with the /r/leagueoflegends subreddit were conducted in the months following the approval of this study, ranging from December 2016 to February 2017. A population of this size is not uncommon for qualitative research and will allow the researcher to “achieve detail in the theory” making (Creswell 2013, p. 113). Given that this study approaches its research questions from a grounded theory approach, and that the largely homogeneous community is being accessed through individual voices, long form interviews were selected as a data collection method (2013). Participants were recruited by the researcher using posts on the subreddit itself, messages to moderators and via email (when available). They will be asked to complete a 13 question interview that took approximately between 30 minutes and an hour. Interviews were completed using Skype and Discord, two VoIP services that provide a situation very close to the telephone format Creswell recommends when access to individuals is limited or nonexistent (2013, p. 164). No demographics such as race, gender or religious preference are variables under consideration. Institutional review board (IRB) approval was granted for the study.

The interview data will then be used to answer the research questions outlined earlier in the prospectus. The interview instruments and definitions were developed to determine how individuals perceive opinion leaders and influence within a largely self-governed online community, albeit one with unique relationships with outside forces. The researcher will code the interview data and will be assisted by a second coder to achieve reliability

Data Collection and Operationalization

Subjects will be chosen based on their role within the community, as defined by four distinct categories: general users, moderator, professional player and Riot employee.

General users can be identified as any individual who comments and posts on the subreddit, along with voting on content submitted by other users, no matter their distinction. Beyond this activity, the general users possess no more formalized power or responsibility than any other user, nor are they affiliated with Riot Games as a paid employee or contracted worker.

Moderators can be identified as subreddit users selected (or elected) to possess responsibilities beyond that of the average users. This may include, but is not limited to, deleting posts that infringe upon the explicit rules laid out by the subreddit, answering personal messages and requests submitted to moderators by other users, banning users with multiple rules infractions, and otherwise curating the subreddit for ease and clarity of others.

Professional players are defined as users who act in much of the same fashion as general users (as defined above), except that they perform in a specific capacity outside of the subreddit on a formalized team of game players, all of whom compete in officially sanctioned tournaments and events with other teams. These players often have indicators attached to their online handle that indicate to other users who they are.

Riot employees are defined as anyone employed and/or paid by Riot Games, the creator and owner of League of Legends. They can work in any number of positions, but their association with the company is almost always noted with an indicator attached to their online handle, which is visible with every post. Often, this name can be linked to a real world name, along with avenues of communication in other social media (Twitter, email, official forums, etc.)

Otherwise, they have no more technical power in the subreddit than the average user, as defined above.

Four users from each category who interact with the site frequently, either via posts and comments or reading the content, will be identified or confirmed for participation via direct messages using Reddit's native interactive system. Frequency is defined as interactivity with the subreddit and others at least twice per week up to daily. Participants will also be active players of the game League of Legends, with expectations of understanding concepts, jargon, recent events and memetic references that occur within the subreddit. Participants may also be contacted using an email or other method, contingent on their approval, for arranging the time and details of interviews. When possible, interviews will be done in person or via a VoIP software (Skype, Google Hangout, etc.) for no more than a total of four hours per participant.

Dependent on the category assigned, the user will be asked question drawn from four distinct scripts. Some of the questions are universal, such as the kind of content they are drawn to and what motivates them to comment or post in the first place, and aim at discerning if parallels in platform use and interaction with the subreddits technology exist or not. Frequency of use, preferred medium (desktop computer, mobile, etc.), and perception of opinion leaders or frequent posters are also phrased into questions common to all four scripts. The individualized questions are designed to first discern the relationship each role has to the others. Specific details unique to a role, such as rules distinct to moderators or Riot employees, will also be addressed in the scripts.

Finally, a better understanding of events in the subreddit's past, which have shaped its growth and the rules that govern its use, will be gained by questioning the users on their perspective of how the community has changed during their use. Reconstructing these

touchstones from a variety of power levels should hopefully create a clearer picture of what caused it, along with how the fallout shaped the subreddit as it progressed forward.

After collection, the researcher alone will transcribe all interviews by hand with the aid of an electronic word processor. Then, a coding sheet will be constructed by manually sorting respondents' answers into categories emerging from the total body of data. An initial step aims to create large and roughly organized themes (discontent, antiauthority, trust, etc.). The second pass will further refine these groups, breaking them down into clearly defined and easily understood themes that will hopefully provide a clear answer to the guiding questions posed by the research. This method is a synthesis of two templates proffered by Creswell (1998) that outline phenomenological and grounded theory coding transcription. Since my data focused both on emergent themes in the data and thematic statements, the marriage of the two approaches felt appropriate for this study.

Data Analysis

Participants

The individuals selected by the researcher for this study were selected via convenience sampling from the pool of volunteers who responded to recruitment material. Recruitment posts were distributed via online messages to Reddit accounts selected randomly from highly rated posts on /r/leagueoflegends through January 2017. This self-selection method targeted individuals who actively took part in commenting or posting to the subreddit. Of the 222 requests sent, 25 responses indicated interest, which was narrowed down to 11 who felt comfortable and willing to take part in the interview.

Out of the eleven participants, all identified as male (100 percent) and none identified as either female or any other gender (0 percent). Participants ranged in age from 18-25. Eight of the participants identified as American citizens (72.7 percent), one as French (0.09 percent), one as Romanian (0.09 percent) and one as Argentinian (0.09 percent). Eight (72.7 percent) were currently enrolled in higher educational programs full time, while three others (27.3 percent) were employed at their current job between zero and two years. For context, the Pew Research Center reported that 67 percent of all Reddit users identified as male, and 82 percent had some college or a completed degree. The sample gathered by the researcher for this study is then somewhat similar to Reddit's overall demographics, given that no religious or ethnic demographic data was collected for this study.

Data Analysis Strategy

This study uses a grounded theory approach to explore the facets of opinion leadership as it pertains to the perceptions of individuals within an online community (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory helps a researcher find theory within the data itself, rather than rigidly categorizing the findings based on pre-existing literature. This approach is particularly useful when examining emergent media phenomenon. When using grounded theory, “data collection and analysis are interrelated processes” (1990, p. 6). If a substantive or divergent result is discovered in one interview, the researcher is encouraged to take that phenomenon into consideration for the next interview, sometimes amending instrumentation or definitions to fit the altered state of understanding. Secondly, “concepts are the basic units of analysis” (1990, p. 7). Core to coding data is understanding the themes that exist between and among the manuscripts and chat logs.

With these tenants guiding the coding procedure, and following procedures articulated by Strauss and Corbin's model, the data was analyzed via open coding and compared for emerging themes. As recurring ideas, such as "content interaction" or "importance of titles," surfaced, the interview script was slightly amended to take this possibly substantial finding into consideration.

This process developed throughout the interview process until 22 codes emerged. The 22 codes were then subjected to axial coding, the process by which categories and subcategories take shape and provide structure to the data's interpretation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Craig and Tracy, 2014). Grouping and collapsing codes together into like sets give the researcher a clear sense of what arguments will support the core category of the research (1990, p. 14). Four dominant categories were recognized: community involvement, content interaction, technology use, and influence. Finally, selective coding provided a synthesis of all 22 categories and subcategories so that they all serve a single concept: opinion leadership within a niche digital community bounded by a specific social networking site. Strauss and Corbin state that this "core category" aids in uplifting the "central phenomenon" of the research (1990, p. 14).

RESULTS

This study sought more understanding into the forces that shape opinion leadership in a niche online community, from the environments that produce them to the kinds of information and expertise that creates their influence. Interview data drawn from users of the community-driven news aggregator, Reddit, provided a small look into an under-researched social media platform. In keeping with existing, geographically-bound development of this theory, much of the influence wielded by the subreddit's opinion leaders derived from their relationship to other users, at least initially. Unconcerned with a carefully crafted persona, other users looked to the merit of comments and posts to signal who to trust. How much knowledge a user brought to bear

in each of their statements, their perceived familiarity with the game, and how well they could distill their ideas for quick digestion and understanding all factored into whether the user base's motivation for elevating an opinion leader or their content via voting. These attributes also reflect the sentiment that opinion leaders must advertise their information to users rather than existing as always-available outlet. Based on frequency of use, all community members prioritize their browsing time based on individual needs, meaning opinion leaders must diversify how they present information in order to satisfy a variety of users.

The structure of Reddit, itself, plays no small role in crafting opinion leadership within the subreddit. Voting is the currency of the website's democracy, but not all users agree with how and when it is used, resulting in stratified levels of interaction, weak incentives to interact with content already popular, and commonly exploited systems of generating content for the sole purpose of gaining karma. Add to this a nuanced opinion of the site's moderation team that largely depends on an individual's amount of use, and the result is a complex hierarchy of needs and those who seek to fulfill them all interacting within a single space, regarding a single subject matter.

The reality expressed here is somewhat unique among social networking sites that often put greater emphasis on using information and news to cultivate a sense of self in an online space. Decisions on what defines a user on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram often comes down to the meaning injected into different content that illuminates a facet of the user's personality. In the comment sections of newspapers and magazines, the currency of information is highly dependent on the reporter or author who operates from a distinct opinion leadership position. How users conduct themselves and perceive the behavior of others is derived from popularized activities (themed posts, shared memetic images) or structure-based functions of the site (poking,

tagging, retweeting, hashtags, etc), both of which can be exclusive to different social networking sites or adapted as their popularity and use becomes ubiquitous. So, Reddit communities present a unique opportunity for mass communication scholars to test the rigor of existing theories, as well as positing new and adapting theories, inside niche interest groups where constant interpersonal interaction and content valuation supplant a personally curated online identity.

Relationships Create Opinion Leaders

In a 2015 study of German media consumption, researchers Mike Schafer and Monika Taddicken discussed whether or not classical opinion leadership still existed in an increasingly online media environment. The results of their research did, in fact, show that opinion leaders could still be found in both social media and less structured communication, along with a surprising finding – the mediatized opinion leader (2015). This role performs all of the same functions as the classical model, but accesses more information from more channels than previously theorized. They also share their expertise more readily and with higher proficiency. Schafer and Taddicken’s study also hypothesized that mediatized opinion leaders would likely exist in “homogenous peer groups” where opinions and tastes are shared more than in traditional mass media (2015). The League of Legends subreddit, and its users, aligned closely with this model. The coding of the transcripts showed a ubiquitous sense of community, a drive to interact with content (whether by voting or just reading), influencing or being influenced by the opinions of other users, and their experience being bounded by the technological structure of Reddit as a website.

Since information exchange on the subreddit is accomplished through two primary means – posting content and commenting on posts – it is important for users to layer the content of their

communication with both meaning and their relationship to the subreddit as a whole. This instills the commenter with a sense of influence within the community and why their submission should be taken serious (Blanchard 2004). When the commenter is not a typical user but instead a Riot employee, moderator or professional player, the specific characteristics of that relationship to general users changes how the information is read and contextualized. Adrian Maya, a 20-year-old DJ, said Riot's interactions on the subreddit show that they are invested in developing a productive relationship with their paying base, as opposed to other game companies he had interacted with: "I feel that they're really hearing people's needs, and also they are entertaining the community so it's not just that serious 'game company to community' relationship" (Maya, p.3)

Other users mirrored Maya's comments that Riot did not need to maintain the relationship that they do with the subreddit. Their efforts then raise them in the esteem of their players, who in turn inherently trust any information or opinions shared to the community. Other scholars might characterize Riot's interactions as following the "one-step flow" of information – from company to individual with little to no help from OLs – but the company uses the same mechanical communication processes as any other user (Bennett and Manheim, 2006). Their comments are not given any extra staying power or momentum that would edge out contributions by other users. Instead, Riot shares information with seeming candor along the same channels as their customers, earning them loyalty and admiration.

Its voice is comprised of many employee/users, all with "Riot" in their usernames (moderators also apply "flair" or a sticker to their posts and comments for visibility), but the respondents all refer to their contributions as if from a monolithic source. Riot provides updates, transparency on bugs and game issues, comments on both the professional and casual play scene,

and sometimes takes part in normal conversation via memes and popular in-jokes (Terrence Ko, p. 3; Carbuncuous, p. 4). Respondent Cold for Teacher, a 20-year-old full-time student, said that Riot's contributions make users view the company "like they are one of us. Not demigods or creators of the game on any pedestal. They are with us" (Cold for Teacher, p. 2). In this way, Riot acts as a mediatized opinion leader instead of a company: they guide their fans towards what should be viewed as important information while using different informational strategies (posts, but also video, gifs, images and external links) to achieve that goal (Schafer and Taddicken, 2015).

Gatekeeping Resistance

The relationship is not always a positive one. Some respondents, especially those who contribute original content more than conversation, tended to be more critical of how and when Riot chooses to interact with the community. 23-year-old freelance creative, Vandiril, spoke on the apparent selective contribution Riot takes with community interaction:

They often don't reply to important threads, I would say. Especially the ones that seem to put Riot in a bad spot. [They are] more likely willing to comment on stuff that is complementing them. (Vandiril, p. 2)

Another content creator, 20-year-old fulltime student Carbuncuous, said that "Rioter posts shouldn't be a big occasion. There are actual forums and a website for that" (Carbuncuous p. 2). While their opinion was in the minority, it seemed substantive given the similar way they both use the subreddit. But their comments were not fully critical, as both admitted that "it makes the community feel closer to Riot and like we actually understand what they're doing" (Carbuncuous, p. 3) and "they respond more than they used to in the past, so that's good, I guess" (Vandiril, p. 3). Carbuncuous and Vandiril's posts may contain different content than

Riots' contributions, but their roles as opinion leaders are similar enough that the respondents may be judging Riot's role performance against their own. Carbunculous' professional stats satisfy the needs of community members dedicated to the professional play scene, while Vandiril's replays showcase in-game talent that is both educational and entertaining to anyone familiar with the game. As mediated opinion leadership research is not as comprehensive, theoretical foundation for how opinion leaders react to one another is lacking, but this finding could point towards a topic for future research (Schafer and Taddicken, 2013).

Riot and a Sense of Community

In a study of self-perception in online news sharing, Ma, Lee and Goh (2013) discussed motivations in a homophilous network, like the League of Legends subreddit. Individuals are both more likely to share and consume information when "the connections are similar in terms of demographics, attitudes, and informational interests" (2013). This largely explains how Riot's employees have assumed an integral and appreciated part of the subreddit community.

Respondents describe them joining conversations about topics both related to the game and otherwise, sharing jokes, or participating in casual conversation. In sum, the users perceive Riot as one of them on a level not seen even on Facebook or Twitter (Karlsen 2015; Park 2013).

James Baker Sullivan, a 17-year-old student, stated that Riot is "integrating and mixing with us. That's something I like," and other respondents mirrored his sentiments.

Blanchard's explanation and operationalization of terms regarding sense of community (2004) help explain why Riot's involvement has the impact recorded in the interviews. Her findings show that SOC is constructed through "membership, boundaries belonging and group symbols...influence, in terms of enforcing and challenging norms...exchange of support among

members...[and] shared emotional connections among members” (2004). Along these channels, users are looking to Riot as an opinion leader providing direct access to game updates and policy changes that directly affect their enjoyment of the game but also as a respected and cherished member of the community.

Perception of Professional Players

Respondent information showed that professional League of Legends players uncommonly join in subreddit discussion, but when they do the more unsavory side of the community responds. It rarely goes so far as to require moderator intervention, but the more mindful individuals come out of it feeling embarrassed and chagrined on behalf of their peers.

Terrence Ko, a 25-year-old programmer, said this:

I don't think about it as whether the perception is good or bad, but whatever the opinion is goes to the extreme. Whenever they like someone, they really like them. And whenever they hate someone, they really hate them (p. 4)

When discussing if professional players elicit the same emotional connection as Riot, the respondents almost universally expressed sympathy or regret. They seemed to be apologizing on behalf of the community because of widespread mistreatment of professional players whenever they take part in community discussion. Vandiril said, “If I were a pro player, I don't know if I would have been able to read comments [in the subreddit]. People are just so negative” (Vandiril, p. 5). When asked why that negativity exists, he blamed the nature of the game. Carbuncuous agreed: “Oh, they better not come to the subreddit right now, or look at Twitter or Facebook because they would be absolutely ridiculed. If a pro player chooses not to use the subreddit, I'm not going to blame them” (p. 6).

Other respondents claim that this reaction is rare when the professional player posts themselves, as the fans tend to dominate conversation, but elsewhere comments become unnecessarily venomous and personal. Along with the apologetic outlook, the respondents had little care for whether the professional players contributed to the community at all. For many teams, the chance is never provided as managers or PR officials take the social media reins. Carter Campbell, a 24-year-old painting contractor, said “once you get in the spotlight like that, it’s probably not in your best interest to have an active Reddit account” (p. 3).

Given that professional players contribute so little content, in quantity and quality, and users seem more than happy to keep that status quo, it should be concluded that their potential as opinion leaders remains unrealized. Professional players express none of McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four characteristics that drive an individual to seek a sense of community: feelings of membership, influence, fulfillment and emotional connection. Instead, news or information about professional players falls under the purview of the communities already established opinion leaders. Schafer and Taddicken might define them as inactive respondents, except that their interest in the topic and level of information exceed those provided by the definition (2013). Instead, professional players take a consciously inactive role while still having content created by them or about them posted on the subreddit and discussed with regularity, most commonly by longtime users like corylulu, whose post history is almost completely comprised of links from YouTube and official websites containing announcements for the professional scene. This relationship more closely resembles the two-step flow of information first theorized by Katz and Lazarsfeld that eventually evolved into contemporary opinion leadership (1957), but it is still used today, especially when examining news and politics sharing on social networks such as Facebook (Hong 2016; Turcotte et al. 2015). Such a relationship can still be seen in social media

where the ability to share the posts of high-profile individuals, such as celebrities or politicians, allows users to pass information along heavy traffic channels with little oversight by those high-profile individuals (Karlsen 2015).

Browsing Frequency Stratifies Users

Evolving User Roles

Schafer and Taddicken (2013) hypothesized the mediatized opinion leader, but could not initially define their characteristics. Trepte and Scherer (2010) used the results of their study to more clearly outline the differences between informed and uninformed opinion leaders. Likewise, the data gathered in this study allows the researcher to describe three distinct user roles as they were observed in the interviews. These roles – the lurker, the discussant, and the content creator – are defined and discussed in the next paragraphs.

The data in this study revealed surprising nuance and depth in the role of the user which subsequently rendered the study's initial definition of user (individual with a registered Reddit account and username) moot. Individuals in the subreddit often self-ascribe to established roles that they know exist within that social ecosystem, using it as an explanation for their habits and behavior. Terrence Ko said he is “typical in the amount of posting I do, which is almost none.” On the other hand, respondent ReticXPython, a 20-year-old IT technician, said he browses constantly, checking the subreddit any moment when he has free time. Trepte and Scherer discussed the roles of opinion leaders of political knowledge (2016), but focused on expertise rather than description of duties. They discuss media use as a lesser contributing factor to the formation of opinion users, as both informed and uninformed leaders had comparable usage patterns when it came to both traditional and online media (2016). Instead, they posited that the

intent or wish to inform was perhaps more important to filling the role of an opinion leader than having the time and resources available. Such a finding was mirrored in the respondents of this study: Terrence Ko admitted to interacting little, but his opinions on both the subreddit and the game were in many instances more nuanced and complex than other respondents with a higher frequency of use. Still, opinions not shared with the community have no explicit value or influence, and so Ko was defined as a lurker.

Other times, the pattern and frequency of interaction, along with popularly held beliefs about how Reddit works, typecasts a user into one or more categories. Evolution of a role can and does happen whenever an individual's habits change, but it isn't common according to the participants. The unanticipated roles include:

- The “lurker” – interacts very rarely, preferring to consume content; the karma fanatic whose every action and decision is in service to receiving upvotes
- The content creator – their experience and relationships are the most markedly different to the typical user, as they prioritize posting the information or content that foments later discussion.
- The discussant – users who take part in discussions regularly while also posting content of their own on occasion. Their motivations may vary, but the level of interaction does not.

Mass media scholars largely agree that the sheer amount of information available to the public has caused consumers to prioritize their time according to a complex web of needs and fulfillment (Cho, Keum and Shah, 2015; Ruggerio, 2000). Therefore, when discussing how browsing frequency affects different user roles and how they contribute to the overall community, this study addressed the binary nature of interaction levels showcased by the respondents. Activity, as it pertains to this study, must be defined in two ways: consumptive browsing and productive discussion. Consumptive browsing describes time the user spends looking at information or discussion in the subreddit passively. For example, respondent Maya

claimed he spend 90 percent of their online time browsing, while only 10 percent go towards commenting or posting. Likewise, 21-year-old student Mario Stomp said he only spent 30 minutes a day online, and all of it is reserved for reading posts relevant to his interests. Upvoting and downvoting content would also fall under this category, as even the most non-interactive respondent described in detail how and why they vote on content. Consumptive browsing only concerns itself with the user and the subreddit as a single entity for the purposes of this study's discussion. Other studies use terms like inactive participant when measuring only levels of activity, but since this study considers multiple factors a more descriptive definition was sought (Schafer and Taddicken 2015).

Alternatively, productive discussion describes interpersonal connection and sharing of information within the subreddit. Frequency varied even within roles, and the community is more sensitive to how little or how much different roles take part in this kind of activity. Theophile Schrimpf, an 18-year-old student, regularly posts content from outside of Reddit and so spends much of his time online responding to comments, reading discussions and researching related material to provide to his peers. Carbuncous, whose posts involve rigidly structured tables of professional game stats, keeps constant tabs on both his posts and those made by fellow team members. He claims to always have a tab open on his phone so that he can quickly refresh the page and check for updates. Posting news and links, commenting, sending personal messages and personalizing usernames with flair all fall under productive discussion. None of these behaviors were described by lurkers as part of their typical browsing experience, and therefore provides a distinct division between the two definitions. Furthermore, it showcases a desire to augment and improve the browsing experience for not only themselves but for their peers. Discussants showcase an investment in the community beyond satisfying their own

gratifications. These measures were inspired and developed off of similar models like the consumption-participation link (Cho, Keum and Shah, 2015) and research into homophilous communities (Long Ma, Lee and Goh, 2013).

For lurkers, content creators and discussants, consumptive browsing activity varied among respondents. Some visited every day at multiple points while others limited their interaction to half-hour intervals at specific times of day. Comparing this frequency with the kinds of information sought, or uses satisfied, did not turn up anything substantive, but that does not mean such a link does not exist; the scope of this study and its instruments were just not designed in that manner. A similar study by Olle Sköld (2013) on another video game subreddit investigated meaning and memory-making via shared experiences, and it found that frequency did not have any bearing on the value derived by users of the subreddit. What can be said is that the frequency of consumptive browsing did not seem to correlate with the respondents' ability to form complex opinions about the subreddit community. This aligns with the results of Cho, Keum and Shah (2015), who found that the rate of news and information consumption is highly dependent on whether or not qualities of opinion leadership are showcased, but evidence for the opposite was not nearly as strong. This offers further evidence that the proclivity for opinion leadership lies more in the want than the means. Respondents who felt driven to provide information to other users would do so, even if it meant breaking from their normal browsing habits. James Baker-Sullivan uses Reddit in 10 to 15 minute daily intervals, but spoke at length about a post he made that recently reached the front page. It discussed dominant eye theory and how to change your game's visual layout in order to take advantage of it. He reportedly read every comment made and took the time to respond as much as possible.

I definitely value [responding]. I usually see that as good interaction to their post. Answering questions, clearing things up. That discussion was just so much more positive.

Alternatively, some respondents only choose to interact when given the opportunity to correct an opinion or answer a question regarding their area of expertise. ReticXPython actively seeks out these opportunities and claimed it was the only time he contributed to a discussion. Samuel Madeira, a 17-year-old student, said he very rarely comments and then only when it relates to the esports scene and he knows the subject matter intimately. While the scope of those opinion did change depending on the type of information most regularly sought, all respondents spoke at length on at least one facet of the community with authority reinforced by their time spent online, whether that be professional play, game technique or creative endeavors.

Role: Lurker

As the study's focus narrowed on users only, even passive consumption took on unanticipated nuance. The term "lurker" on Reddit often applies to one who views the website without an account, thereby limiting their interaction; a user needs an account to vote, comment, and modify what subreddits they see on their Front Page. As Ruggerio explains, though, low levels of traditional interaction do not mean an individual's activity level is correspondingly low: "different individuals tend to display different types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times in the communication process" (2000). Since lurkers' activity is mostly relegated to consumptive browsing, and this study is chiefly concerned with influence exerted on others in a shared community, their contribution must be downplayed even if the total amount of time is greater than the other roles.

Certain respondents to the interview either directly referred to themselves as lurkers (although they have accounts and usernames) or implied it through a comparison of non-interactive behavior. Their relationship to the subreddit is one of almost pure consumption. They

watch videos, read posts and view images with the intent of moving on once the information has been digested. According to uses and gratifications theory, these individuals are not motivated to participate in activities that do not directly pertain to their sought gratifications, and so their activity remains relatively low (2000; Rayburn 1996). Any opinions they have are kept close to the chest unless it directly affects their habits. Asking about how the rules of the subreddit should be interpreted, what they thought of upvote/downvote use, or other interaction-based inquiries did not elicit thorough responses, and most expressed apathy towards forces that did not directly impede content reaching the front page of the subreddit. Terrence Ko was one who professed to being “more of a lurker” and a “content consumer.” He is fully aware of his comparatively low interaction levels, even though his opinions on how the subreddit should be operated were fairly well-formed.

Because of their low-level interaction, the lurkers in this study exert little to no influence on other users in the subreddit. The extent of interaction to be expected from this role is only through the upvote and downvote button, but the individual impact seems negligible to the subjects when considered among the thousands more usually garnered by posts that reach the front page of the subreddit. The respondents reported feeling like their votes on both posts and comments were ultimately meaningless when hundreds or thousands of other people had already contributed. Cold for Teacher said that posts with comments already were “of no use” to him, so he doesn’t even consider further contribution. Likewise, Carbuncuous further explained the problem:

If it’s already well on its way, what is one more vote either way going to do. I don’t think it is very much. You vote whenever your decision matters. (p. 7)

By the time they read a post or comment, the community has decided through their votes that it deserves to be at or near the top, garnering it the most visibility possible. What more could

they do to change the trajectory of something at that point? This phenomenon, interaction saturation, occurred within other roles and is discussed in detail later.

Role: Discussant

Another group of users were identified whose main interaction consists of discussion with their peers in the comment section of popular posts: discussants. The state of the professional scene is a popular topic of conversation for many of the subjects, and one the discussants among them all felt equipped to speak about with confidence. By initiating or continuing a conversation via replies to comments in the thread automatically created for each post in the subreddit, the subjects want to share their knowledge and expertise for the betterment of their fellow user, among other gratifications. Adrian Maya sometimes views posts on the subreddit by filtering for the newest posts. The majority here will not reach the front page and often contain simple questions from less experienced or confused players.

Yeah, that's why I do visit it. Because there are people just asking for a little help and it won't necessarily reach the front page. But if I can help, why not? (p. 2)

They do not seek out false information or arguments, but those situations encourage them to post if they know how to correct the error or combat the popular opinion. In some cases, the subjects admitted to posting a comment that they knew would be popular and receive upvotes: a widely shared opinion, some memetic reaction or joke, or a witty response of their own contrivance. Some of Carbuuous' teammates habitually use the new post section to prospect for posts that will later be popular.

The first 20 to 30 minutes that a post is submitted are important for visibility. They do it for karma. They will upvote stuff that they think will make it to the front page, and then leave a comment that will get a lot of karma. (p. 9)

Use these methods incorrectly, and the community will downvote as a way of showing the user that their contribution is neither necessary nor appreciated. In any case, the karma gained by successfully deploying a strategic comment is as much a motivation for interaction as creating open dialogue on game related content. Discussants do not post news or media nearly as often as the comment on it. When they do, it is only if they consider it a noteworthy addition that will be positively received. Like comments, acute understanding of the subreddit's mood reportedly affects the success of a post as much as the value of the information. As Theophile Schrimpf, put it:

They do the same thing I did: lurking, then looking without posting – just some upvotes and downvotes, then a few comments. You have to get used to the trends on Reddit before you start posting.

The respondents believe in an evolution of roles: through practice and an investment of time, a lurker may become a discussant – sense of community, discourse, and perceived expertise are all observed motivation (Blanchard 2004). This change does not happen for every user, as the study's professed lurkers seemed aware and content in their community role, but users also knowledgeable about optimal posting times, content formatting and popular parlance could equip them to assume a more influential role.

Several discussants displayed a certain sense of self efficacy by admitting that while receiving karma for insightful or funny comments is a nice reward, they mainly interact with a post to wield their own expertise in a way that benefits the community. Vandiril talks with fans of his content in order to think of new ideas (p. 3), and ReticXPython said he simply loves to argue with people (p. 2). Answering a question, correcting false information or defending their favorite professional player and team are all things the respondents looked for when commenting. Again, this is not done on very popular posts. In order to catch a post early enough

to make a meaningful contribution, discussants often browse the subreddit by filtering posts under the “new” or “rising” category. Shown in “rising” are posts that Reddit’s algorithms mark as receiving increasing interaction over time. Discussants can be reasonably sure that comments and upvotes made on these posts will have an increased effect on the trajectory of the post. Good content continues to rise, with the discussant’s comment hopefully showered with upvotes; bad content stays away from the front page. Thus, discussants influence the subreddit by curating new content and ensuring discussion within the post itself. They are satisfying a need for group discourse as defined by Ruggiero (2000), along with acting as gatekeepers to content framed in ways outside of community norms (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009).

Discussants indicated more balance of the two kinds of activities during their online periods. Their responses indicate levels of productive discussion ranging from three times a week (Baker-Sullivan, p. 1) to “at least two or three times a day” (Maya, p. 1), even though the ratios can and do fluctuate for each individual. When commenting, discussants tend to stick within a wheelhouse of comfortable expertise and talk with others from that vantage point. Very few respondents admitted to starting a conversation if they did not already know the answer to a question or held a strong opinion about the conversation topic. Maya said, “I’m doing it [discussing] with people that want to share information. I don’t really comment unless someone asks for a thing.” Discussants seem to browse with a bimodal state of mind, meaning they come to the subreddit already knowing whether they want to consume content passively or search out conversations in which to take part. ReticXPython was exact in detailing the aspects of the professional scene he is interested in, while James Baker-Sullivan’s browsing habits change whether he is browsing to waste time or is in the mood to learn about gameplay styles. Some

users even claimed that different parts of the day were better for discussion versus browsing, but most operated within the leisure time afforded them by their lives.

When I make a post myself...I'm trying to hit the time just right, so I'll post it at 6 p.m. EU (Eastern European) time. It will start getting some attention from EU people, but then you will have the NA people come in soon after." (Theophile Schrimpf, p. 4)

Comments they leave are meant to be helpful or constructive to either another user or the subreddit as a whole. The reason they comment in the first place is because they think their information is worth sharing. As will be discussed in further detail later, most discussants in this study viewed the subreddit as lower-skill players who lack the ability to understand the game's finer points on their own. The most active discussants all claimed to spend some amount of time in the "New" section curating posts and leaving comments (Schrimpf, p. 1; Maya, p. 2; Vandiril, p. 2). Some do so for karma, others want to answer questions that shouldn't make it to the front page, but deserves an informed answer from someone who can help (Maya, p. 1; Carbuncuous, p. 4).

Discussants motivations and activities fit Schafer and Taddicken's model (2015) of mediatized opinion leaders, and closely resemble Riot employees, though without the blatant notoriety attached to their name. Their professed wants are for community discussion and feelings of helpfulness and acceptance (Blanchard 2004), but in fulfilling those they leave others in a better and more well-informed state. The information they use is drawn from the game, the subreddit, their own experiences and elsewhere online. Multiple channels of information coalesce and are made available through these mediatized opinion leaders.

Role: Content Creator

Two respondents, Carbuncuous and Vandiril, described their contributions to the subreddit as independent information or entertainment created chiefly for Reddit's League of Legends community. This third category of users encountered by the study was the content creator: active participants in the subreddit whose main impetus was sharing posts either of their own construction or from a team of individuals working towards a shared goal. These users do not normally aggregate news, videos and images from other sources but serve only as part of the network of information dispersion (Ma, Lee and Goh 2013). As the name implies, these users share work done in service of independent research, gameplay or artistry. Their behavior profile is similar to that of a "prosumer" as first described by Toffler (1980) and further enumerated by Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) as categorizing a class of people who actively facilitate or improve the means by which a need is fulfilled. Online examples include curating article on Wikipedia, selling items on eBay, and writing reviews on Yelp! (2010). The concept of the active audience helps explain the different levels of interactivity witnessed in different media: individual determinants affect how strongly one wants to take part in shaping the information and news they consume, but the reality of a highly mediatized world means most take part on some level (Ruggerio 2000). Of the two respondents who fit this category, Vandiril makes YouTube videos of interesting or exciting gameplay footage, known in the subreddit as a "highlight" clip. The other, Carbuncuous, is part of a team that develops formatted result information from recent professional matches into a readable text post that provides both stats and a thread for group discussion. While Vandiril stated that he does not provide his videos solely for the benefit of the subreddit, he claimed the community was more positive and cohesive than that found on

YouTube (p. 3). Similarly, Carbuncuous claimed he would continue his work even if nobody in the community ever saw it. The fact that people appreciate what he does he just an added benefit.

I was inputting all the information by hand, myself at first. I guess it showed that I was dedicated to it, but the team offered me [a position]. Now I've been doing it for six or seven months. (Carbuncuous, p. 10)

The influence of content creators is tied not to name recognition, but consistent delivery of content. In the case of YouTube videos, it means sticking to a publicized schedule that fans come to rely on. For game updates, consumer-minded users are looking for the information on the front page as soon as possible, no matter who delivers it. Respondents who identified as this role spoke in length about the effort and time spent beyond creating the content to make sure it is successful in the subreddit. Vandiril said, "It's hard to say what started it, and I cannot really specify one thing. I just constantly started posting weird things to Reddit and only after getting to the front page tens of times did people start recognizing me" (p. 1). Timing plays a large role in gaining traction and making it to the front page for any kind of content. As the U.S. comprises the majority of Reddit's primetime users, Vandiril must submit content during the early morning in America (the user lives in France and submits content during the evening). According to him, if one times it right and is lucky their post will gain an initial boost in the morning, be buoyed in the afternoon as other times zones wake up, then receive a surge in the evening when the majority of browsing occurs (p. 6). Mastering this timing is apparently essential to gaining karma and developing rich conversation. Unlike the discussants, content creators need interaction on their posts to signify that it is worth checking out. The other respondents in the study corroborate this: posts at the top of the page and with many comments are telling traits of information worth checking out (Mario Stomp, p. 1; ReticXPython, p. 1). To content creators, the karma is an inconsequential byproduct of discussion and involvement.

Carbuncuous, though, spoke of a slightly different approach. Until a recent change in the overall rules of Reddit, text posts (no videos, images or other multimedia content included) did not garner karma for the user posting it. Votes still counted in terms of visibility, but it did not affect personal scoring in any way. That karma functions like it would for any other posts, but the team doesn't seem to mind. According to the respondent, providing factual and reliable information to the community satisfies their need for recognition, providing for the community and cultivating a dependent relationship with other users.

A lot of people on Reddit like to post filler comments. It's the same thing over and over again. Just trying to get karma. I'm not one for the karma race. I don't try to do that. I try to actually have a discussion when I post. Even before text posts gave karma, [the team] didn't care. It's cool that we get it now, but it never mattered. (Carbuncuous, p. 2)

The subreddit can take part in smart, up-to-date discussion of the professional scene thanks to the clean and easily understood statistical posts made by their team, and the community has come to rely on their performance. Admittedly, other users do occasionally try and "snipe" the post: submitting the information in a similar manner before the team has a chance. If the community recognizes the format and begin upvoting it, there is nothing in the rules that protects the team's interest (Carbuncuous, p. 9). The respondent cited an unfortunately common occurrence of sniped posts not being updated as long weekend tournaments go on, providing the community with false, or missing, information. For that reason, the team remains as vigilant on timing as they do on precision. These "uninformed opinion leaders" have access to the same channels and tools as any other user, but do not take full advantage of them to fulfill the role of opinion leadership (Trepte and Scherer 2010). Instead, they seek the notoriety and reward normally due to content creators without investing the necessary resources. Scholars show that successful opinion leadership relies more on a feeling of personal fulfillment than an external reward for providing information, especially when that information is incomplete or false (2010;

Schafer and Taddicken 2015; Park 2013). When asked, Carbuncuous said he does not blame the subreddit's community for incorrectly voting on bad content. The fault lies with those who would take advantage of Reddit's system for their own selfish gain (p. 9).

Content creators welcome interaction with the posts they submit, but they must also deal with additional impetus provided by the subreddit's rules. One of those states that for every post a user submits, they must also submit nine comments. That 9:1 ratio is the bare minimum meant to discourage or disable spam accounts from filling the "New" section with repetitive, empty posts and thereby drowning out the contributions of real users.

I do my best to always make quality comments, but it may be slightly lower [due to the rule]. Higher quantity means slightly lower quality. That's a shame, but a day has only 24 hours. (Vandiril, p. 2)

He remembered receiving a warning from the mod team when they first started their account sternly reminding them of the rule's existence. They were told they would not receive a second warning on the matter. The respondent felt the rule was objectively fair but sometimes "really sucked" (p. 11). Despite hemming by rules, both content creators talked positively about their interaction with the community and relished the feedback, praise, criticism and non-sequiturs provided by discussants interacting with their posts.

Such rules and structure limitations work to further stratify content creators from the other user roles. Riot employees post with far less regularity, yet receive as much, if not more, recognition simply by virtue of name value. They do not worry about post/comment ratios or dealing with automated spam filters. Digitally codified roadblocks like these work to gate content by limiting the opinion leaders who would provide its access to the community (Barzilai-Nahon 2008). This finding provides substantial evidence that, even among mediatized opinion leaders, a systemic stratification occurs in the community that puts some at an advantage over

others. Network gatekeeping forces are explained later as they affect more than just the role of a content creator.

Identity Matters Little to the Majority

Of all the insights gathered from the study's respondents, none were more unanimous than their perception that usernames held little value when deciding the worth of content on the subreddit. This runs perpendicular to the work of communication scholars who postulate that usernames and other online identities help individuals identify commonalities and relationships in homogenous interest groups (Long Ma, Lee, Goh 2013; Graham and Gosling 2012; Skold 2013). According to Reddit's technical structure, a user cannot vote, comment or post in any subreddit unless they first create an account. This process involves providing an email and creating a unique username by which they will be known to others across the website. Account creation is one of the ten gates that comprise the Barzilai-Nahon network gatekeeping model (2009), but also provides a pseudonym that cannot be changed once the account is successfully created. All posts are saved and publically accessible through a hyperlink tied to the username – anyone else can view what has been posted by the account whether the investigator has one or not – along with their overall karma score. The assumption that others will critique their post and comment history does affect the behavior of some users: three users were skeptical of responding to the recruiting material given my relatively new username (used solely for Reddit research) and its lack of post history. Curating one's history seems one way of providing credentials for belonging to the in-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Yet, the respondents all admitted to hardly ever noticing or investigating the username of those who submit content on the subreddit. Mario Stomp said that the submitter's name never

matters to him and instead focuses on the content of the post. Others echoed the sentiment, adding either that it isn't a big deal to keep track of who posts content or with some regret that they don't have the time or experience to pay heed to usernames. Carter Campbell said that whenever a user impinges upon the Subreddit's rules to the point of distraction is the only instance where he tends to remember their name. Others added that moderator names are some of the only that spring to mind because they tend to show up in places of controversy, which are inherently interesting to the community. Some users, like Maya, shared personal stories that relate the apparently low value of usernames:

I've been on front page twice. I asked one of my friends, 'Did you see something weird on League's subreddit this morning?' He said nope. I was the second post [but] still nothing. I asked him for a print screen, and my username was right in the center of the screen. Still, he didn't notice until I pointed out. (p. 2)

When regarding the value of a post or comment, users largely seem to be more interested in the content and its value than who submitted it. Therefore, the fear of being judged on one's comment history does not hold much water unless a user breaks the rules or creates a controversial scene. The typical interaction does not concern itself with the personalities behind the username, as other research suggests (Graham and Gosling, 2012). The content of the post or comment creates a temporary but impactful profile of the user that exists only as long as they are involved in the discussion. Already, Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory (1944) becomes inadequate to discuss the dynamics of power at play in the subreddit if an opinion leader's influence is not always tied to their name.

Interaction Saturation Devalues Reddit Democracy

Another outstanding finding was a recurring sentiment that voting or commenting on posts at or near the front page was a fruitless task – users gained nothing by it and should either

consume passively or move on. Dubbed interaction saturation by the researcher, respondents in every role and at all level of use commented on this phenomenon. Ruggerio defined interactivity in the scope of U&G theory as “the degree to which participants in the communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse” (2000; Williams, Rice and Rogers, 1988). Interaction saturation describes a breakdown in this needs fulfillment cycle because the user no longer feels as though they have control of their role as an opinion leader who can offer their expertise and have it appreciated by the community. Cold for Teacher said, “I never comment on something that already has comments. It’s of no use to me” (p. 1). For those users who browse more than post, it often came down to the way in which they choose to view the subreddit; by never exposing themselves to new and untested content, they consciously remove the choice of interaction from their browsing habits.

Because I only look at Hot, what the use in upvoting it more? It’s already there. It never occurs to me to upvote anything, comments or posts. (Terrence Ko, p. 4)

Others expressed a wish to vote, but understood that their individual voice mattered little on front page content. Vandiril called interaction with these posts “so damn useless” (p. 4), and Maya agreed with the sentiment.

I feel like if a post has a 6000 score my upvote or downvote won’t change a thing. It’s still going to be top of the front page for one day. (p. 6)

Nonparticipation when it comes to voting is not a new concept, even in the realm of online mass media scholarship (Kam and Simas, 2012; Bratu 2013; Ryan 2010; Scherman and Arriagada 2012), and the reasons are still being debated and discussed today. In the subreddit, at least, the respondents become discouraged to participate in the face of overwhelming community output. Paradoxically, those same users do not (or rarely) seek out posts in the New section,

which have little to no interaction or votes. Vandiril partially blames Reddit's voting system for creating such a contradictory environment, as well as the community for perpetuating it:

You can technically filter comments by new, but I figured it out after like two years and used it once. Why don't you make one post about roster changes? Better make 20 billion ones (*sic*) every time. I feel like a lot of good content is lost this way. (p. 6)

The users' lament over how the front page is beyond their control highlights another tenant of U&G theory – demassification, which defines how much control over a medium the user submits (Ruggerio 2000; Williams et al 1988). On the subreddit's front page, topics and conversations are beyond the control of the user. They can vote and comment, but the chance of further interaction resulting from their efforts is slim. When faced with the options of shouting into a crowd or starting a dialogue on a post that may die young, users feel a loss of control that saps away their drive to interact. How a user proceeds relies largely on their general browsing habits. The lurkers, defined by low overall interaction, considered this phenomenon as a force beyond their control and simply cease to interact.

Straight up. I don't [interact] at all. I let everyone else do it. I'm purely consumer.
(Terrence Ko, p. 4)

Discussant and content creators, on the other hand, were more likely to disparage the system or provide ways of coping, largely because their habits involve or are shaped by the system of democratic visibility Reddit employs.

DISCUSSION

In an attempt to shed light on the further sophistication of opinion leadership in online communities, this study examined the forces and structures that affect their formation in the League of Legends subreddit. By investigating what users thought about the various types of individuals with which they communicate, the researcher hoped to begin to understand and record how those forces work both on this particular subreddit and in mass media beyond. Opinion leadership continues to be an integral force in deciding what information is consumed by a public and under what frames and agendas it is contextualized. If researchers can operationalize formal definitions for the influences and structures that occur online, they can better navigate the deep waters that are global communication on the internet.

The bonds between users proved the most telling evidence for opinion leadership in the niche online community. The users on the subreddit are constantly evaluating and reevaluating how they should act with each other according to social schema derived from past encounters, but formative exchanges stick in the mind – exceptions are more striking than the rule. Of little consequence was the username an individual creates for themselves when making an account. Reddit threads are infamous as walls of text, but the online handle of most commenters and posters held almost no influence on whether information was considered worth consuming. That same information could reach a point of interaction saturation, as the study discovered, if too many users had upvoted or commented. While no user could explicitly describe the point when they feel their contribution holds no power, its existence was not up for debate. The technological structure of Reddit also confines a user via its voting system, which held a contentious place with the respondents. They described it as an outdated and easily-exploited

system not fit for the kinds of discussions and interactions that take place daily within the subreddit.

The first research question regarded the factors that allow opinion leaders to form in this online community. Results showed that the most influential factor was an individual's relationships with the community as a whole, especially regarding Riot, who owns and maintains the game itself. Their casual and conversational tone was endearing to most of the respondents, who saw them as wanting to be a part of the subreddit without special treatment, even if that immersion was not sold on every user. Popular humor, memetic language and a light-hearted tone regarding even serious game discussion led the community to believe that Riot's intentions on the subreddit were largely to keep in touch with a vocal minority of their player base, albeit one dedicated fully to the discussion and appreciation of their product. Compared to the Twitter and Facebook accounts of corporations and businesses, the relationship shared between the subreddit and Riot shows more intimacy and reciprocity with regards to conversation. Users view it more as the game company meeting them on their own terms than pretending to be something they are not. The users' relationships with professional players did not measure up, due mostly to the absence of professional players interacting in a similar one-on-one capacity. Instead, managers or PR employees acted as conversation surrogates. The respondents accepted this reality, claiming that the less savory elements of their community tended to emerge when pro players showed up. From this, we can conclude that relationships do play a large part in how much influence an opinion leader claims. Clear intentions, an understanding of behavioral norms and a dash of brevity increase the likelihood that a user will look to another for information or opinions.

Secondary forces included how often a user browses the subreddit and how much game skill they could bring to bear. Both of these were expressed through comments at the point of discussion, allowing every comment to provide a fresh chance to prove a user's inherent expertise. The success or failure of past endeavors did not affect the outcome of future ones. In the subreddit, comments and posts were measured by the content they contained rather than any existing personality or pedigree. Opinion leadership, then, is not a mantle passed down or earned, but more so a temporary role sought and filled at each conversation juncture.

The second research question sought what kinds of information or expertise held value to users, and were perhaps used to distinguish opinion leaders within the community. Interestingly, usernames were unanimously regarded by the respondents as inconsequential to determining the worth of a comment or post. This can be somewhat tied to the immediate, yet transient nature of expertise expressed when users reply to comments or posts. Since their worth is largely decided by content, the username cannot hold much sway. In fact, respondents admitted that only moderators and Riot employees (both of whom have colored flair next to their username) ever catch their eye. Whether this finding is endemic only to the League of Legends subreddit or can be examined elsewhere is an interesting topic for future research. Alternatively, the title of a post proved influential to almost every respondent. When asked how they would choose between two posts with similar content, the title was constantly mentioned as a main, if not the deciding, factor. Users must craft a concise yet thorough title that appeals to the browsing habits of the subreddit's majority. Overwrought or confusing sentence structure, flashy claims without much substance, and tired humor were all mentioned as ways to be passed up.

Both of these findings spoke to the conclusion that opinion leaders are selling their service to a demanding audience. Given the population of the subreddit and the relatively limited kinds

of information deemed important, and therefore worthy of the front page, a user must be fast, accurate and mindful of composition (along with a bit of luck) if they want to produce a popular post or comment. The respondents viewed the subreddit as a catch-all for any information that might be of interest to them, a homogenous connected pool fed by many channels of information. The content would, given time, reach them eventually. Who brought it was of little concern, meaning that opinion leaders were not sought but expected to perform their function. This differs from other social media networks, such as Twitter or Instagram, where opinion leaders earn followers who opt in to receive all information provided by that leader. Changes in what they provide or how often they post can lose them influence, but the subreddit does not offer an individual subscription option. Instead valuable spots on the front page are earned and lost daily, and opinion leaders must constantly prove that their content and its packaging are worth the time of the community.

The third and final research question approached the technical structure of Reddit and its rules, attempting to see if they had any effect on how opinion leadership functions within. Foundational to any subreddit is the democratically minded voting system that decides the visibility of both comments and posts to any community on the website. Voting is the main tool all users have to decide what content is worth being seen at the top, and by extension which users are allowed to express their influence. The respondents had mixed feelings as to whether this system was fair or not, and their role within the community had some bearing on this. Lurkers, the most inactive role, spent little time considering how the vote system worked and trusted the community to provide the content they wanted to see. These users were also likely to use the vote system on content they agreed or disagreed with, a sentiment many other communities strive to disabuse. Discussants and content creators were more critical in their assessment, stating

that many workaround and exploits, such as cock puppet accounts and karma farming, kept similar content and users appearing with higher frequency on the front page. If the system created boundaries, they believed the democratic nature of voting crumbled. They want a subreddit that functions as a marketplace of ideas, where the best and most interesting content reaches the front page, regardless of who submits it.

Related to this struggle for visibility was the phenomenon of interaction saturation, which describes a point at which users no longer felt their contribution would affect the community. This drains the incentive to take part in conversation or submit posts unless further effort is expended on the part of the would-be opinion leader to overcome another initial hurdle. Many deemed the exercise not worth their time and so became less active users, slipping from a discussant role into a lurker. Others create interesting strategies to overcome or circumvent the structure entirely, such as creating sub-communities or creating a need via previously missing information. Just as creativity thrives under constraints, interaction saturation spurs a few to seek out new channels of influence within the community. Therefore, its effect on opinion leadership is not altogether negative, but it does seem to constrain more users than it uplifts.

Limitations

The initial concept of this study was much more involved and took into account interviews with Riot employees, Moderators and professional players. Due to both a lack of access and time, the scope of the study was restricted down to interviewing just users about their perception of the three other groups, along with the subreddit as a whole. Future research might take this study's instruments and conduct the originally planned experiment in its entirety. That is not to say that the results reached herein are no less viable; interviews with the three other groups

will provide fascinating context that will allow user perceptions to fit into a larger overall picture of life on the League of Legends subreddit.

Future Research

Continued study of opinion leadership in specific subreddits will provide context for the findings within the League of Legends community. Reddit is not the homogenous network often seen on specific pages, and is more than the sum of its parts. Different moderation styles, rules, and interactions provide a rich and fertile array of topics for communication scholars to choose from. Additionally, the self-selection method used to find respondents could be changed in order to provide a certain demographic. Especially poignant would be the perspective of community members that identify as women, given the recent increase in public awareness that gaming is not only the purview of men. Do the factors and structures expressed in this study affect them differently? Are they able to circumvent, or does it compound their perceived minority within gaming communities? Lastly, this study approached the topic from a grounded theory perspective in order to define and operationalize much that was not in the existing body of literature. Testing what this researcher provided for scientific rigor would aid other communication scholars also interested in the rarely researched medium that is Reddit.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Introduction

Hello. My name is Chase Carter, and I am a graduate student researcher with the Mayborn Journalism School at UNT. First of all, thank you for your help and participation in this study. The interview should take no more than approximately an hour and a half.

The purpose of this study is to understand the network of information sharing within online communities, like Reddit. During this interview we will talk about your use of the website and your interactions with the community.

We request your permission to record the interview's audio. This is for practical reasons, so that I can compile the information from this meeting. We guarantee the confidentiality of all content, and they can only be used by the study's researchers.

Please feel free to talk whenever you wish, or ask for a question to be restated. Let's start with your name, or whatever identifier you wish to be referred by, then I will ask the first question.

For subjects identified as a "general user" as per study's definition:

1. What is the main purpose of visiting this subreddit?
2. How often do you visit the subreddit?
3. What kind of content do you normally reply to?
4. How frequently do you comment versus how often you just browse ("lurk")?
5. How do you view posts on the subreddit, i.e. "Hot", "Top" or "New" page readout?
6. What indicators alert you to the existence of a frequent commenters or posters?
7. What extensions or browser addons help in identifying these frequent commenters or posters?
8. How do you perceive Riot employees contributing to the subreddit?
9. How do you perceive moderators contributing to the subreddit?

10. How do you perceive professional players contributing to the subreddit?
11. What content are you most likely to “upvote”?
12. What content are you most likely to “downvote”?
13. If two users submit the same or similar posts to the subreddit, what helps you decide which to promote and which to ignore?

For subjects identified as a “moderator” as per study’s definition:

1. What is your main task within the subreddit
2. How much daily time do you contribute to this task?
3. In what situation do you explicitly post to the subreddit?
4. How often are rules evaluated changed?
5. What normally prompts those changes?
6. Which rule is most commonly transgressed?
7. If you contribute to the community outside of your moderator role, how does this occur?
8. How do rules and their application differ for Riot employees?
9. How do rules and their application differ for professional players?
10. Tell me about your involvement in the decision to enact the mod-free week?
11. If so, what led to that decision and what was hoped to accomplish?
12. What was the result of that week, and how has the subreddit changed in its wake?
13. What is the relationship with the subreddit /r/leagueofmeta and its moderators?

For subjects identified as an “employee” as per study’s definition:

1. How often do you contribute to the subreddit?
2. What is your main reason for contributing, and what do you hope to accomplish?
3. How strict are the company’s rules on deciding what you can say and how it is said?

4. How much power or influence does the content that is seen on the subreddit have within the company?
5. How do you work with the moderators in order to augment or improve the company's involvement with the subreddit?
6. What is the common response to your submissions, posts or comments?
7. Describe the relationship you try to cultivate with users.
8. How is that relationship different when the user is a professional player?
9. How is that relationship different when the user is a moderator?
10. If the user is a frequent commenter or poster, how does that factor into whether you reply to an issue/question?
11. Describe the qualities of posts you normally decide to comment on, in regards to content of message and existing karma count.
12. What other related subreddits do you, on behalf of the company monitor or take part in?
13. If you contribute to the community outside of your official employee role, how does this occur?

APPENDIX B
SUBJECT RECRUITMENT FORM

Hello,

My name is Chase Carter, and I am a graduate student researcher with the Mayborn School of Journalism at the University of North Texas. I am contacting you today to extend an invitation to help take part in an academic study. The goal of my research is to understand the network of information sharing within specialized online communities, like the League of Legends subreddit. To that end, I am looking for users that use the subreddit frequently, are avid players and can speak with confidence and clarity about their experience with this Reddit community.

Your part in this study will consist of at least one, but perhaps more, personal interview contacted over the phone or using some VoIP software (Skype, Google Hangout, etc.). The total time investment will not exceed four hours.

If you are interested, please feel free to contact me via email at clintoncarter2@my.unt.edu, or by texting or calling (xxx) yyy-zzzz. If you have any questions about the study or your part in it, we can clear those up before any agreements are made.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Chase Carter
Graduate Researcher and Teaching Assistant
Mayborn School of Journalism

APPENDIX C
CODE BOOK

COMMUNITY

These codes inform interaction between users in the subreddit, typically via comment threads in public forums. It also contains users' perceptions of each other and the various roles who also take part in the subreddit, along with habitual details like frequency of use.

- Community Opinion

This code is used for data that describes an opinion held by a user about either the subreddit as a whole or the different demographic groups of which it is comprised. For example, if a user said that most lower-skill players tend to comment less, or that the subreddit doesn't care about reposts, such statements would be considered a community opinion.

- Expertise

This code refers to a user's perception of their own knowledge on a topic, or lack thereof. Such knowledge does not have a topical restraint as long as they express that it plays a role in their use of the subreddit and interaction with others. A user saying that over time you learn how to spot posts on their way to the front page would qualify for this code.

- Terminology

This code is used whenever a user offers a phrase or word that has specific meaning within the League of Legends or Reddit community, and therefore needs specific clarification to understand their meaning. Upvote/downvote or subreddit do not count: these are technical terms with accepted meanings beyond the subreddit community.

- Hivemind

This code refers to a recurring sentiment that the subreddit, and Reddit at large, acts in a single-minded manner that defies and disallows independent opinion forming. Often, it is used to

describe behavior that the user does not ascribe to themselves. Look for denigration of widely held opinions or practices as a signifier.

- Engagement

This code is used for statements by the user describing how much (or little) they interact with the community via commenting, upvoting, or posting. If a user were to say that they comment a lot on the weekend, but during the week they are too busy, that would qualify for this code.

CONTENT INTERACTION

Codes under this header describe data on how or why a user interfaces with information in the subreddit and encompasses reading, commenting, voting, and posting. It also signals phenomena witnessed by the researcher specific to this study.

- Usernames

Whenever a user talks about any usernames in their experience on the subreddit, this code applies there. It could be their own, other users, or popular usernames they are familiar with. Even a statement of not noticing or caring about usernames applies.

- Voting

Simply put, any mention of upvotes, downvotes or the action of using them applies to this code. A user's frequency of voting and the kind of content they vote on also count, along with their opinion on how such democratic tools should be used vs. how they are in reality.

- Interaction

This code should be applied to data describing the ways in which a user interacts with information on the subreddit. Do they say that they only read the top comments? Search for

incorrect opinions? Upvote and move on? All sentiments apply as long as the statements offers insight into their content consumption habits.

- TL;DR

One of two phenomenon witnessed during initial coding, TL;DR refers to a widespread sentiment that content must work to earn the attention of the typical, otherwise they will pass it up without any interaction. Use this code on data that communicates such an idea. An example, Subject A doesn't have time to read a wall of text, so it better have a summary or a good title.

- Interaction Saturation

The second phenomenon recognized during initial coding, this seemingly occurs when a piece of media has received such large amounts of comments or upvotes that the user no longer feels their input is meaningful. If Subject A said upvoting would be a waste of time because its already on the front page this code would apply, among other situations.

TECHNOLOGY

This umbrella code collects others pertaining to how Reddit as a website shapes a user's experience or how a user might use 3rd-party software (addons, etc.) to augment the experience to suit their own needs.

- Frequency

The frequency code should be used on data that describes the hard figures of how often a user visits the site, how long their browsing sessions last, and whether or not their use is periodical or perpetual in nature. The user may approximate or be able to offer specific numbers of hours/days. The code applies in either case.

- View Format

The LoL subreddit can be augmented to show posts in a different order: "New", "Hot", "Top", "Controversial" and others. When users talk about their preferred browsing format then apply this code to the data. Users may also speak about why they don't use other formats, as well.

- Addons

Apply this code when a user speaks about using software not owned or affiliated with the Reddit corporation to change how the site operates or loads on a visual level. There is no exhaustive list of possible addons, so instead look for comments about specific functions Reddit doesn't offer and how the individual user does or does not remedy them with addons.

INFLUENCE

This last heading code contains the more contextual code describing the interactions and perceptions of others within the subreddit, whether they be moderators, players, Riot or other users. Most data herein are not facts but beliefs held by the subjects of the study that they felt strong enough to share during the interview.

- Transparency

The code should be applied to data pertaining to the user's perception that other entities are influencing the subreddit with clearly expressed intentions. If a change is made, the reasons for that change are made highly visible and plainly expressed to the user. If not, they will likely comment about how transparency should be offered.

- Role Performance

Users largely have a general idea of how the different roles should perform in the subreddit, and comments with this code inform the researcher of those ideas. Do moderators censor angry

users? When is a Riot employee overstepping their boundaries in promoting paid content? The answers to these and related questions explain a user's perceived role performance.

- Invisible Mods

This phenomenon describes the repeated sentiment that moderators operate beyond the recognition of most users to the point that they could not confidently say whether or not they do anything at all. Use this code on any data that informs the researcher on their stance, whether moderators are a daily occurrence or something rarely and briefly seen while browsing.

- Exclusivity

Use this code on data the user provides that speaks to their exclusive use of Reddit as a source of news, information or entertainment. They may say that links on related sites end up here anyways, or that only things worth seeing make it to the front page. If it limits their exposure to non-reddit media, use the exclusivity code.

- Agenda

This code should be applied to comments about a role's motives for interacting on the subreddit beyond those of the typical user. For example, Riot gets free publicity or a professional player is promoting a charity stream tomorrow. The motive does not need to be malicious or overly selfish, and the user might even think it a good thing.

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