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# Opinion Leaders: The Circle of Influence



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Opinion leaders are the filters of ideas and information. Each industry, issue, interest and ideology has its own opinion leaders. They are change agents and active media users. Opinion leaders engage with the media where their ideas are spread to the wider world of those who care about the industry, issue, interest or ideology.

washingtonpost.com is the place 10,000,000 people visit each month\* to follow the ideas and opinions shaping business and policy. No other online media brand covers the issues of business and policy with the quality and depth of washingtonpost.com. Opinion leaders come to washingtonpost.com to influence the debate. Others come to learn the issues and make decisions based on the debate.

Opinion leaders shape business and industries, influence study and debate, spread ideas, expand the conversation and affect policy decisions.

\* Nielsen Online, NetView, three-month average: January–March 2008

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# Shaping Businesses and Industries

Every industry has its opinion leaders, the names that business leaders turn to for the trends and changes affecting their business.

Bill Gates, founder and chairman of Microsoft, has come to the pages of The Post over the years to address the key concerns of the technology industry and the economy as a whole. Gates propounded opinions on worker visa, competitiveness, spam, global trade and intellectual property.

## **Senior Executives and Business Leaders**

Managers and decision makers need to keep pace with change, to keep an eye on the myriad issues that affect their decisions. Senior executives and other leaders turn to the opinion leaders in their industry to know what change might be coming. They know the opinion leaders' names, read what they write and discuss their opinions. Business leaders bring their localized issues—geography- or industry-specific—to the opinion leaders.

Many senior executives become opinion leaders themselves. Their opinions are published and their names become well-known as representing their business, their industry and its needs.

## **Influential Constituents**

The media-savvy Influential and active leader knows and turns to the opinion leaders on their issues of interest. Whether the issue is business, politics or personal, these influential constituents are tuned into the debate and acting on what the opinion leaders say.

Influential constituents take up the concerns that impact local businesses and communities. Their goal is for these issues to be taken by opinion leaders onto the national and global stage.

The most influential and active citizens become opinion leaders themselves, as they become more plugged-in, more vocal and more engaged in the issues, as others tune to them for their point of view.

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# Influencing Study and Debate

New research and emerging ideas add fuel to the exchange of ideas and generate new opinions. Current debates are fueled by new research.

Opinion leaders have come to the pages of The Post to discuss the environment—a complex issue with research and science as essential contributors to the debate. In January 2008, Michael Novacek, paleontologist, author and senior vice president/provost of the American Museum of Natural History, came to The Post to frame the current environmental crisis as the “sixth extinction.” Lisa Margonelli, author and fellow at the New America Foundation, opined about “green energy” in February.

## **Trade Associations and Business Coalitions**

Trade and industry associations represent the needs of industries and professions. They monitor, promote and lobby for issues that benefit their industry. Associations seek to influence key opinion leaders in policy and industry. Association members position themselves as opinion leaders in their specialty. More than 6,600 associations are headquartered in the Washington area, to engage debate at the national level.

## **Think Tanks and Research Institutions**

Think tanks conduct research focused on specific issues and points of view, whether industry-specific or policy-related. Opinion leaders monitor new research, discuss it and promote it. Others turn to the opinion leaders within the think tanks to inform the debate.

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# Spreading Ideas and Expanding the Conversation

Opinion, debate and change play out within the media. Without professional journalists, writers and the blogosphere, the ideas and issues of opinion leaders would not be heard.

David Simon, a media personality who was a Baltimore Sun reporter from 1983–95 and is now executive producer of HBO's "The Wire," commented on the possible decline of news media in a January 2008 opinion piece in The Post.

## **Journalists and Media**

Journalists inform and advance what opinion leaders are saying. Media personalities adopt issues and widen the audience. Opinion leaders rely on journalists and the media to spread opinion and add to the debate.

Many journalists are opinion leaders in their own right, as they develop a following and a recognized expertise on a particular topic. Many Post journalists are sought after for their opinions on government, business, policy and culture. Post journalists are often seen in media beyond our own pages, invited to represent their valued opinions.

## **Independent Writers and Bloggers**

The Internet has spawned an (arguably) more literate society of idea exchange. The ideas of opinion leaders bounce around the Internet and are discussed by many.

Individuals independent of any business or organization can rise to be a well-respected and well-read opinion leader in a particular field. Some of these may be former business or government leaders, now publishing books, blogging or otherwise influencing opinion independent of big institutions.

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# Influencing and Setting Policy

The most significant impact an opinion leader can make is to have their opinions inform policy. Opinion leaders influence the actions of legislators, get laws passed or change the rules for government agencies.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger launched a campaign targeting the practices of the federal Environmental Protection Agency with an Opinion piece on the Post.

## **Lobbyists and Interest Groups**

Special interests influence government policy through lobbyists. Lobbyists interact directly with government leaders to communicate the issue they represent and influence the result of policy debate.

There are as many as 34,750 registered lobbyists in the DC area alone, influencing the debate on local and national issues from outside the Beltway to influence inside the Beltway.

## **Government Leaders**

Debate and opinion may ultimately lead to change in the arena of public policy, requiring action by Congress, by the executive branch or by state and local government. Government leaders tune into the debate, and follow what opinion leaders are saying. Many government leaders are opinion leaders on issues important to them.

Congress turns to [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) more than any other Web site for news in general and for policy information.\* Government leaders at the federal, state and local level turn to us as the unmatched source of policy news and information.

\*QSA Leadership Study 2007

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