WONDRIUM

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Skills

Propaganda and Persuasion

Guidebook

Dannagal G. Young

WONDRIUM

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HOW PROPAGANDA AND PERSUASION DIFFER

You are inundated with efforts of persuasion everywhere, all the time. How do you know if they are ethical or if they constitute manipulation, coercion, or even propaganda? This lecture outlines the criteria for persuasion, distinguishes between common types of messaging, and examines the complexity of ethical persuasion.

ELEMENTS OF PERSUASION

For something to be considered persuasion, several criteria must be met. First, it requires some form of communication. This might seem obvious, but it matters. Second, there must be an intent to persuade. If someone changes their opinion of something in response to something you said, but you had no intention of getting them to change their mind, that is not persuasion.

> Successful persuasion gets us to persuade ourselves. It feels less like someone is changing our minds and more like we are changing our own minds.

If you're a parent of young children, you probably spend a lot of time trying to persuade them to do things like eat vegetables, share toys, or go to sleep. You might withhold dessert from them as punishment for not eating their broccoli, or you might reward them with ice cream if they do. The latter approach might be considered bribery.

These methods are complicated, because often there are different goals for your persuasion. You need to ask yourself whether the goal is to get the child to perform the desired behavior right now or if it's to persuade them to want to engage in that behavior regularly—on their own. If you're aiming for a long-term behavior change that the child self-regulates, you'll probably need to do better than punishment and bribery. And this is directly related to the definition of—and criteria for—persuasion.

Persuasion is only successful if the person being persuaded, the "persuadee," demonstrates a change in their attitude or beliefs. The attitude or belief doesn't have to become the opposite of what it was before, but there must be a

Criteria for Persuasion

It requires some form of communication.

It is an intentional act.

The persuadee must demonstrate a change in their attitude or beliefs.

The persuadee must perceive that they have free will.

change in how the persuadee evaluates the attitude object. Attitude objects are anything that we have an overall evaluation of, positive or negative. They can be people, places, things, concepts, and even behaviors. So, in the parenting example, for you to witness persuasion, you need to see that the child's actual evaluation of eating broccoli—the attitude object—has changed.

Persuasion also requires that the person being persuaded have free will. Importantly, this criterion is not determined by some objective measure of whether the person has free will or not in the philosophical or legal sense; rather, it is wholly determined by the individual's perception of their free will. If the persuadee feels that their free will is being compromised, or they feel like they will suffer some negative consequence of not complying, this violates that key criterion for persuasion. It also changes persuasion to coercion.
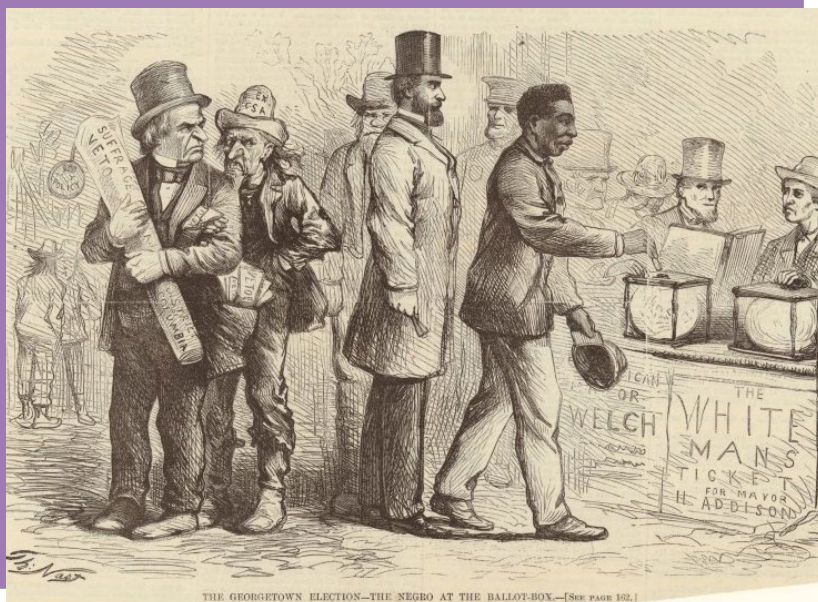
COERCION

Coercion occurs when someone tries to get someone else to engage in a particular behavior but infringes on that person's perception of their own free will in doing so. When a bank robber aims a gun at the teller and demands money, the robber is not persuading the teller to give up the money. It is coercion because the threat on the bank teller's life robbed them of their free will.

> The defining characteristic of coercion is that it is up to the person who is being influenced to decide if they perceive they have free will in the situation or not.

Coercion can happen not only by threatening negative consequences but also by implying negative consequences, or merely by being in a position of power that carries the potential threat of negative consequences for the individual.

Two key elements of persuasion—the need for there to be an authentic change in the attitude or belief of the persuadee, and the need for them to make that change of their own volition and free will—help explain the unique role persuasion plays in democratic societies. When citizens are free to vote for the people and policies they want, their free will is largely intact, and efforts by candidates to change voters' minds

THE GEORGETOWN ELECTION—THE NEGRO AT THE BALLOT-BOX.—[See page 162.]

constitute persuasion. But in a military dictatorship that lacks free and fair elections, the hard work of persuasion becomes unnecessary, and coercion through threat of force is a far easier substitute.

MANIPULATION

Imagine your friend invites you to go with them to a dinner party. You don't want to go, but your friend expresses concern that you've been isolated and says the party would be good for you. Encouraged by your caring friend, you decide to go. At the party, you realize that your friend wasn't concerned about your well-being at all. The person she's had a crush on is there, and she simply didn't want to go alone.

> Manipulation is persuasion that occurs when the true intent of the persuader is concealed from the person being persuaded.

Did your friend persuade you to attend the party? You had the freedom to say no. You changed your mind and decided to go. But it was under false pretenses. According to persuasion theory, in this example, yes, you were persuaded, but it happened through manipulation.

The temptation to conceal one's true intention when persuading a person or audience makes sense. People often don't want to do the thing we want them to do. That is why manipulation is so common. It's also why conversations about ethics must be front and center when we think about processes of persuasion.

ETHICS OF PERSUASION

We can think about persuasion ethics in terms of the end goal of the persuasive efforts and the tactics and practices being used. While philosophers and persuasion scholars have competing views of what kinds of persuasive efforts are ethical, Sherry Baker and David Martinson's TARES Test is a useful framework. They suggest that ethical persuasion must meet five criteria:

Truthfulness: The message itself must be truthful to the best of the persuader's knowledge.

Authenticity: The persuader must act with integrity, be sincere in their persuasive efforts, and act independently—not as an agent of some entity or company.

Respect: The persuader must have respect for the persuadee and treat people with dignity rather than as a means to some larger end (like power or profit for the persuader).

Equity: The tactics used must be fair. This relates to the status differential between the persuader and persuadee—where audiences that are especially vulnerable are off-limits. Manipulative or deceptive tactics would also violate equity rules.

Social Responsibility: This principle captures whether the persuasive communication is serving the common good rather than merely the self-interest or power or profit motives of the persuader.

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**TARES Test for
Ethical Persuasion**

> **T**ruthfulness
>
> **A**uthenticity
>
> **R**espect
>
> **E**quity
>
> **S**ocial Responsibility

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Each of these criteria operates on a spectrum, where some efforts are more ethical than others—and some efforts are more manipulative or coercive than others.

Disinformation—deliberate lies designed to influence people—is unethical, violating the criteria of truthfulness, authenticity, respect, and equity. Do deliberate lies also compromise our free will such that these efforts stop being persuasion and instead constitute coercion?

Persuasion scholars hold different views on this topic. Rhetorician Jen Mercieca suggests that even though deliberate falsehoods might get us to change our minds, they don't constitute true persuasion. Because we're denied the ability to thoroughly engage with the arguments, the change occurs without our full consent. But, while deliberate lies might compromise our ability to engage fully and honestly with a topic, might we still ultimately have the agency to believe what we want? If so, then our free will is not compromised by lies.

Persuasion scholar Richard Perloff suggests these questions might be better treated as questions of persuasion ethics rather than as questions of whether something counts as persuasion, coercion, manipulation, or even propaganda.

PROPAGANDA

This ominous term captures a form of strategic communication designed to serve the goals of the persuader—and which may use unethical tactics, including manipulation and deception. So, is propaganda just a form—albeit a likely unethical form—of persuasion?

Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell define *propaganda* as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist." Most definitions incorporate a sense of its scale: Propaganda is

generally distributed to large numbers of people through media technologies such as flyers, posters, newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and social media. We wouldn't refer to persuasion between individuals as propaganda.

Propaganda also involves some kind of control of the message sender over the flow of information. In authoritarian regimes, for example, the government typically controls the media system, and so the regime can serve as a gatekeeper, controlling the kinds of one-sided messages that reach the public. But in the United States, media outlets and technology platforms are mostly owned by private corporations. And while private corporations are free from government interference, some of them are massive and have a great deal of gatekeeping power of their own.

Consider social media platforms like Facebook that track your activity and allow advertisers to make use of user data to identify small, persuadable target audiences. Imagine an anti-vaccination organization that wants to identify people who are interested in natural, homeopathic remedies so that it can send them an ad that questions the safety of lifesaving, FDA-approved vaccines. Is this best described as propaganda? Does it fall under Jowett and O'Donnell's definition? Some would say it does. Conceptualizations like this raise interesting questions about how we categorize advertising and marketing, especially so-called integrated marketing approaches.

INTEGRATED MARKETING

Integrated marketing refers to advertising campaigns that extend across different channels and take different forms. A company might have traditional paid advertising on television or online but might also pay search engines to promote their brand, so when users enter certain search terms, a link to their company shows up at the top of the page. The company might even pay news organizations for so-called native advertising, which is designed to look like news articles and stories but is actually sponsored by a company.

How do these efforts reflect the TARES criteria for ethical persuasion? The Federal Trade Commission was concerned enough about the ethics of native advertising that they clarified their rules around the practice in 2015, with an emphasis on the need to include "clear and prominent disclosures" indicating to the reader or viewer that the content was paid for by a company

for purposes of advertising and does not constitute editorial content from the news organization. The FTC was trying to keep such ads in the realm of ethical persuasion, highlighting the A, R, and E portions of the TARES criteria by requiring prominent disclosures to be certain the ads were authentic, respectful, and equitable between the persuader and the persuadee.

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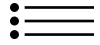
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EARLY FEARS OF MASS PERSUASION

The study of propaganda and persuasion dates back centuries. But it was during the 20th century that advances in media technologies ignited interest in these topics among social scientists. As a new mass audience emerged, so did the debate among scholars and leaders about how mass media would affect public opinion.

ADVANCES IN MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

At the turn of the 20th century, the Industrial Revolution had already brought with it changes in where people lived, what they did for work, and the role of family and friends in everyday life. Advances in industry through the 1800s, along with increased literacy rates, fueled the mass production of newspapers and magazines. And urbanization meant they could be distributed fast and efficiently through populous city centers.

Plus, by 1934, more than half of US households had a radio delivering news, public affairs, and entertainment content. These two trends—exploding newspaper circulation and the birth of broadcast technologies—transformed how public opinion formed and changed. And sociologists and psychologists quickly became fascinated by these changing dynamics, eager to understand how they might benefit—or harm—democratic society.

SOCIOLOGY OF GROUPS

Interest in persuasion and propaganda in the 20th century had its roots in the work of French sociologists who, since the late 1800s, had been focused on the development and spread of group attitudes and behaviors. Concepts like Gustave Le Bon's "group mind" dominated at the time, when sociologists were particularly concerned about the unruly and volatile crowd.

Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde had watched people move in huge numbers from the countryside to the cities and had witnessed political revolutions that brought massive crowds into the streets—often resulting in property damage or physical violence. Their concern was the transformation in the psychology of individuals once they became part of a large group. Le Bon wrote about a process of "contagion," whereby individuals "catch" the emotional energy of the crowd and quickly become irrational and impulsive.

But the growth of newspapers, coupled with the invention of broadcast radio, led sociologists to conceptualize a new kind of group. This group could be massive in size, but unlike a crowd, its members were geographically separated from one another. American sociologist Herbert Blumer referred to this group as a mass. Its members were disconnected and anonymous to one another. They had no ability to communicate or engage in organized collective action. The only thing they had in common was that they were all sharing in a common experience—perhaps reading or listening to the same media content.

> The shift toward mass communication technologies meant a shift in the very nature of the human experience.

Sociologists like Gabriel Tarde saw the shift away from crowd behavior as a good thing. He imagined a group called a public, comprised of individuals who engaged thoughtfully with newspaper content and discussed it with others to come to rational, considered opinions.

Herbert Blumer, however, saw members of the mass society as isolated individuals, selecting and consuming media content that would distract and disconnect them from their local communities and from their authentic interpersonal and cultural experiences.

THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Somewhere in between Tarde and Blumer were those thinkers who were cautiously optimistic. Political and military elites, progressive reformers, and advertisers saw mass media as an efficient tool that could help shape and guide human behavior in peaceful, functional, and especially profitable ways.

One such voice was an American progressive reformer and thought leader, Walter Lippmann. He served as an adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, and, during the First World War, was tapped to work for the Committee on Public Information. The CPI was charged with reminding Americans about their national values and encouraging the public to support the US entering the war on the side of the Allied forces.

Lippmann saw his role with the CPI as using media to spread factual information and debunk rumors and falsehoods. But his optimism soon waned. By the time Lippmann penned his influential book *Public Opinion* in 1922, he questioned the role of media in positively guiding human behavior and had come to see the masses as largely incapable of understanding the complexities of the world.

WALTER LIPPMANN

Lippmann wrote with contempt about the modern public relations industry—what he dubbed the "publicity man"—writing, "The picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. … He is censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers." Lippmann proposed that society needed an independent body of experts—social and political scientists, perhaps—to study events and facts and relay to the public how they ought to think, feel, and act about them.

Another member of the Committee on Public Information, Edward Bernays, also did not trust the whims and urges of the masses. But where Lippmann was critical of self-interested publicity men, Bernays was the publicity man. He saw

propaganda as a positive force and helped to create the field of public relations, working with government and industry to improve their reputations among the public and to shape public opinion in ways that served those entities.

EARLY STUDIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS

Some sociologists and early media theorists were concerned about the potential for media to exploit, manipulate, or brainwash individuals and society. They wrote about the concept of the mass as a disempowered and disconnected collective—unable to communicate with each other or act together. Furthermore, there was the absence of a feedback loop from the audience back to the message sender. The masses were merely recipients of media messaging, unable to talk back to the powerful entities sending out the messages.

But early empirical studies of media impact from the 1920s and '30s weren't finding evidence of strong, direct media effects. Far more common were reinforcement effects—that is, people had their preexisting beliefs reinforced through media exposure, not dramatically altered by it. Studies also showed that people were selective in their media use.

The People's Choice study carried out in the 1940 and 1944 US presidential elections sought to understand how media election coverage and campaign materials would affect public opinion and voter choice. Researchers found that most people weren't directly affected by media content at all; selective exposure, perception, and retention were the norm; and interpersonal communication mattered more than media.

In 1948, the lead researcher on that study, Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, and sociologist Robert Merton wrote a canonical essay about the impact of media on individuals and society called "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action."

Sociologists Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that, because of its nature, American mass media was more likely to reinforce mainstream beliefs than to be a successful propaganda machine.

According to them, the ownership structure and the nature of mass media systems in the US, combined with the disconnected experiences of the masses, made it very unlikely that media would serve as successful conduits for mass propaganda. If anything, media content would reinforce the existing social, political, and economic order.

They explained how, for propaganda with broad social or political objectives to be successful through mass media, three criteria would have to be met: monopolization, canalization, and supplementation. But because of the commercial nature of American mass media supported by advertising, and because of the nature of broadcast media in the US, these criteria were very unlikely to be met.

MONOPOLIZATION, CANALIZATION, AND SUPPLEMENTATION

Monopolization is the idea that mediated propaganda campaigns can't succeed when they operate in the presence of counterpropaganda. To win the propaganda war, your message must monopolize the information space. And without centralized control of the American media system—like by the government, for example—Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that the media could not be used toward some centralized social or cultural objective. The system's private ownership meant that no one single entity could or would have total control of message environment, so monopolization by propaganda was very unlikely.

Canalization refers to channeling messages through a preexisting belief system. Successful propaganda has to capitalize on existing goals, desires, or beliefs to foster persuasion. The researchers argued that because commercial media were supported by advertising dollars based on mainstream viewership, the content was far more likely to give their mass audiences what they already wanted, reinforcing the status quo, than it was to change their beliefs in some fundamental way.

When politicians tap into the notion of the American dream or the fear of minority groups, they are capitalizing on a preexisting canal.

Edward Bernays wrote in 1928 about the need for propaganda to create the foundation for later strategic communication. He said that "the modern propagandist therefore sets to work to create the circumstances which will modify a custom," meaning a practice or behavior.

But digging canals takes a lot of time, money, and know-how. The point that Lazarsfeld and Merton were making was that to be successful, large-scale mass-mediated propaganda would have to tap into something that already existed on the part of the audience.

Supplementation highlights how unlikely it is for mediated propaganda alone to fuel large-scale change in public attitudes or behaviors. Without buy-in from regular people who reinforce propaganda through interpersonal channels, there was little chance of a media campaign fundamentally changing social, cultural, or political beliefs.

This last criterion explains why authoritarian governments often police public speech. They typically incentivize members of the public to monitor the statements of friends, family, and neighbors to minimize the likelihood that interpersonal conversation will run counter to the dominant message being broadcast through state-controlled media. But in the US, where freedom of the press and freedom of expression are guaranteed by the Constitution, there is little means to mandate—or incentivize—regular people to echo the elite perspectives that come through media. The primary way interpersonal conversations would organically support the content of media messaging is if individuals actually felt sympathetic to those messages—again highlighting the agency of regular people, and the limits of the power of media.

Lazarsfeld and Merton were writing about analog media technologies: newspapers, radio, and the very early days of television. Digital technologies and social media fundamentally changed not only the economics of media industries but also the structure and logics of how media messages are shared, received, and disseminated. So, is it still true that that we are unlikely to see successful large-scale attitude change brought about by social, cultural, or political propaganda through media? These are some of the questions covered later in the course.

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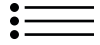
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PROPAGANDA OF THE THIRD REICH

The successful use of propaganda by the Nazi Party in the 1930s illustrates numerous concepts related to the psychology and communication of propaganda, particularly how it interacts with cultural and historical context to shape public opinion and human behavior. This lecture explores specific categories of propaganda as well as tactics used by the Nazis to accomplish their goals.

PROPAGANDA IN WORLD WAR I

Germany had been economically and structurally devastated by World War I. Morale was painfully low, and people were increasingly desperate for economic security, stability, order, and hope. All these factors increased the German people's willingness to embrace a leader like Hitler, who offered the promise of recovery and rebirth.

Recall that during World War I, the Committee on Public Information had recruited social psychologists to help convince the American public to enter the war on the side of the Allied forces. Much of this was done by vilifying the German military and people in the process. Caricatures of German soldiers as barbaric "Huns" dominated Allied propaganda during that time.

These techniques were so successful at influencing American and British public opinion that after the Allied victory, politically ambitious people around the world studied these tactics to learn the tools of the propaganda trade. Chief among those people were Adolf Hitler and his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels.

In his manifesto, *Mein Kampf,* Hitler wrote with great reverence about the propaganda work of the Allies during the First World War and how he had "learned enormously" from it. It was successful, he said, because it was designed not for the intelligentsia but for the uneducated masses and relied on repetition, simplicity, and clarity, all in service of one unified cause.

NAZI TACTICS AND MESSAGING

Recall the three criteria for successful propaganda outlined by social psychologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1948: monopolization, canalization, and supplementation. All of these are illustrated through Nazi propaganda.

Monopolization stipulates that for a persuasion campaign to be successful, the message must be made in the absence of counterpropaganda. Under Hitler's authority, the media apparatus in Germany was controlled by the Nazi government. There was no other side to the "final solution." Even school textbooks were changed to reflect Nazi ideology and teachings.

Canalization suggests that persuasion must build upon preexisting beliefs and values of the audience if it is going to be successful. Here is where persuasive propaganda directly interacts with culture and economics. Hitler capitalized on centuries-old anti-Semitism to ignite German hatred. Jewish citizens had been the target of derision and attacks—even during the First World War. By tapping into and exploiting an already existing out-group, the Nazi Party swam with the current of public opinion rather than working against it.

Supplementation is the notion that for mediated propaganda to be successful, it must be supplemented by regular people through interpersonal communication. In authoritarian regimes, citizens are stripped of personal freedoms, so shaping interpersonal communication is as simple as criminalizing certain kinds of speech and activities. The Nazis also

LEUR PATRIE.

used a secret police force, the Gestapo, that encouraged Germans to serve as informants. Neighbors and family members turned each other in for speaking critically of the Nazi Party, engaging in communist activities, or being a Jewish sympathizer. With threats of jail time or even death, the Nazis incentivized citizens to engage in interpersonal communication that supplemented—rather than challenged—the goals of the regime.

ELLUL'S CATEGORIES OF PROPAGANDA

Two decades after Lazarsfeld and Merton, French sociologist Jacques Ellul also wrote about various characteristics of Nazi propaganda. As an influential member of the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France, Ellul's observations about the power of propaganda were very much informed by his lived experiences. In his 1962 book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Ellul introduced a series of categories for conceptualizing propaganda's different forms and functions. Although his writing is ethnocentric and some of his propositions are fundamentally problematic, his delineation of propaganda categories is still useful.

POLITICAL VERSUS SOCIOLOGICAL

Political propaganda is used by powerful entities to influence a specific behavior on the part of the public. Explicit and overt, it covers most of the examples we would come up with when we think about what propaganda typically looks like.

Sociological propaganda is more ambiguous. This is content that creates ideological conformity across a society, perhaps through popular culture, music, and film, or subtle themes in advertising. Crucially, Ellul argues that this kind of messaging is not deliberately created by powerful leaders. It occurs spontaneously through the economic and political system that naturally gave rise to it. The key, though, is that while not deliberate or strategic, sociological propaganda does create the conditions that allow for strategic political propaganda to be successful later. If you think back to

the concept of canalization, sociological propaganda is akin to digging the canal that later political propaganda campaigns use to channel opinions in a particular direction.

One could argue that popular anti-Semitic caricatures and cartoons from the 1890s and early 1900s constitute a form of sociological propaganda. These spontaneous creations were the outcome of a society that accepted anti-Semitism as part of everyday life. Cultural products such as these then created the conditions that allowed Nazi strategic political propaganda to make specific appeals to punish and even eradicate Jews from German society.

AGITATION VERSUS INTEGRATION

Agitation propaganda, also known as agitprop, is primarily designed to fuel big change, like revolution or war. It relies on intense emotional appeals and calls for huge sacrifices on the part of the public. It often shifts its focus from one injustice to another, blaming all of them on the same "enemy."

By highlighting some out-group, like Jews in Nazi Germany, agitation propaganda blames all of society's ills on one group of people, and in so doing creates a simple solution: Eliminate that category of people, and society's problems are solved.

Agitation propaganda is thought to be especially influential among the less educated and the lower socioeconomic classes, possibly because people in those groups might be less likely to critically evaluate content and more eager to change their lot in life.

Integration propaganda is a long-term, subtle effort to remind people to think of themselves as part of a group. It is used to maintain stability, consistency, and conformity in more developed, wealthy, peaceful societies, where people might be more inclined to protect the status quo.

VERTICAL VERSUS HORIZONTAL

Vertical propaganda is top-down, coming from leaders to the public, while horizontal propaganda originates with regular people, spreading through social networks. Vertical propaganda requires the machinery of mass media

to operate successfully. But horizontal propaganda needs people talking to one another. It works swiftly in small groups. The Nazi regime's control of the media allowed for the efficient use of vertical propaganda. And because the regime exploited Germans' uncertainty, fears, and anti-Semitism, much of the conversation between regular people echoed the messages of the regime (supplementation). Both vertical and horizontal propaganda were in play.

Today's digital and social media networks are efficient machinery for the spread of horizontal propaganda. Sometimes misinformation online can be traced back to powerful people and organizations (making it best described as vertical propaganda), but other times it's just something that develops organically within small groups: horizontal propaganda.

IRRATIONAL VERSUS RATIONAL

Irrational propaganda overtly appeals to emotions and passions—hope, pride, fear, or hate. When Nazi posters showed scary caricatures of ominous Jewish faces peering from behind a curtain, these were irrational propaganda.

As for rational propaganda, Ellul makes a distinction between the properties of the propaganda itself and the way that the audience might engage with it. A message may seem rational—meaning it includes facts, figures, and statistics—but that does not mean the audience will process the details rationally. An example would be a Nazi Party campaign poster loaded with data about increases in German production and employment under Hitler's leadership. According to Ellul, readers cannot process excessive data and will instead draw a general picture. And the general picture painted by such a poster was that Hitler had improved the quality of life of the German people.

SEVEN PROPAGANDA DEVICES

Another framework often used to deconstruct Nazi propaganda techniques comes from the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, or the IPA. This American organization was created in 1937 to empower regular people to recognize and understand the tactics that were being used to exploit them. They identified the following seven propaganda devices:

Name-calling: Labels are used to create hate or fear in response to certain kinds of people.

Testimonials: Well-known people, like celebrities, endorse an ideology or product, making it seem like it's good simply because they endorse it.

Transfer: The propagandist tries to transfer the meaning and feelings associated with one thing onto something else. The Nazis did this by associating Hitler with Germanic tradition, the countryside, youth, and mothers. It was also done negatively with the juxtaposition of rats or vermin with Jewish people.

Reichssporttag des B·D·M·
23·September·1934
Memm.

Card-stacking (or stacking the deck): The propagandist selects only those facts or details that serve their case and excludes inconvenient details. The Nazis' selective use and application of "science" included the strategic use of eugenics principles to justify policies like the extermination of Jews and the forced sterilization of people with disabilities.

Glittering generalities: This refers to language that signals virtues and values promised by the organization seeking power. Think of popular slogans or concepts like truth, freedom, honor, country. When Nazis deported and murdered Jews and Polish citizens to acquire land for the German people, the mission was described as "strengthening of the German nationality."

Bandwagon (or social consensus): This tactic signals that being a part of the movement is a social norm—that good, regular people are fighting for this cause. It suggests that the movement is huge in size and growing, and that the people in it are passionate.

In Leni Riefenstahl's iconic Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, the first 10 minutes show eager Germans lining the streets to see Hitler and his motorcade. People are clapping, smiling, and saluting as he passes by. This footage offers "proof" that being a part of the Nazi movement was what everyone was doing.

Plain folks: The propagandist claims to be one of the people, someone just like you, who shares your values, works hard, and resents elites and institutions trying to make life harder than it has to be. Although Hitler commanded authority and captivated crowds, he did not come off as pretentious or wealthy. His speeches typically sought to connect him to working-class people.

PROPAGANDA AND PRESENT-DAY POPULISM

We can connect these concepts to the present-day rise of populist authoritarian movements around the globe. Populist leaders today continue to capitalize on the very devices the Institute for Propaganda Analysis outlined almost a century ago. Populism expert Cas Mudde describes populism as a thin ideology that separates common or "pure" people from the "corrupt elites." As populist leaders criticize the establishment, they ingratiate themselves to the plain folks—the working-class, less educated, racially homogenous folks.

So, populism combines a distrust of elites with a rejection of outsiders, commonly rejecting and demonizing immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. Through card-stacking, transfer, and name-calling, populist leaders frame so-called outsiders as the cause of society's ills—responsible for everything from unemployment to crime and even disease.

And while we cannot undo the harm that was done in 1930s Germany, we can take steps to protect our ourselves and our communities from future destructive outcomes. We can start with the simple identification of propaganda tactics in the moment. When we feel emotionally moved—especially through anger, fear, or flattery—we can stop to ask ourselves: Who is benefiting from my emotional response? And if they are trying to persuade

me through symbols, emotions, and propaganda devices, what does that say about their cause and how logical, virtuous, or ethical it is? From there, we might disrupt these influences just enough to avoid future harm.

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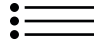
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PERSUASION OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER

A big shift in American advertising occurred after World War II. Expansions in industry and infrastructure during the war transformed the US economy, and these transformations changed the kinds of persuasive appeals that marketers and advertisers still use today. This lecture looks at the role of persuasion and propaganda in the United States as a means of fueling the postwar economy by creating mass desire for new goods and services.

Delicious Peas—
sweetened by the sun!

Have you ever tasted pea soup made by the most famous soup chefs in the world?

Have you ever tasted soup made of peas so carefully selected and so skillfully prepared?

Have you ever tasted pea soup blended with fresh country butter and seasoned with the delicate touch that only French chefs can give?

Taste Campbell's and know how good pea soup can be!

The best Cream of Pea!

Heat contents of can in a saucepan and stir until smooth. Heat an equal quantity of milk or cream to the boiling point separately, and add to the soup *a little at a time, stirring constantly* (using a spoon or Dover egg beater) to keep soup smooth. Serve immediately.

21 kinds

12 cents a can

I'm as light as any feather
Floating in this sunny weather.
Campbell's give such life and laughter
I can dance the whole day after!

Campbell's Soups

LUNCHEON   DINNER   SUPPER

EARLY 20TH-CENTURY ADVERTISING

One ubiquitous form of persuasion, advertisements, has long used emotional appeals to convince people to buy things that they may or may not need. Ads in the early 20th century for products like Listerine, Campbell's soup, and Palmolive were designed to induce emotional responses in the audience, but they were centered on arguments, explaining how these products or brands would benefit your life, most often by suggesting that they would help maintain domestic tranquility. Through the Second World War, this was the norm for American advertising. After the war, we began to see a major transformation in branding and marketing in the direction of "meaning-making" and the cultivation of desire.

Advertisements from the last several decades simply try to associate their product or brand with some kind of meaning. For example, the 1970s ad that says "I'd like to buy the world a Coke" had nothing to do with the affordability, quality, or benefits of Coke. This was a symbolic ad that juxtaposed Coca-Cola with notions of world peace, camaraderie, and love.

To understand how and why marketing underwent this shift, we must go back to changes in US industry that occurred during World War II. Although these changes were designed to help the war effort, they ended up necessitating a fundamental transition in the United States' economic engine and in the marketing of American products.

US ECONOMY DURING WORLD WAR II

The Second World War came just on the heels of the Great Depression, and during the war, Americans were called upon to make great sacrifices. They were asked to grow victory gardens, to buy war bonds, to conduct scrap drives, and to ration everything from food to raw materials—all to help the production effort for the war. However, it would be wrong to assume that these sacrifices meant that most Americans did not have money during the war.

WAR GARDENS FOR VICTORY

GROW VITAMINS AT YOUR KITCHEN DOOR

The infrastructure of American industry was growing exponentially to keep up with the demands of war. Expansions in factories and advances in mass production increased employment opportunities for Americans. Meanwhile, with tens of thousands of men serving overseas, women were recruited to work on the assembly lines, which meant earning paychecks that had once been reserved for men. For many Americans, these opportunities brought more income than they had seen since the early 1920s—or ever. This was the incongruity of the war era: people with money in their pockets but very few items they could spend it on.

The advertising industry responded by reconceptualizing the story that they were telling about American goods and services. Rather than trying to get people to buy things in the present—which Americans couldn't do because of scarcity— marketers asked them to imagine

Postwar ads highlighted innovative luxuries that would fill the homes of newly returning soldiers. Marketers presented a future defined by modern conveniences and domestic suburban bliss.

products of the future. Then they tied those products and other innovations to the American way of life and the freedom that American soldiers were fighting for overseas.

CULTIVATING DESIRE

As the war came to an end and soldiers came home, the US economy experienced another huge transition. Industry leaders recognized that to maintain full employment, they needed to maintain full production lines, and those production lines would be in their newly expanded manufacturing infrastructure. The products that had filled up these lines were war products that were demanded by the wartime economy. But in peacetime, something else would need to be produced, which meant that something would need to be in demand.

Without an expanded market of goods, the country would be in an economic crisis. Consumer demand would become the linchpin that would fuel economic growth in the aftermath of war. And for Americans to buy enough products to keep things operating at full capacity, they would have to perceive a need—a desire—for goods and services that they might have never needed or desired before. And this was the role of the postwar advertising industry: to cultivate desire.

> The postwar years became the era of the "mad man," the Madison Avenue executives charged with cultivating mass desires for products and services beyond the basic necessities.

This was the shift that catapulted marketing away from arguments about the qualities and characteristics of the products themselves and toward meaning-making: associating brands with social, emotional, even existential meaning. This was the moment when marketing through association became the norm.

One of the guiding voices spearheading this shift to emotional and psychological marketing was Edward Bernays, the father of modern public relations. In a 1947 essay, he explained how it was the job of men in positions of power to reach important social objectives by molding the attitudes and beliefs of the masses, and to do this required careful study of the "public mind." In the advertising world, this research became known as motivational research, and it centered on the study of consumer behavior, needs, and desires.

Through the 1950s, as emotional appeals to subconscious motivations in public thought became more common in advertising, critics began to take note. In 1957, social commentator and journalist Vance Packard wrote a short but scathing critique of advertising's extensive use of social psychology. He described what he referred to as depth merchandising, through which marketers appealed to our deep subconscious needs.

> Critic Vance Packard outlined eight needs that advertisers created and reinforced to sell products: emotional security, reassurance of worth, ego gratification, creative outlets, love objects, a sense of power, a sense of roots, and immortality.

As the public became increasingly aware of advertising's techniques, the industry pushed back. In 1958, prominent American Marketing Association professor Edmund McGarry published a defense of advertising in which he acknowledged that postwar advertising was no longer operating in the realm of mere information and education about products. Instead, he wrote, "advertising as used today is primarily a type of propaganda." But, he argued, this was necessary to maintain the economic engine.

Industry leaders pushed back in other ways, even arguing that if people previously had not experienced a desire for conveniences or luxuries, that was attributable to a failure of imagination on the part of the masses. Importantly, these leaders also suggested that the consumer held some of the cards in this relationship, too. It was the consumer whose needs and desires were anticipated by industry and marketers, so it was the consumer who determined what products would be developed and what needs those products would come to satisfy.

MEANING-MAKING THROUGH ASSOCIATION

So, how would advertisers and marketers tap into people's hidden needs—especially with products that may or may not serve those needs at all? The answer is through association. By merely associating products and brands

with meaning, the products become symbols of that meaning. Marketers repeatedly pair their stimulus (the brand) with a response (an emotion or meaning). Eventually, after having been paired frequently enough, the public comes to perceive the meaning in the product, even if the product doesn't serve that need at all.

If this sounds familiar, it should. This is consistent with the psychological process of classical conditioning that Ivan Pavlov discovered in the 1890s. While studying digestion and salivation in his dogs, he realized that the dogs would start salivating not just in response to the presence or smell of food but in response to other stimuli, including a metronome, that had been paired with the food. Over time, even in the absence of food, the mere presence of these stimuli caused the dogs to drool.

The food is an unconditioned stimulus, which evokes a natural unconditioned response from the dogs: drooling. After repeatedly pairing the unconditioned stimulus with a neutral stimulus like the metronome, the dogs would salivate from the metronome alone—transforming the metronome into a conditioned stimulus.

In marketing, the process is the same, but marketers work in reverse. First, they identify the emotion or big meaning they would like to infuse into a product or brand—perhaps feelings of love, family closeness, or even sexual arousal. Then they identify an unconditioned stimulus that naturally triggers that response. Love might be triggered by romantic images of a couple. Feelings of family closeness might arise from a father and daughter sharing an emotionally close moment. As for inducing sexual arousal, an appropriate stimulus might be an attractive model.

Then comes the pairing of the food and the metronome, or the romantic couple in love and the perfume, or the father and daughter sharing an emotionally close moment over a cup of coffee, or a scantily clad model and beer. Over time, the product itself elicits that feeling and the classical conditioning is complete, even if the product could never deliver the feeling or meaning on its own.

How does this work? When we activate more than one idea in the mind simultaneously, it strengthens the relationship between the two ideas. So, in the future, when we are called upon to think of one of those ideas, we'll be more likely to also think of the other one.

This illustrates the operation of heuristics in our minds—cognitive shortcuts in the brain that operate between concepts, emotions, or ideas. Heuristics help explain why, after repeat exposure to these ad campaigns, when we think of a product name, we will also experience the meaning or feeling that marketers have worked to infuse it with. And it all happens without the advertisers ever having to make the case for how or if that association makes any logical sense at all.

Considering the transformation of the American advertising industry in terms of the economic changes during and after World War II helps us understand why ads changed from product-centered and rational to consumer-centered and emotional. If you stop and ask yourself, "How does this purchase deliver on its implicit promise—of love, security, success, or romance?" you may discover that many brands come up short.

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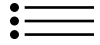
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THE ROLE OF ATTITUDES IN PERSUASION

Our attitudes are influenced by many factors, including our values, genetics, and experiences. Because they shape our perceptions and behaviors, and vice versa, attitudes are of great interest to the study of persuasion. Topics covered in this lecture include how attitudes form, how researchers study them, and how targeted populations can benefit from persuasive campaigns when their attitudes are understood.

HOW ATTITUDES TAKE SHAPE

In 1935, social psychologist Gordon Allport described attitudes as "the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary social psychology." But what are they? We have attitudes toward all kinds of things: people, places, concepts, even behaviors. The target of an attitude is referred to as an attitude object—that is, the thing about which we feel some overall valence, positive or negative. Attitudes are emotional, rooted in feelings, but they're also cognitive, comprised of and informed by beliefs and thoughts.

Persuasion scholar Richard Perloff describes beliefs as "specific and cognitive" perceptions of an attitude object. But we also have attitudes toward more abstract concepts, distant events, and places with which we have little to no firsthand experience. How is that possible?

We have attitudes toward these things because we learn them through direct and indirect experiences, and through the stories we are told and tell ourselves. Attitudes are also informed by our overarching values. Importantly, research from political and social psychology suggests that some of our values and traits have a genetic component. If your parents were inclined toward social and cultural conservatism, for example, you are likely to be as well— not just because your parents socialize you to be conservative but also because your biological makeup and physiological systems may predispose you to feel that same way.

But it is through direct and indirect experiences that our specific attitudes crystallize, which is why social psychologists are careful not to engage in deterministic theorizing. If our views were wholly determined by our biological makeup, human beings would no longer have free will. We'd be no better than robots, preprogrammed to think and feel and act in certain ways. In spite of overarching value systems that contribute to our attitudes, and in spite of our genetic predispositions, how we evaluate specific attitude objects is learned.

This is why attitudes are so crucial in the study of persuasion. If attitudes are learned, and if that learning comes from both direct and indirect experiences, then the information environment matters. The messages we receive about

that attitude object matter because they will inform our attitudes. Persuasion researchers try to understand how and why people's attitudes change in response to certain messages—or not.

But attitudes are not directly observable. There is no spot in the brain where an attitude toward something resides, no way of seeing that attitude or watching it change. But that's not to say that attitudes are fictional. They are real in the sense that they are accompanied by emotions and cognitions that have psychophysiological dimensions to them—our mind and body experience many aspects of our attitudes.

According to cognitive psychology, we all hold cognitive representations of people, places, and things in memory. These mental representations are sometimes referred to as schemas, or mental models. These representations are networks of associated emotional, cognitive, and sense-based constructs. Our mental models link associated concepts together and allow us to use heuristics, or shortcuts, so we can make judgments quickly and efficiently.

So, our knowledge and beliefs about an attitude object inform how we feel about that object. This makes sense. During political campaigns, as we learn that a candidate supports policies that are important to us, we may start to develop a more favorable attitude toward that candidate. Or, as we learn about scandals in their past, we may develop a more negative attitude toward them. But all this works in the other direction as well. Our overall attitude shapes what we know and what we perceive, too.

SOCIAL JUDGMENT THEORY

For almost a century, social psychologists have written about this influence of attitudes on cognitions and perceptions. How we feel about something shapes what we perceive and what we come to know. As Allport wrote in 1935, "attitudes determine for each individual what he will see and hear, what he will think and what he will do."

This may seem highly irrational, but it is often functional, adaptive, and very efficient. Allowing our attitudes to guide our thoughts allows us to make efficient (and ego-protective) guesses about what is true and untrue, based

on how we feel about it. If we feel positively toward a political candidate, we will tend to believe information that's favorable toward them and reject the information that is negative.

According to social judgment theory, the attitudes we hold influence how we process information related to that attitude. We're not objective information processors. Instead, we experience our own attitude as an anchor, or baseline, against which other positions—and beliefs and facts—must be evaluated. We assimilate those beliefs that fall inside our acceptable range of views and reject those beliefs that fall outside of it. We do not perceive issues in a vacuum. Instead, we see them through the prism of our own attitudes—attitudes that we perceive as correct and appropriate.

This influence of your attitude on your perceptions of the acceptability of other positions depends on how strongly you hold the attitude—and how involved your ego is with it. The greater the attachment, the more effort you'll make to find a way to feel better about a counter position.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

According to this theory, we desire cognitive consistency, or a match between what we think, feel, and do. And when there is a mismatch between these things, we will take steps to reconcile it.

We could change our attitude. Or we might reduce the importance of—or seek to justify—the new belief. Or we might try to discredit the new information. These processes pave the way for misinformation. If beliefs about an issue or person are shaped by how we feel about them, we're going to ignore facts that contradict our view and look for information that bolsters it. We'll also be more likely to remember information that is consistent with our attitude. We'll be more likely to think about those things that match our attitude, and conveniently, we'll ignore, forget, and discount those things that contradict our view.

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

Researchers are at a disadvantage because attitudes are not directly observable. So, to study them, they typically observe what people say and do, and from that they try to derive an understanding of how they feel about something. Sometimes this means asking people about their attitude toward an attitude object. And when people respond to these questions—perhaps saying they feel favorable or unfavorable—researchers take a leap of faith and use that as an indicator of their attitude.

Why the leap of faith? Well, because self-reported attitude measurements are not direct measurements of attitude. They are what people say their attitudes are, but are they accurate? On the one hand, people might not be able to say how they really feel about the attitude object. They might not have an attitude at all. Researchers call these nonattitudes, when someone hasn't given much thought to an issue.

People also might not want to say how they really feel toward a particular attitude object. This is what researchers call the social desirability problem in survey research—when participants give the socially desirable response to a question. This is especially problematic when asking people about attitudes that have a strong social normative component—that is, when there is some dominant cultural norm that people feel pressured to match. Depending on the question, people might feel a need to answer more favorably or more negatively than they really feel.

> After the 2016 US presidential election, some analyses of polling showed a social desirability effect, where some voters were less likely to admit supporting Donald Trump. This and other factors may have contributed to the disconnect between the public opinion polls and the outcome of the race.

Fortunately, there are ways of reducing social desirability bias in research. Studies show that when surveys are self-administered, it tends to reduce social desirability pressures compared to surveys that are administered with

a live interviewer. Just the mere presence of another human being asking the question causes us to think more about our self-presentation and increases our social desirability demands.

THE ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR LINK

Another method of understanding attitudes is through measures of behavior. In persuasion research, attitudes are important because they influence behaviors. But while scholars have long assumed a close link between attitudes and behaviors, often the attitude-behavior link is not particularly clear—or strong. In fact, many of us seem to behave in ways that make no sense given our attitudes.

Some might say these inconsistencies make someone a hypocrite, but it turns out most people have loose associations between their attitudes and specific behaviors. While studying this phenomenon in the 1970s, social scientists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen proposed that maybe people aren't hypocrites at all. Maybe the problem is that researchers are asking the wrong attitude questions.

Fishbein and Ajzen introduced a concept called the compatibility principle. They proposed that instead of asking about general attitudes to see how they correlate with specific behaviors, researchers should be asking about specific attitudes toward the behaviors in question. By changing the question, and by anchoring it to a specific time period, researchers find a much stronger correlation between attitudes and behaviors—and suddenly people stop looking like hypocrites.

What's most fascinating about the compatibility principle is that it encourages us to recognize the many different factors that shape our attitudes toward specific behaviors. But why the disconnect between general and specific attitudes?

EXPECTANCY-VALUE MODEL OF ATTITUDES

Here, Fishbein and Ajzen offer an explication of attitudes that elegantly incorporates two key aspects of most social psychological research, the heart and the head: affect (or emotion) and cognition (or thought). They do this through the concept of the expectancy-value model of attitudes. Here, *expectancy* refers to what outcomes people expect from performing a behavior—their beliefs about the behavior—and *value* refers to how people evaluate those outcomes—whether they're good or bad and how good or how bad. Sometimes, this research reveals that the bad outcomes outweigh the good.

The key to Fishbein and Ajzen's contributions is that they propose that only members of the target population can tell you what their behavioral beliefs are and how they evaluate them. Only the people you are studying can tell you what is really driving their attitudes and behavior.

This model of attitudes has been especially useful in the world of campaign development and interventions, particularly in health communication. In public health, researchers use the expectancy-value model to unpack why people hold a negative attitude toward a positive health behavior, like getting a mammogram or a vaccine, or stopping smoking. The study of the precise target population of interest must be at the center of any efforts to persuade that population. Once researchers know the behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations, they can design highly customized campaigns to help change the attitude within that specific population.

> Assuming why people feel or behave the way they do is a recipe for a failed persuasion campaign—or worse, a boomerang effect: accidentally moving the audience in exactly the opposite direction of what you intended, like a boomerang.

The population of interest must be at the heart of persuasion research—not the persuasive text, not persuasive rhetoric, not the platform or medium through which we want to send a persuasive message. It's the people that matter. Only

rigorous, formative research on the population of interest will successfully persuade an audience. And only approaches that respect individual differences, contexts, and values are likely to lead to long-term change.

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6
RATIONAL AND IRRATIONAL PATHS TO PERSUASION

Rhetoricians have long been fascinated by the notion that people are persuaded in very different ways: through emotions and feelings, through argumentation and logic, and sometimes through a combination of these methods. This lecture explains how attitude change happens and looks at conditions that lead people to take one path or another.

PATHOS AND LOGOS

Aristotle defined the concept of pathos as "feelings which influence human judgment or decision-making and which are accompanied by pleasure or pain"—meaning emotions and feelings. He defined logos as "proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself." So, where *pathos* refers to emotional appeals, *logos* refers to appeals through evidence and reason. In oversimplified terms, we can think of these as persuasion aimed at the heart (pathos) or the head (logos).

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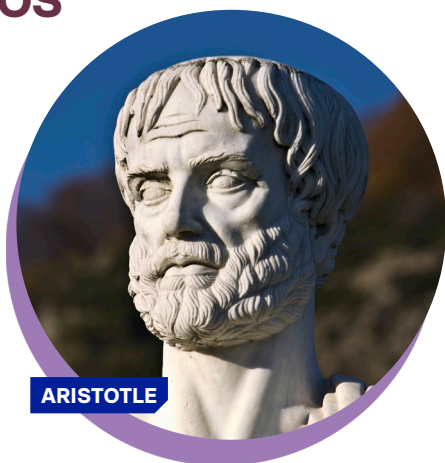
While the distinction between logos and pathos seems clear in the writings of rhetoricians and philosophers, untangling persuasion that occurs through these two processes has proven difficult for social scientists. It's also been challenging to figure out which efforts are most successful.

For scholars, the results have been confounding. Sometimes rational arguments were highly persuasive, and other times they didn't matter much at all. Studies also showed that sometimes emotional appeals moved people, and other times they didn't. And not only did such emotional appeals not always work, sometimes they even caused a boomerang effect—that is, sending the audience's attitude in the opposite direction of what the persuader intended.

> Whether a message is processed emotionally or rationally is likely a function of the characteristics of the audience, not just the characteristics of the persuasive message.

But social psychologists soon landed on the possibility that maybe logos and pathos are not wholly determined by the persuasive appeal itself. Instead, maybe logos and pathos are determined by the person receiving the persuasive appeal.

To better understand when reason persuades and when emotions persuade, we really need to understand more than the persuasive appeal alone. We need to understand why people might process a message through reason or through emotions.

THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, social psychologists John Cacioppo and Richard Petty formulated a model to make sense of what was happening as people encountered persuasive messages. Their model, called the elaboration likelihood model, suggested that people either process messages thoughtfully and rationally or not so thoughtfully and not so rationally. They described these two methods of processing as "processing pathways" or "routes" that people could take as they encounter persuasive messages.

According to Cacioppo and Petty, when we think carefully and thoughtfully, we process "centrally." And when we centrally process information, we integrate existing information from memory, and we apply it to the incoming message. When we do this, we're assessing the strength of the arguments and the evidence in the message. The authors describe this process as "cognitive elaboration"— we elaborate on the incoming message based on other information we have in memory. We engage in a sort of internal debate about the strength of the message arguments: "How well evidenced is the message? How fair is it? Is it consistent with the other things that I know to be true?" Such elaboration might be positive or negative, depending on the strength of the arguments and depending on the information and constructs in our own minds.

When processing centrally and encountering a message found to have strong arguments, cognitive elaboration generally results in the person positively elaborating on the message, generating positive thoughts in response. The result is a higher likelihood of being persuaded by the message.

If the arguments seem especially weak, biased, or unfair, centrally processing will involve negative elaboration on the message. Negative elaboration will result in less persuasion, and might even backfire, leading the person to have even more negative attitudes toward the topic than when they started.

This thoughtful, rational engagement with messages—this central processing, or logos—doesn't happen all the time. It is cognitively taxing to do. It is

> The key element of central processing and message elaboration is called argument scrutiny, which involves evaluating whether the reasons provided really hold up.

tiring. And we are busy people. We are trying to deal with an overwhelming amount of information coming at us all the time. And because of this, we are far more likely to process messages in a shallow way, based on emotions and other kinds of shortcuts. We call these shortcuts heuristic cues, as heuristics or cognitive shortcuts operate officially in memory without engaging in exhaustive searches.

Petty and Cacioppo referred to this very common kind of message processing as peripheral processing. This "peripheral route" to persuasion involves message processing based on these more intuitive, emotional, and efficient judgments related to more surface-level characteristics of a message. What's interesting about the peripheral route is that when people process in such a shallow way, the strength of the arguments that are offered really doesn't even matter that much.

So, what determines whether an individual will process a persuasive message centrally or peripherally—through logos or through pathos?

MOTIVATION AND ABILITY

Like many things in cognitive psychology, it comes down to an individual's motivation and their ability—that is, their motivation to thoughtfully process that message, and their ability to thoughtfully process that message. When folks are motivated and/or able, that's when they take the central route.

The desire and ability to thoughtfully engage with a message are informed by characteristics of the individual, of the message environment, and of the message itself. Any combination of these factors can affect an individual's processing motivation or ability, thereby shaping whether they take the thoughtful central route or the less thoughtful peripheral route.

What might affect an individual's ability to thoughtfully process a message? On the part of the individual, having knowledge on the message topic would make one more able to thoughtfully process it. Education can also increase people's ability to thoughtfully

> Without the requisite motivation and ability to centrally process a message, peripheral processing is our default setting.

engage with a message. The more you know about the topic, the better equipped you are to scrutinize an argument.

Our environments can shape our processing ability, too. Distractions such as loud noises or unrelated cognitive tasks make thoughtful processing very difficult. They overburden our cognitive resources and decrease our ability to think carefully.

Sometimes characteristics of the message can affect us, too. Messages that are highly complex or relay a lot of information very quickly are burdensome, and they make it hard for us to engage carefully.

Just like ability, motivation can come from the individual, the environment, or the message itself. If we're interested in the topic, if it's relevant to us, or if we have something at stake, we're more likely to process the message carefully. When we're looking to spend a lot of money on a good or service, we have a lot at stake. With huge price tags comes huge motivation to thoughtfully engage with the arguments presented.

There are also several external incentives that can be used to motivate argument scrutiny and cognitive elaboration. If you know you're going to be accountable for the information presented, or responsible for recalling it sometime in the future, you'll be more motivated to engage thoughtfully with it.

PERIPHERAL PERSUASION

Peripheral cues include aspects of the message that serve as a sort of proxy, or substitute, for arguments: dramatic music, production quality, the source of the message, how likable or beautiful a speaker is, how credible they seem. All of these might stand in for arguments if we're not thinking too hard.

Realize, too, even if a message does contain arguments—even compelling ones—if we are neither motivated nor able to think about them carefully, the evidence presented in those arguments is not going to move us. What might move us, however, is just the sheer number of arguments presented—even if those arguments are ridiculous. If we're not actively evaluating their contents, we might come through the peripheral route just thinking an idea must be good because the speaker listed a lot of reasons or appeared confident, even if the arguments were terrible. Sometimes even the speed with which a spokesperson makes their case serves as a cue that that person is smart, confident, and prepared—all things that might signal to us that we should be convinced that they are right.

It seems a whole lot easier to persuade someone peripherally than to persuade them centrally, doesn't it? So, why bother trying to come up with strong arguments to persuade someone centrally if you can persuade someone through emotions and symbols?

Here are two big reasons: If you prepare a message—an ad for soda, for example—with an attractive model and upbeat music in anticipation of an audience that is peripherally processing, and it turns out they actually have the motivation and the ability to think about your message, they will probably be turned off by the low quality or absence of your arguments.

> When persuasion happens through the central route, the resulting attitudes last longer, they're more resistant to change, and they're durable in the face of new, opposing messaging.

Attitudes that result from thoughtful engagement with information end up lasting a long time; they're hard to reverse. The process of cognitive elaboration in our minds serves as a sort of internal debate, meaning that the attitude has already been challenged; it's already been worked through from various angles—by us. So, new challenges to that attitude are no big deal. It's already been through the wringer.

But attitudes that result from peripheral processing are untested; they've only moved through emotion and shallow cues. There was no debate over whether the attractive spokesperson means that the soda is actually good. There was

merely a feeling of attraction and excitement about the soda that had resulted from the attractive model. So, what will happen the next time that attitude encounters a strong, credible argument—like that soda has weird chemicals in it, or it's high in calories, or it's more likely to cause cavities? Having never gone through that internal debate, your own attitude toward the soda is vulnerable to this new information.

ETHICS OF PERSUASIVE APPEALS

The final question when it comes to pathos versus logos is the question of ethics. Is it more ethical to persuade through argumentation and logic than it is through emotion and feelings? Even though Aristotle identified pathos as a mechanism of persuasion, he saw certain applications of emotional appeals as problematic.

He suggested that there's a subset of pathos approaches that are unfair or that bias the audience—that leave us unable to process the information appropriately or thoughtfully. But rational arguments that stir emotional responses—these Aristotle saw as reasonable.

But who decides when it's reasonable to stir emotions like anger or fear? As discussed at the start of this course, Sherry Baker and David Martinson would say that the ethics of a persuasive appeal are not determined by whether it's emotional or rational. Instead, they are determined by whether the appeal itself is truthful, authentic, respectful, focused on the equality of the speaker and the audience, and serving the common good. And as it turns out, these criteria can be met with—or violated by—either logos or pathos.

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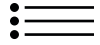
7

PERSUADING WITH REASON

Preventive medicine is one area where behavior is motivated by thoughtful deliberation. By understanding what drives behavioral intention, public health campaign designers can create successful messaging tailored to a specific population. The theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior provide a useful framework that can be applied when people are deciding whether to engage in a given behavior.

THEORY OF REASONED ACTION

You may recall from lecture 5 that after studying the attitude-behavior link for years, social psychologists Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen introduced the compatibility principle. They argued that the reason many researchers couldn't find a consistent link between attitudes and behaviors was because they were often measuring attitudes toward behavioral outcomes instead of attitudes toward specific behaviors within a given time frame.

These concepts are centered on reasoned actions—planned behaviors that people deliberately engage in—and because of that, the linchpin is the concept of behavioral intention. For the behavior to occur, the person must intend to do it. It makes sense, then, that these approaches are often used in the context of health behaviors that require some forethought, reasoning, and planning.

In the theory of reasoned action, Fishbein and Ajzen suggested that two factors—attitude and subjective norms—shape behavioral intention, and intention then directly shapes behavior.

> Behaviors like getting a cancer screening or starting an exercise regimen require a clear intention. Absent that intent, the person is not going to schedule the doctor's appointment or take the steps necessary to schedule regular exercise or join a gym.

ATTITUDES AND SUBJECTIVE NORMS

You may recall the expectancy-value approach, which focuses on behavioral beliefs and the evaluations of those beliefs. When using this approach, what becomes clear is that what we assume people think or feel is often not what they actually think or feel. So, to assess people's behavioral beliefs, researchers conduct elicitation techniques, or open-ended surveys of people from the population of interest.

Before a formal study begins, they ask broad questions to a subsample of the population about the behaviors in question. The researchers are then equipped with the reality, not assumptions, of what people actually think. They then use the most salient—that is, the most prominent—beliefs to construct the survey to ask how likely people think it is that this behavior has these characteristics or outcomes, and how they evaluate those characteristics or outcomes as good or bad.

Elicitations are key to capturing the most salient underlying beliefs that are present in a population.

Subjective norms capture how much one's social environment encourages or discourages the behavior. You may have heard of the term *social norms*, used to describe whether our society generally condones a given action or not. The concept of subjective norms takes that concept one step further by asking about people's most important reference groups when it comes to that behavior.

The two underlying components of subjective norms are normative beliefs and motivation to comply. Normative beliefs are beliefs about whether the important people in our lives want us to do the behavior or not. Motivation to comply looks at how motivated we are to comply with what each of these groups wants us to do.

In studies of why adolescent populations engage in risky behaviors like smoking, binge drinking, or illicit drug use, motivation to comply often plays a very important role. Despite having family members, doctors, teachers, or coaches who do not want them doing these things, maybe they only have one reference group that does encourage them: their friends.

When we factor in the concept of motivation to comply, the influence of friends outweighs the presence of the other groups. This means that the normative guidance from friend groups will be the most important thing shaping an adolescent's sense of what "important others" want them to do. And if their friends want them doing unhealthy things, they're going to want to do unhealthy things.
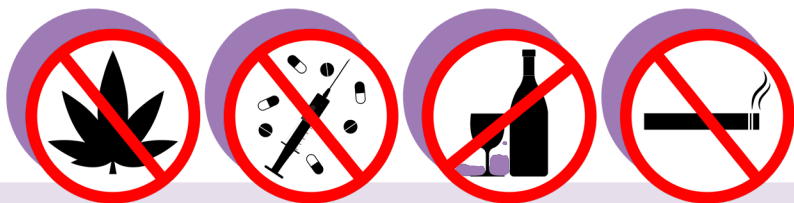
The Above the Influence antidrug campaign from the mid-2010s tapped into subjective norms that often drive young people's intention to engage in risky behaviors. The campaign tried to reduce their motivation to comply with those peer groups who were condoning drug use.

The expectancy-value approach is highly quantitative. Researchers measure these concepts on scales from 1 to 7 or 1 to 5, and then calculate correlations between attitude and intention or between subjective norms and intention. They use these correlations to figure out which of these things is driving intention. Once they obtain a large enough sample of people from the target population, they can start to understand what is strongly related to people's intention to perform a behavior: attitude or subjective norms.

By understanding what's driving behavioral intention within a population—like teenagers—researchers can then craft theory-driven intervention campaigns to try to target those factors. In the Above the Influence campaign, those interventions tried to do three things:

> reduce the strength of young people's subjective norms in predicting their intention to do drugs,
>
> reduce their motivation to comply with their friends who were condoning drug use, and
>
> increase the predictive power of their attitude about the dangerous consequences of doing drugs.

All of these are mechanisms that are consistent with the theory of reasoned action.

A problem with the theory, however, is that it assumes that people have what is called volitional control over their performance of the behavior—meaning if they want to do it, they can do it. But as Ajzen wrote in 2020, there are many behaviors that do not fit this assumption. What if you don't know how to do the behavior, or you don't have the money or time that's necessary to do it? What if you need other kinds of support or resources? It was this recognition—of the missing piece related to control—that led Ajzen to extend his work on the theory of reasoned action and create the theory of planned behavior.

THEORY OF PLANNED BEHAVIOR

This theory is almost identical to the theory of reasoned action, with the addition of a third predictive construct: perceived behavioral control. Just like attitude and subjective norms, perceived behavioral control can be unpacked into two underlying components: control beliefs and perceived power.

Control beliefs are your perceptions of the likelihood that certain resources or obstacles to the behavior may be present in your own life. For example, if the behavior of interest is getting a mammogram, some relevant control beliefs in a population might be that they're unlikely to be able to take off work, they don't have health insurance to cover the test, or they don't know how or where to get the test.

Perceived power refers to how much power you perceive you have over these factors and how much power these factors have over your ability to get a mammogram. Do you think that not having health insurance or not knowing where to go would make it very easy or very difficult to get a mammogram?

Sometimes our perceived behavioral control is made up of actual obstacles, things that are preventing us from being able to act. If getting a mammogram requires money and you do not have money, this is an actual obstacle that could make you unable to get a mammogram. But if you learn that some places do them for free, you might feel higher perceived behavioral control over getting a mammogram.

When campaign designers learn that perceived behavioral control is what's preventing people from engaging in a behavior, there are a few different kinds of interventions they might use:

Remove the actual obstacles that are in people's way. This often takes resources—perhaps from nonprofit or philanthropic organizations or governmental agencies.

Tackle the perception. Reduce people's sense that the obstacle or lack of resources makes the action harder. This might involve educating people about ways to overcome those obstacles, so they don't feel so insurmountable.

Refocus away from perceived behavioral control and back to attitude by emphasizing the potential dangers or negative outcomes of not doing the behavior. This might be enough to change people's calculus and get them to perform the behavior.

The beauty of the theory of planned behavior is that is allows for practitioners to get creative and consider various possible interventions based on the factors that are influencing the behavior in the target population.

COVID CAMPAIGNS IN THE US

In the context of the COVID crisis, Americans witnessed various efforts to increase people's intention to get vaccinated. Most of these efforts reflect the framework discussed in this lecture. Here are some examples of messaging and what the campaign was targeting:

Ads referring to the vaccine as a way to keep you from dying of COVID (attitude)

Officials highlighting the fact that the vaccine is safe and effective (attitude)

People saying that getting vaccinated would allow us to "get back to normal" (attitude)

Messages referencing how our community wants us to get vaccinated, and how our loved ones and our doctor want us to be vaccinated (subjective norms)

Folks updating their profile pictures on Facebook with a message saying, "I am vaccinated" (subjective norms)

Mobile vaccine clinics deploying to reduce the burden of vaccination (perceived behavioral control)

In the fall of 2021, some employers began requiring that people get vaccinated to come back to work. This approach reflected several different avenues of influence within the theory of planned behavior. First, it meant that remaining unvaccinated could cost people their jobs—a very negative outcome of remaining unvaccinated—and hence an attitude construct. Second, it meant that thousands of workplaces around the country would have high vaccination rates, which could create a new social or subjective norm regarding vaccination, hence increasing the subjective normative pressure to do what the vast majority of folks are doing. And third, it meant that for some people, remaining unvaccinated would literally become difficult—not just unpleasant, but also inconvenient.

Despite all these methods, a sizable portion of the American public chose to remain unvaccinated. For some, the idea of getting vaccinated was perceived as a violation of individual rights—a belief that they evaluated very negatively, thus resulting in a strong negative attitude toward the COVID vaccine.

For many of these same people, their friends and family shared that same negative attitude toward the vaccine, thus reinforcing a social norm that ran in opposition to the COVID vaccine. And with an attitude and a subjective norm that both discouraged getting vaccinated, it didn't matter how easy they felt it was to get the vaccine. Many of these folks continued to have no intention to get vaccinated.

For decades, these theories have helped practitioners create intervention campaigns that are tailored to the needs and cognitions of a specific population. These theories continue to provide a useful framework—especially in the context of public health.

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8

PERSUADING WITH EMOTION

Fear is a popular—and effective— messaging strategy because, when faced with a threat, people naturally want to take protective actions. This lecture looks at how fear appeals and framing techniques are often used to shape audience beliefs and norms. When we understand our natural psychological processes relating to threat management— and how they can be exploited—we are better equipped to evaluate fear-based messages that we encounter.

FEAR APPEALS

Evolutionary psychology encourages us to consider how and why we think and act the way we do, based on what adaptations might have been advantageous for us as a species over time. The patterns of thought, emotional responses, and behaviors that have contributed to the survival of the species are those that are more likely to be passed down from our ancestors. Through this framework, we can think about our inclinations and our behavioral tendencies as adaptations that have helped us survive over time. Fear is a powerful motivator of action, because historically it has helped us survive. When we feel afraid, we naturally seek out actions to help us stay safe—or to keep our loved ones safe.

Let's consider two iconic fear appeals, one from politics and one from a public health context.

In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson, the Democratic incumbent, was running for president against Barry Goldwater, the conservative Republican US senator. Capitalizing on Americans' fear of a nuclear war, the Johnson campaign seized on the senator's statements supporting the possible use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War, should that become necessary. Johnson's campaign responded with the iconic Daisy ad.

It shows a young girl pulling the petals off a daisy, counting them one by one. A robotic narrator's voice then begins a formal launch countdown. The camera zooms in on the girl's face and then on her eye, where, as the countdown gets to 1, the screen cuts to a massive nuclear explosion and a giant mushroom cloud erupting into the sky. We then hear President Johnson's voice. "These are the stakes," he says. "To make a world in which all of God's children can live—or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die." The screen cuts to black, and a narrator says: "Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."

> The Johnson campaign's Daisy ad aired on television only once, but its impact is still felt today.

This is a fear appeal. It highlights the existence of a threat to instill fear in the audience with the goal of encouraging them to act in a particular way. Here, the threat is nuclear war, with the goal of getting the audience to vote for President Johnson.

In 1987, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America put out a series of public service announcements designed to scare young people about the dangers of drug use. Perhaps the most famous features a sizzling-hot frying pan, as the narrator says, "This is drugs." An egg cracks into the pan. The narrator then says, "This is your brain on drugs," and the egg quickly fries and bubbles. Finally, the narrator asks the rhetorical question, "Any questions?"

This message uses a visceral graphic image to illustrate how dangerous drug use can be for the brain. But its effectiveness is questionable. While the Daisy ad gave clear action steps for viewers to take to avoid the threat of nuclear war—vote for President Johnson—what steps did the antidrug PSA give to its viewer?

Research has found sometimes fear appeals work and sometimes they don't. Worse yet, sometimes they cause a boomerang effect, causing people to have an attitude opposite of the desired response of the message sender. So, what explains these varying outcomes, and how can fear appeals be used to effectively shape persuasion?

EXTENDED PARALLEL PROCESS MODEL

In 1992, Dr. Kim Witte, a social scientist, introduced the extended parallel process model, or the EPPM. It captures how fear can be used successfully to fuel persuasion and behavior change. According to the EPPM, there are two aspects of a message that are necessary for a fear appeal to persuade an audience to take action. Threat information concerns how bad and how likely the threat is. Efficacy information concerns the steps to take to avoid the threat and how effective those steps will be at helping you avoid it.

Let's start with the threat information. According to the EPPM, for people to feel fearful, they need to perceive that the threat is severe, and they need to perceive that they themselves are susceptible to that threat. So, on the one hand, the audience needs to perceive that the negative outcomes of

> For a fear-based appeal to be effective, it needs to include both threat information and efficacy information. The first must instill a sense of severity and susceptibility. The second must empower through response efficacy and self-efficacy.

doing (or not doing) the behavior are devastatingly bad. To do this, a message might include graphic imagery, frightening music, and it should concentrate on outcomes that the target audience will actually perceive as scary and awful.

In the Daisy ad, the severity information was the nuclear explosion, at a time when the threat of nuclear war was a salient fear in the population. But in the antidrug PSA, what was the severity information? Without adequate fear being induced by a message, people will not be moved to identify what they could do to avoid that threat.

The second aspect of threat information that's required for a fear appeal to work is susceptibility information: We need to feel like these negative outcomes are likely to happen to us—that we could be susceptible to that threat. This kind of information might include statistics about the prevalence of the outcome.

Fear appeals also need two kinds of efficacy information to be successful. This is empowering information that tells what steps the audience can take to avoid that threatening outcome. It also involves giving people a sense that the steps are easy to do.

Response efficacy information provides the action steps an individual can take to avoid the threat. In the Daisy ad, the action is clear—vote for President Johnson. But with the antidrug PSA, we don't know what to do. Providing alternative choices to drug use, or concrete ways to decline an offer of drugs—those would have provided efficacy.

Self-efficacy information is where the message makes it clear that you have the power to do the action. This could be conveyed by literally stating, "It's that easy," or by discussing how many people are doing this action every day or every year.

Threat information in the EPPM is a wonderful way to address the role of attitudes in the theory of planned behavior discussed in lecture 7. Researchers often use a combination of the two frameworks to develop persuasion campaigns. When an audience's attitude underestimates the risks that are posed by a known threat, this is an opportunity to use the EPPM to develop a fear-based appeal to change those attitudes toward the behavior and provide efficacy steps to empower them to take those steps.

CONSTRUCTED THREATS

It's important for communication practitioners to understand how to use fear effectively as a persuasive tool. But understanding how propagandists and snake oil salesmen construct threats to mobilize us to take action may be even more important.

Think about how advertisers use fear to sell a product. A 1990s commercial for a home security system featured a frightening scene where an intruder enters a home at night. This is the threat information. The narrator then explains how people can protect themselves by installing an ADT home security system. This is the response efficacy information. Fear-based appeals like this ad tap into our preexisting fears and attempt to persuade us by offering a way to avoid a threat.

Now consider how powerful people or organizations might use these same tactics to suggest that various types of people are the threat. Maybe they point to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, maybe to sexual minorities, or even an entire political party—groups of people with whom we may have had little opportunity to interact, so perhaps they elicit our feelings of uncertainty or fear.

Understanding how political and media elites deliberately identify and construct these kinds of threats is crucial. Once they tap into our fears—especially of groups we rarely interact with—we're going to look for a way to either avoid the threat or successfully manage it. We're going to look for efficacy information—the steps we can take to stay safe. And when we do, these same entities who have helped to identify and construct the threat in the

first place will be standing by to tell us exactly what we can do to feel better. They'll tell us who to harass, who to hate, who to vote for, or who to give money to.

> **The next time you encounter a fear-inducing message, ask yourself these questions:**
>
> Why am I feeling fearful?
>
> What is the nature of this specific threat?
>
> Who is telling me this?
>
> What are they encouraging me to do about it?
>
> What might they have to gain from my fear?

FRAMING

One very efficient way in which persuaders—and propagandists—deliberately construct threats is through a subtle persuasive device that permeates our information environment: framing. Perhaps you've heard people describe a news story or an article as "framing an issue a certain way." In a colloquial sense, to frame just means to present information in a way that leads the audience to have a certain impression.

While framing isn't always done intentionally, it can be used strategically to draw an audience's attention to a certain part of an issue or event while downplaying others. Subtle wording choices trigger associations in our minds that lead us automatically to certain judgments.

Imagine news coverage of a social protest, for example. Some news outlets might cover the story and include pictures of peaceful protesters singing or holding hands. Others might include pictures of the few violent individuals who threw rocks at the police. Both portrayals might accurately capture what

actually happened at the protest, but the inclusion of one image instead of another has important consequences for the way that we, the audience, will come to think about the protestors and the protest itself.

And when messages frame people or types of people as threats, the potential consequences for public opinion are significant, because our natural inclination, when experiencing fear, is to quickly identify steps to take to manage the threat. It is for this reason that authoritarians and fascists have historically made efficient use of these very methods to mobilize the public. They do it by framing certain categories of people as threats, and then offering up actions the public can take to manage those threats— actions like voting for policies that restrict those people's rights or turning those people in to the authorities.

The psychological processes themselves are not bad. In fact, they are largely functional. They exist for a reason. They help keep us safe. But understanding how they can be exploited by entities with something to gain—like power or profit—can help us recognize the need to slow down and think critically as we feel that fear response being activated within us.

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9

PERSUADING WITH HUMOR, STORIES, AND FRAMING

Getting an audience to let their guard down enough to entertain an idea—even just for a moment—can be an important part of a persuasion campaign. Only recently have scholars begun to unpack how and why jokes and stories have unique abilities to affect audiences' attitudes and beliefs. This lecture dives into the psychology of narratives and humor to understand how they can reduce an audience's resistance to arguments.

NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION THEORY

Intuitively, most of us know that stories have the capacity to move people. Abstract ideas may be controversial, but when we tie those ideas to individual people and vivid descriptions of their experiences, we engage the audience through emotion and connection. Narratives that have the capacity to persuade are those that involve a plotline with a beginning, middle, and end; a sympathetic protagonist; and relatable, emotional displays of pain or suffering. Narratives encourage us to identify with the protagonist, empathize, see things from their point of view, and even root for that character in the story.

In the field of communication research, Melanie Green and Timothy Brock have created the narrative transportation theory to account for the seemingly magical persuasive powers of narratives, or stories. They describe the process of being transported into a narrative world as a mental process that involves pointed attention to elements of the story, resulting in cognitive imagery in our minds, and an emotional experience in that world.

It highlights a unique form of cognitive processing that contrasts sharply with the way we process most traditional persuasive messages. In narratives, we're operating not from a position of a critical reader or viewer, but from within the story itself, as an empathetic participant. This changes how we orient to very subtle persuasive themes in that story. Instead of resisting ideas or counterarguing themes we disagree with, we're merely along on the journey, willing to entertain ideas we might have viewed critically if they were presented another way.

One way that narratives can be impactful is by encouraging us to identify with certain characters, to put ourselves in their shoes. When this perspective-taking happens, and that character happens to engage in thoughts or behaviors that might contradict our values, because we've adopted their perspective, we will tend to be less opposed to those behaviors and less hostile to those attitudes.

The subtle persuasive powers of stories are so great that communication practitioners and organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States regularly work with TV writers to integrate pro-health and pro-social messages into fictional plotlines to shape public opinion and behaviors in the context of important issues. Such "entertainment education" methods are used to educate the public on topics and to change their attitudes, beliefs, and even behaviors.

Some of this work builds on the fact that we, as humans, are influenced vicariously through witnessing the experiences of others and the consequences of their actions. This framework, known as social learning theory, allows us to think about stories (and entertainment) as a place where we learn what values, beliefs, and behaviors will be rewarded and punished—and therefore which ones are good and bad.

And when viewers begin to empathize with a character who has opposing views and values, they become less resistant to the character's point of view and the arguments presented by that character.

Reducing an audience's resistance to an argument—that is, reducing their counterargumentation—can have important consequences for persuasion. Especially when we're talking about topics or issues that provoke strong negative emotional responses, finding ways to encourage an audience just to hear or engage with a point of view that contradicts their own is a step forward, because that is the necessary step that comes before attitude change. And that is the power of a dramatic narrative.

HOW HUMOR WORKS

Humor can also disrupt an audience's counter-argumentation and encourage them to consider ideas and topics they might otherwise dismiss out of hand.

To understand the unique impact of humor and jokes, we have to first discuss how humor is constructed and how it operates in the mind. Like narratives, humor requires certain content elements to work. There are various theories of how humor is constructed and appreciated. These include superiority theory, which suggests that we laugh when we feel superior to others, and relief theory, which suggests that we laugh as a way of releasing nervous

energy. But the theory that's most frequently used in psychological approaches to humor effects is incongruity theory.

Incongruity theory proposes that humor results from a mismatch of incongruous elements in the mind that don't immediately make sense together, but that we, the listener, reconcile. We make them fit.

In incongruity theory, humor begins with the activation of one topic, and the related mental framework associated with that topic. We also call this a schema—meaning the ideas, emotions, and concepts that are associated with a given topic in our minds. The activation of this first schema is then followed by the activation of a second, seemingly unrelated schema that's introduced. According to incongruity theory, in humor, it's our job as the audience to put these two seemingly unrelated mental schemas together, and we have to find a way to make them fit.

The power of humor is so noteworthy that, historically, satire has been considered a kind of magic or sorcery.

Take for example, this short joke: "Politicians and diapers have one thing in common. They should both be changed regularly, and for the same reason."

From the start, there's a mismatch between two schemas, or incompatible frameworks that are rarely used together: politicians and diapers. The word *politicians* activates a schema that might include things like elections,

> Incongruity theory suggests a very active role of the audience, as it is their job to access relevant information or concepts from memory to solve the incongruity and get the joke.

Congress, voting, and signing legislation. The word *diapers* activates a schema that might include babies, poop, bottles, and changing tables.

So, when we hear "They should both be changed regularly," that resolves some of the incongruity, as we picture politicians being voted out and babies' diapers being changed. But the big reconciliation is on us to do. Why do we need to change politicians and diapers? Well, maybe we don't know why we need to change politicians, but we know we need to change diapers when they are full of excrement. Ergo, politicians need to be changed because they, too, are filled with excrement. Voila.

Now, when you were laughing at this joke, you hadn't literally asked yourself these questions. This process happened rather automatically. But just because a cognitive process is automatic doesn't mean it's easy. And activating information, experiencing a mismatch, and having to activate additional information to make these two incongruous elements fit is actually quite a bit of cognitive work.

WHY HUMOR WORKS

For many years, persuasion scholars sought to understand why it seemed that you could say things through jokes that might anger an audience if they were presented seriously. By and large, they thought it was because humor served as a kind of distraction from the main argument being made in the message. But at the same time, studies were showing that humor increases attention to and recall of the main arguments made in the joke. So, if humor is distracting away from the arguments, how are people better able to remember them? It just didn't make sense.

In 2008, Dr. Dannagal Young (your presenter for this course) introduced the counterargument disruption model of humor—also called the resource allocation hypothesis. It proposes that we are motivated to understand

and appreciate humor because we have the goal of experiencing the payoff: laughter. But because this is a cognitively taxing process, requiring the activation of information and the integration of that information with an incoming stimulus to reconcile the incongruity and see the joke, we have fewer resources left over to scrutinize the underlying claim being made in the joke. The audience lacks the ability to counterargue in the face of humor.

Around the same time, Dr. Robin Nabi and colleagues were working to advance a related theory to account for the persuasive effects of humor. According to her hypothesis, people are less likely to counterargue the claims made through humor because they discount humor as "just a joke." As a result, they see it as "not an appropriate context" to scrutinize or critique the premise of the joke. In other words, it's not the right time or place to counterargue—it's playtime. The audience lacks the motivation to counterargue persuasive humorous messages.

Researchers have found evidence for both processes. It seems that when people consume more lighthearted jokes, people see it as "just for fun" and so an inappropriate context for scrutiny. Thus, the discounting cue hypothesis makes sense. However, other studies suggest that in the context of more complex, longer, ironic humor, the cognitive work involved might reduce our ability to counterargue the claim.

When it comes to using humor as a persuasive mechanism, it can be a very difficult needle to thread—because to reduce an audience's resistance to an argument, you, the persuader, cannot state the argument itself. The argument you're hoping to advance must come from the audience.

For the resource allocation hypothesis to work, the audience must do the work to reconcile the gap and get the joke. The joke teller sets up that incongruity— that gap between mismatched schemas—but it's the audience that must bring something to bear on that text. So, you have to be certain you know that the audience will bring the correct information to make the correct argument. But what if they don't? What if they bring the wrong information to bear on the text, and then they "understand" the joke, but it's not the joke that you meant to write at all? This is especially challenging in the context of irony, where there's a disconnect between the literal message and the intended message.

IRONY

To understand and appreciate irony, the audience must

1 process that literal statement of the text, then

2 recognize the intent of the message sender (that is, understand that it's ironic), then

3 invert the meaning of the text (understand the opposite of the stated text), and then

4 extrapolate from all of that to figure out what broader argument is being proposed.

It's a lot of work.

> Irony is a form of humor that features a mismatch between what is explicitly stated and what is actually meant.

Writing in 1900, Henri Bergson wrote that irony reveals a contrast between what is real and what is ideal—or that which "is" and that which "ought to be." Irony is often used as an efficient vehicle to advance a social, political, or cultural critique. By describing a terrible reality as though it's great, or by describing the ideal world as though it's undesirable, we invite the listener to recognize the disconnect and then hopefully see that we should be striving for the ideal—we should be working to change our terrible reality.

HENRI BERGSON
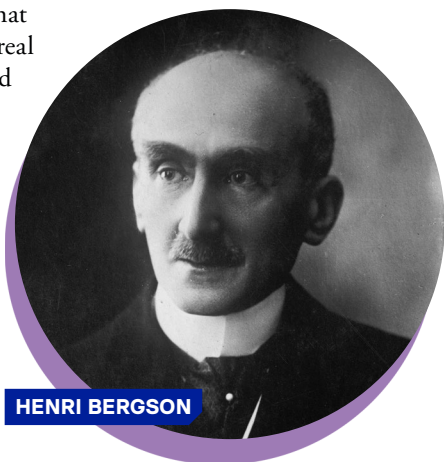
Subtle persuasion mechanisms like those enacted through narrative and humor can be profoundly powerful. Reducing an audience's resistance to controversial arguments is an objectively important part of the persuasion process. But with subtlety comes the increased likelihood that the audience may use the message in a way that is most gratifying for them. By studying audiences' attitudes, beliefs, needs, and desires before crafting messages, message producers might better predict how audiences will interpret the narratives and jokes they encounter later.

> The 1970s American sitcom *All in the Family* is an example of how irony can take viewers in different directions depending on their own social values. While some saw Michael ("Meathead") as the show's hero, which was the producer's hope, others saw Archie as the hero.

And for those consuming irony, maybe we could ask ourselves what real and ideal aspects of the world we're being asked to contrast. We might be surprised by what the producers of our entertainment are really hoping we'll come away with. And for those of us consuming stories and jokes, let's take a moment to think through who it is we're expected to identify with in a story—and why.

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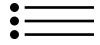
10

PERSUADING THROUGH SOCIAL IDENTITY

We all have individual identities based on things that make us feel unique, and we have social identities based on the groups of people we align ourselves with. This lecture explores the concept of social identity and the related concepts of self-categorization, social comparison, and group norms. It also discusses how these concepts relate to persuasion, because how we think of ourselves in relation to others influences how we think, feel, and act—and even how we perceive the world.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SOCIAL IDENTITIES

If someone asked you to tell them about who you are, what would you say? Would you describe your personality, occupation, marital status, or something else? What you land on first in response to that question says a lot about what is most salient, or prominent, to you when you think of who you are at this particular moment in time.

At the center of this conversation is the concept of identity. We all have individual and social identities. Our individual identities are made up of qualities, traits, and beliefs that we feel make us unique.

> While our individual identities help us see ourselves as distinct from other individual people, our social identities help us see our social group as distinct from other social groups.

When we think of ourselves in terms of our social group, we tend to want to match the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of our group. And this has crucial implications for persuasion.

The concept of social identity has its roots in the research of Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel. He was fascinated by intergroup dynamics, especially antisocial phenomena like discrimination and prejudice. He wanted to understand what might cause one group to look down on another group of people. Tajfel was influenced by the work of Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport, who in the 1950s had begun to think about discrimination and prejudice not just as social phenomena that were related to power and status, but also as cognitive processes related to how humans think.

Allport described prejudice and intergroup biases as consequences of human cognition. To comprehend the world around us efficiently, we all tend to simplify complex ideas and concepts in our minds. And one consequence of this is that we create categories—for things, for ideas, and for people.

Henri Tajfel expanded on this idea in the 1960s and began to consider the implications of these processes—how lumping things into categories erases differences where they do exist and creates differences where they don't. For example, rather than having to separate distinct concepts like porcupines, lake trout, and blue jays, or daffodils, hydrangeas, and roses, you could make two categories: animal and flower. This is about cognitive simplicity and efficiency.

But by grouping the animals together, we ignore key differences between them—like the fact that some of them swim, some fly, and some attack with quills. And meanwhile, separating the flowers from the animals erases qualities that they might have in common. For instance, blue jays and hydrangeas can both be blue. And a porcupine's quills and a rose's thorns can both prick your skin and make you bleed. So, categories oversimplify.

IN-GROUPS VERSUS OUT-GROUPS

In the context of social psychology, identifying what social group we're in and what groups we're not in has similar consequences. We compare ourselves to people we see as part of our in-group, and people we consider to be outside of our group, or people in our out-group. We tend to erase differences that exist between us and members of our own in-group, and we exaggerate differences between us and members of our out-group. When we compare ourselves to those within our group, we're naturally inclined to downplay the differences that might exist, because we're motivated to be like those within our group. Sometimes we even manufacture differences to justify our cognitive separation from members of our out-group.

Importantly, when we compare our group to other groups, we're not objective or neutral. When we're talking about our social categorizations and how we view ourselves, we have two goals: We want to reduce our uncertainty, especially about who is a friend and who is a foe. And we want to feel good about ourselves. These motivations work together to cause us to see our in-group as good and our out-groups as bad. These are the roots of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility.

We're then motivated to learn how "people like us" think, feel, and act, especially regarding other groups. We not only learn the appropriate attitudes and behaviors of our group, but we also begin to incorporate and embody them.

Henri Tajfel then wanted to know if the human tendency for categorization can trigger in-group favoritism even when the group is constructed at random.

In a series of experiments in the late 1960s, he and his colleagues consistently found that participants behaved in ways that favored their in-group, even though the groups were completely arbitrary.

Learning how members of our social groups judge other groups—as good or bad—is central to a group's social identity.

The notion that social identities can be artificially constructed shows that they change based on context, depending on what's happening around us and what's going on in our minds.

Now think back to the question about how you'd describe yourself. But this time, think in terms of your social identity. What social groups do you consider yourself to be a part of? Would you categorize yourself by your community, your religion, your race, your political party? The identities that are most salient are those used most recently or frequently.

Certain social categories are used all the time—they become chronically accessible to us. For example, gender and race, social categories which may be accompanied by identifiable visual cues, tend to be readily accessible in our minds. Being a member of a social category that happens to be in the minority will also tend to be salient. This makes us feel distinct—and this will prime our social identity, making it prominent to us.

GROUP PROTOTYPES

So, how does any of this relate to persuasion? Historically, humans have relied on our social groups for survival. We think of ourselves as members of groups because we survive in groups. We want to be accepted by our group. We want to be good group

Without much reflection or critical thought, our individual thoughts and feelings are shaped by the thoughts and feelings of our group.

members and be obviously different from other, less favorable groups. As a result of these primal forces, social identity is an efficient and powerful influence on our attitudes and behaviors.

When we look to our group to figure out how to think or act, we look to the shining star of the group—the member that best represents what our group is all about. The shining star is called a group prototype. It is a stereotyped, idealized group member. And they might not even exist in reality.

Since we look to prototypes of our social category for a sense of how best to perform the role of someone in that category, by changing our perceptions of prototypes, persuaders can shape how we think, feel, and act. These very concepts have been used by health practitioners to promote healthy behaviors. Consider the role of social norms in the theory of planned behavior, for example. We know that people look to their relevant social groups to figure out what behaviors are appropriate for members of their group.

> To reduce alcohol consumption on college campuses, some universities have tried to alter students' perceptions of what's normal for their group. These efforts aim to redefine the prototypical college student as someone with more moderate drinking behaviors.

Social norms can be used to promote positive or healthy behaviors, but they can also be used to engender hatred or fear. As discussed when we explored Nazi propaganda tactics, the messaging and activities that were orchestrated by Hitler's regime were designed to create the illusion of social consensus, while also shaping the public's perception of a prototypical "good German." They tried to influence people's sense of which behaviors were most common and accepted among the most desirable group members. As other members then looked to these newly curated prototypes to guide their actions, persuaders hoped that people would change their individual behaviors to match the new group prototypes.

IDENTITY SALIENCE

Persuaders might also seek to alter our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors by simply changing which group identity we have in our mind at any given moment. This concept is called identity salience, and it refers to how prominent a particular social identity is in our minds. Sometimes, just by encouraging us to think in terms of that group identity, persuaders can subtly guide our subsequent thoughts and actions.

For example, imagine one of your social identities is "environmentalist," and you support the use of renewable energies. But you also identify as a member of a particular rural mountain community, and that group opposes the installation of wind turbines because they detract from the area's natural beauty. Your perception of the issue can shift, depending on the people you're talking to, the messages you're encountering, and which identity hat you're wearing at the moment.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND MEDIA

Our social identity shapes how we interpret and perceive the world around us. Think about what that might mean for the processing of media messages. Priming or activating a particular social identity can affect how we interpret incoming messages.

Communication scholar Mike Slater takes this process one step further. He suggests that not only do our social identities shape how we interpret messages, but they also guide our selection of media in the first place. It's the "people like me watch shows like this" calculus. This can be explicitly identity-reinforcing, as is the case when conservative Republicans watch Fox News or liberal Democrats watch MSNBC. It might also be more understated than that—especially in entertainment programming, where identity-supporting themes are subtly woven into narratives.

As we view this content through our social identity lens, that identity is further reinforced. This is why Slater describes this process as an ongoing spiral. Over time, as we consume more media to support our group identity, the process repeats itself. We become more and more entrenched in our role as a member of our team.

We're in a moment when our social identities, especially identities related to politics and power, are being constantly activated—by politicians and media personalities, social media algorithms, and even bumper stickers.

But when messaging compels us to think in terms of our team, this might be a good time to think hard about why. When we do this, we may find that the messenger is capitalizing on our innate need to belong, simply because evidence and arguments aren't really on their side. They might even be tapping into our social identities to encourage us to act against our own self-interest, or to violate our own personal moral code. And when they succeed, pathos beats logos once again.

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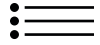
11

PROPAGANDA AND PERSUASION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

As much as the shift from newspapers to radio and then from radio to television had important consequences for persuasion efforts, none of these shifts altered the very logic of media dynamics like the introduction of digital and social media did. This lecture revisits the big question of media effects—this time through the lens of digital technologies. It explores how the digital media context shapes how persuasion processes unfold—in ways that might make propaganda campaigns more successful than ever.

A HISTORY OF THE INTERNET

Recall from lecture 2 that some early media theorists feared the centralized control of traditional mass media technologies like newspapers, radio, and TV. Scholars worried that audiences would become almost brainwashed by media content, but studies showed that media effects were not strong, and that people engaged selectively with media. People consumed information that supported their worldview, and they interpreted messages in a way that was consistent with their preexisting beliefs. Direct, powerful effects of media messages were rare.

To understand how digital technologies change media dynamics, and thus might change media's capacity for influence, it's helpful to understand the history of the internet itself, particularly why it was created and how it later developed.

The conceptual roots of the internet go as far back as the Cuban missile crisis in 1962—the height of the Cold War. The conflict highlighted vulnerabilities in American military information systems, which were, up to that point, hierarchical and centralized. Command centers had all the information and plans. Other locations waited for instructions about what action to take. So, if a command center were destroyed, or if the physical information infrastructure were damaged, chaos would ensue.

So, in the mid-1960s, researchers at the RAND Corporation developed the idea of a decentralized information system with no central hub. Information could be broken down into smaller digital packets, sent across a network, and put back together when they reached a destination. The very first decentralized information network, named ARPANET (after the Advanced Research Projects Agency), was created in 1969. Through the 1970s, the network grew, and in 1985, the US government expanded the reach of the network through National Science Foundation grants that funded the creation of the

NSFNET backbone—that is, the foundational structure of what would later become the internet.

The commercial internet grew in the 1990s, but few platform developers were successful at harnessing the power of the internet as a money-making enterprise. Following the dot-com crash of 2000, web developers leaned into the concept of Web 2.0—that is, trying to better capitalize on the unique characteristics of the internet.

> The internet was designed to be decentralized, horizontal, with little room for a centralized gatekeeper. It was also designed to facilitate a many-to-many flow of information.

The early 2000s saw an explosion in the number of collaborative, community-based platforms. Myspace launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006—all platforms

> Web 2.0 prioritized user-generated content, interaction, and collaboration between users and the platforms, as well as features like ratings, reviews, and comments.

designed to promote horizontal, interpersonal communication between users, and to empower individual users to create content and distribute it through the network.

GATEKEEPERS

In traditional top-down mass media systems, media organizations and the people within them controlled what messages could enter the flow of information. People like editors, producers, reporters, network executives, network censors, and advertisers exerted control over what messages were produced and distributed. These were the gatekeepers who controlled what messages you would get to see.

> The shrinking role of elite gatekeepers is the defining story of how digital technologies and the internet affect politics, economics, and culture.

But digital technologies changed all of that. The internet was designed to diffuse control over information throughout the network, with two-way information flow. Control migrates downstream, away from formal elite gatekeepers, into the hands of everyone else on the network. The impact of this shift cannot be overstated.

There are still newspaper editors and TV producers and record company executives—but if you have a story to pitch, or a song that you wrote and performed, or a TV show you created, you can post them on platforms like SoundCloud or YouTube. You can write the news story yourself, post it to a blog, and share it from your social media account. Your content is now in the flow of information, even though none of the elite gatekeepers ever let you in.

For years, scholars and journalists were overwhelmingly optimistic about the likely impact this shift of control would have on democratic health. The thought was that people would become empowered, and that would fuel people-centered processes and give more chances for regular folks to have their voices heard in a way that the traditional gatekeepers had not allowed.

In fact, in spring of 2011, the entire world watched as activists in Tunisia and Egypt used social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to challenge authoritarian leaders and mobilize democratic revolutions. While these platforms certainly did not directly cause the wave of revolutions across the region, they did facilitate horizontal, networked communication that could happen without constraints or censorship by elite gatekeepers.

But it soon became clear that the lack of information gatekeepers and oversight also meant that propagandists had a massively powerful new tool.

REVISITING THE PROPAGANDA CRITERIA

Remember that in the era of traditional mass media, social psychologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton wrote an essay to dispel the public's fears of strong, direct media effects. They argued that because the three criteria for successful propaganda—monopolization, canalization, and supplementation—were nearly impossible to satisfy (at least, in the US context), direct powerful effects of media would be very rare.

But in this new media environment, are Lazarsfeld and Merton still right? Is it still nearly impossible to meet those three criteria?

Dr. Dannagal Young and social media scholar Shannon McGregor reflected on this question in a 2020 article for *The Washington Post*. In it, they reconsidered each of the three criteria and how they operate in the context of the current digital social media environment. They determined that, unlike the analog, traditional mass media system that made society-altering propaganda campaigns difficult, today's media technologies make propaganda easy.

MONOPOLIZATION

Monopolization refers to the absence of counterpropaganda. In traditional mass media, audiences were bound to hear the other side of a story: ads for Coca-Cola and for Pepsi, speeches by the Democrat and the Republican.

Today, social media users can curate their news feeds to include only like-minded friends, and they can join Facebook groups where their views are reinforced and left unchallenged.

Most importantly, microtargeting of advertisements through social media platforms allows advertisers to identify such precise subgroups, people can go through their day without ever seeing counterpropaganda. It can be absent from today's media experiences in a way that was simply impossible 70 years ago. In these carefully curated spaces, monopolization is possible.

> Microtargeting allows advertisers to make use of our online behaviors to appeal to us at a granular level, targeting very specific kinds of people.

CANALIZATION

Canalization refers to tapping into beliefs and values already held by the audience. Without intimate knowledge of the beliefs and values of individual audience members, how are you going to design propaganda to take advantage of a preexisting canal? And without a personalized medium able to reach those specific people (as opposed to the millions of people reached by broadcast or newspapers), how would you distribute propaganda to take advantage of a preexisting canal? You simply couldn't.

But the microtargeting capacity of social media allows organizations to target us with messaging aimed at hyper-specific targeting criteria—or, in the language of canalization, to identify preexisting canals that would help guide the water in exactly the right direction. Facebook, for example, boasts that advertisers can reach their target audience on their platform based on their prior purchases, specific locations, or even user interests and hobbies. To highlight their capacity for microtargeting, Facebook's ad information page also states: "Reach everyone, or just a few."

SUPPLEMENTATION

In 1948, media content was not experienced within interpersonal communication networks. Without any supplementation to reinforce the media narratives, direct, powerful impact was quite tiny.

But today, media messages are embedded within and experienced through interpersonal networks. We encounter media messages that have been liked and shared by our friends and family. We engage with friends and family to make sense of the content, reacting to it together. So now, the media message is not experienced in a vacuum; it's embedded within an interpersonal context, which tells you the people you care about and respect see this story as credible and perceive the information to be persuasive.

Platforms like Facebook that offer a hybrid of interpersonal communication and media messaging are excellent places for media-fueled interpersonal conversation. So, social media is a supplementation machine.

Young and McGregor concluded that the very conditions that Lazarsfeld and Merton had argued prevented traditional mass media from being used successfully for large-scale propaganda are now met. Social media platforms create the very conditions that ought to make propaganda campaigns successful—even efficient.

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

The characteristics of digital and social media completely transform the mass media experience. We are no longer disconnected, anonymous, and relegated to the station of message recipient, unable to talk back to powerful, centralized message senders. We identify with social groups and experience mediated content within them. This can be profoundly empowering. These networks can facilitate grassroots activism, social movements, and collective action.

At the same time, by reducing the role of elite gatekeepers, decentralizing control over the flow of information, and connecting us to one another, social media and digital technologies also allow for bad actors (that is, individuals or organizations with nefarious intent) to infiltrate our information ecosystem—to spread false information, or information deliberately designed to anger us or to fuel hate.

This is what Russia's Internet Research Agency, the online propaganda arm of the Kremlin, did during the 2016 US presidential election. They used fake social media accounts to tap into preexisting animosities—canalization. They used supplementation by working within social media networks to mobilize people—even helping to organize offline, real-life protests. And they did this using the logic and mechanisms of the internet—that is, the fact that it is decentralized, it is networked, and it allows a two-way flow of information.

As we make use of these digital technologies to connect with friends and family, to learn about the world, and to engage with our communities, it's essential that we keep in mind the forces that might be at play in shaping our digital experiences.

By understanding how these technologies allow advertisers and organizations to "get to know us" and to customize appeals to move us, we can exercise restraint. We can activate a healthy degree of skepticism and pause to reflect before we like a post, share a story, or join a group. This might be all we need to do to disrupt the engine that fuels the spread of disinformation online.

> The very same characteristics of the internet that facilitate grassroots activism and democratic processes can also be—and have been—exploited to undermine those same processes.
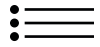
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12

MISINFORMATION: AUDIENCE OVER MESSAGE

The spreading of false information, rumors, and conspiracy theories is not new, but the speed with which they spread may very well be. This lecture explains the differences between misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. It also examines why people believe these forms of false information, illustrating how their persuasiveness is more about the audience than it is about the content of the messages themselves.

TYPES OF FALSE INFORMATION

Let's begin by unpacking several different terms that people use interchangeably but that are quite distinct.

Misinformation is information that is false or misleading. It can be rumors or factually inaccurate information that's shared, but without necessarily having an intent to deceive the audience.

Disinformation is information that is known to be false and is intentionally spread to mislead the recipient. It is a category of propaganda that contains known falsehoods and is distributed to very large audiences, typically through media.

When Russian internet trolls created social media posts with false information about how Americans could vote in the 2016 federal election by simply sending a text message from their cell phones, this was disinformation. They knew it was untrue, and they did it strategically, with the intention of suppressing American voter turnout at the polls on election day.

> When we engage in interpersonal deception on a small scale, the term *lying* would probably suffice. But disinformation is the intentional spreading of falsehoods on a far grander scale.

The term *conspiracy theory* refers to a specific genre of inaccurate information that can be either misinformation or disinformation depending on the knowledge and intentions of the source. What makes conspiracy theories different from mis- or disinformation is the nature of the falsehood. They're based on a certain kind of narrative—one that involves a powerful group of people operating in the shadows, hiding the truth from the public. Conspiracy theories also assume that the people operating in the shadows are acting with nefarious intent to harm the public or to keep the public in the dark to benefit themselves.

Conspiracy theories are distinct from actual conspiracies, which do exist but are rare. The Watergate scandal was a real political conspiracy that involved a cover-up orchestrated by members of President Nixon's administration. The

Tuskegee syphilis study was a decades-long medical conspiracy that involved withholding a known cure for the disease from Black patients.

Two well-known conspiracy theories are that the 1969 moon landing was staged and that President Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, did not act alone. A more recent one is the suggestion that the COVID-19 vaccine is secretly designed to implant people with a tracking device.
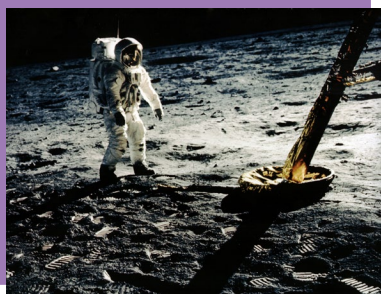
What makes conspiracy theories especially difficult to undo is the fact that it's impossible to disprove them using standard methods of reasoning—not because they are true, but because they are what Harvard professors Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule call "self-sealing," meaning any piece of evidence you might bring to bear on the theory to prove it wrong can be used by the conspiracy theorist as further evidence of the conspiracy.

MOTIVATIONS FOR CONSPIRACY THEORY BELIEFS

University of Kent psychologist Karen Douglas and her colleagues separate the motivations for conspiracy theory beliefs into three broad categories: epistemic, existential, and social.

Epistemic motives concern our desire to make sense of the world around us—to identify cause-and-effect relationships, and to see patterns in events. We do this to live more efficiently and to aid in our own survival. But this tendency can also lead us to see them where they don't really exist.

Because conspiracy theories satisfy our desire to connect the dots and find a cause-and-effect relationship, they're more likely to be held by people who are especially prone to pattern seeking. They're also more common among people who are high in a need for cognitive closure—that is, people who dislike ambiguity and seek fixed answers to questions.

Conspiracy theories are also more common among the less educated and among people who are less analytical in their thinking styles. Unsurprisingly, people who like to base decisions on their gut reactions, or intuition, are also more likely to embrace conspiracy theories compared to those who rely on data or evidence.

> A need for certainty can draw people to conspiracy theories because they impose a sense of order on an otherwise chaotic world.

Existential motives concern our desire to feel safe and in control. By giving us a target for our anger—the bad people operating in the shadows—a conspiracy theory can feel comforting in the chaos of a scary and complex world. These motives help explain why we find higher belief in conspiracy theories among people who feel powerless or who feel little control over their own lives.

Social motives relate to our desire to be close to our social group and to distance ourselves from out-groups. Sharing a belief—even a false one—can make us feel like we're part of a group.

In addition, among groups who feel they are lower-status or somehow losing, conspiracy theories can allow them to save face by blaming their losing status on a conspiracy. This helps explain why people who vote for a losing political candidate are more likely to believe conspiracy theories related to an election outcome. While this is a natural human tendency that operates across the political spectrum, it can be exploited and amplified by elites with something to gain.

SOCIAL ROOTS OF CONSPIRACY THEORY BELIEFS

Social psychologist Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Professor Karen Douglas explain that conspiracy theories are "consequential, universal, emotional, and social." They are consequential because they affect important aspects of life, universal because they've been a part of society throughout history, emotional because they activate negative emotions, and social because they are rooted in intergroup conflict. This last piece is essential. Van Prooijen's research emphasizes the importance of coalitions to the concept of conspiracy theories—that is, that there are groups of actors strategically operating in the shadows (what they call hostile coalitions), working against the interests of other groups.

> Conspiracy theories increase in-group cohesion while also emphasizing the threat posed by an out-group, so they are an efficient way to solidify social identity.

The social roots also account for the link between conspiracy theory beliefs and trust. People who don't trust others and don't trust institutions are more likely to believe conspiracy theories—which makes sense, given that most conspiracy theories are about deception by people working within our existing institutions, from government to the medical community, for example.

According to some social psychologists, conspiracy theories historically may have helped groups survive. According to this adaptive-conspiracism hypothesis, because of the real, tangible threat posed by dangerous outside groups, being suspicious of potentially hostile coalitions would have increased

a group's likelihood of survival. Early detection of such threats would have given humans the ability to strategize and eliminate those threats before they eliminated members of their own group.

INTENTIONAL FALSEHOODS AS A MOBILIZATION TOOL AND PROPAGANDA

Social psychologist Michael Bang Petersen proposes a related theory to explain how and why strategic, intentional falsehoods—disinformation—are so effective. Like the adaptive-conspiricism hypothesis, Peterson suggests that the influence of disinformation has its roots in intergroup conflict. However, his model suggests that the use of disinformation by political and military leaders originated as a device to mobilize, not inform. Rather than seeing disinformation as a form of manipulation, Petersen's approach suggests we should consider disinformation as a tool for mass coordination of group activity in the face of intergroup conflict. So, less important than the content of the false information is the mobilizing effect it has on the people and the troops.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories can also be used to sow distrust and create fear and chaos. Viewed this way, they constitute manipulative forms of persuasive communication. They also constitute propaganda. They are persuasive because they involve the intent to influence the attitudes or behaviors of the audience. They are manipulative because the true intent of the persuader is concealed from the audience. They are propaganda because they are designed to further the intent of the propagandist and operate at scale through media technologies. Returning to some concepts from the very first lecture, these efforts are also largely unethical. They fail the TARES Test— that is, the requirements for ethical persuasive communication to be truthful, authentic, respectful, and focused on equity (between the persuader and the persuadee) and social responsibility (serving the common good).

Importantly, disinformation and conspiracy theories are not random. They are narratives that support and cultivate a specific ideological perspective. Conspiracy theory expert Professor Joanne Miller and her colleagues explain that at the individual level, conspiracy theories "protect or bolster one's

political worldview." Both liberals and conservatives believe conspiracy theories about secret evildoers in the other group.

In 2022, a massive study by social psychologist Roland Imhoff and his colleagues showed that conspiracy theory beliefs are more prevalent among people on the political extremes and are slightly more prevalent on the right

> Beyond providing certainty, order, comfort, and social cohesion, conspiracy theories are about social and political structures.

than on the left—particularly among people who support far-right, traditional, authoritarian parties. Some scholars have even noted a link between the prevalence of conspiracy theories and the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe and in the United States. These movements focus on a sharp contrast between the "morally good people" and the "corrupt elites"—this might include people in government, higher ed, media, or science. In their construction of the desirable in-group, populist leaders often draw distinctions along racial or cultural lines. For populists, then, conspiracy theories present an efficient way to demonize one group while emphasizing the goodness of another.

PATHOS OR LOGOS: YOUR CHOICE

The more we learn about disinformation and conspiracy theories, the clearer it becomes that these manipulative forms of persuasion are successful not because of the information they provide, but because of the feelings that we anticipate from them. These messages promise us feelings of comfort, control, and community. This is pure pathos.

Since all these forms of false information are appealing because of their emotional effects, one way to counter their influence is to incentivize the audience to process the messages not through emotional shortcuts or pathos, but through rational, analytic thought—through logos.

Research by MIT's David Rand and the University of Regina's Gordon Pennycook suggests that the more people think about the likely accuracy of false information, the less likely they are to believe it's true. And if prompted to think in terms of what's most likely to be true, people are less likely to share it with friends and family.

This research highlights how much of the belief in—and spread of—misinformation online results from what they call inattention, or just a lack of careful, reflective thinking. It also illustrates yet another reason why our online media environment is so well suited to the spread of false information and propaganda. Because of the speed with which we scroll through our social media news feeds, our default approach to that information space is not especially thoughtful. But, as it turns out, as individuals who have free will, who have agency to alter how we engage with persuasive messages, we always have the ability to update our beliefs in response to them—or not. We can slow down, think, and engage through logos, or we can allow pathos to guide us. Which one will you choose?

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