

A Brief Exploration of Modern Persuasion Theories

Ian Gillespie

Brigham Young University

School of Fine Arts and Communications

December 13, 2012

Persuasion, or the ability to sway opinions without coercive measures, is one of the most universal human tools (Gass & Seiter, 2007). The “art” of persuasion is one that has been studied for millennia, outlined in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and arguably reaching a historical climax with the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* – at least until the last century. Although persuasion is never a “one size fits all” tool, it is comprised of numerous variables which may often be generalized to fit large audiences. This is significant, because without the ability to influence entire audiences at a time, few things of major importance would ever be accomplished. So persuasive means continue to be used and studied in the context of virtually every aspect of society, including parenting, education, religion, business, politics, psychology, marketing, and warfare.

Studies have identified numerous variables involved in persuasion, such as message sources and recipients, message characteristics, persuasive strategies, and how media interact with these variables. As understanding has improved, theories have been postulated concerning the nature of persuasion, each trying to capture a different aspect of the area. A few of the major theories are explored below, each touching on a different aspect of the field. These include the five canons of rhetoric, elaboration likelihood model, cultivation analysis, the theory of planned behavior, and agenda setting. Before discussing these, however, definitions of persuasion and coercion will be discussed.

### **Defining Persuasion and Coercion**

There is a difference (sometimes subtle) between persuasion and coercion, although this difference comes down to a matter of definitions. A common distinction is that persuasion gains influence through use of understanding message sources and recipients, arguments, data, and mediums, while coercion uses manipulation, bribery, incentives and flattery in order to achieve

its goals (Gass and Seiter, 2007). It may further be argued that successful persuasion sways an audience's opinions or perceptions, so that they feel favorably toward a convincing message. Coercion's primary purpose, on the other hand, is to gain compliance by convincing the audience that it is in their best interest to support the message, even if they may not agree with what is being said. These distinctions are important on not only a moral level; persuasion has a far more enduring affect on beliefs than coercion. It is interesting to note, however, that despite the differences between persuasion and coercion, they often exist side-by-side (Gass and Seiter, 2007).

The field of marketing has been diverging from traditional methods of coercion and persuasion, finding new, subtler way to influence consumers to buy products (Gass and Seiter, 2007). Examples of this include "viral" marketing, where a few influential people are seen with a product in high profile situations and "infect" society with it; or people may be sent incognito into social settings where they talk about a great new cleaning product. In these cases people are often unaware that they are being persuaded, but experience has shown that this brand of marketing is effective (Gass and Seiter, 2007).

### **Persuasion Theories**

Theories are reasoned, empirically tested ways of explaining the world, and can be valuable tools for understanding the how and why of persuasion. However, because the variables involved are numerous and sometimes complex, theories abound in this area of research. Due to the limited space and scope of this paper, only five prominent theories will be explored, each representative of a different emphasis: The five canons of rhetoric, which focuses on message and source; elaboration likelihood model, which centers on persuasive methods; cultivation analysis, representing media uses and effects; the theory of planned behavior, which covers

cognitive processes and behavior; and agenda setting, which centers on manipulating or guiding the thoughts and opinions of entire communities, cultures and nations.

### **Message and Source: Five Canons of Rhetoric**

The five canons are important not just historically, but because they focus on the message and message source. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* borrowed heavily from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and were attributed to Cicero for over a thousand years (*trans.* 1954), but now it is generally understood that the author is unknown. The book outlines five tools or "canons" of rhetoric: invention, disposition (arrangement), style, memory, and delivery.

*Invention* involves producing a valid argument, including prominent points to support the position. *Disposition* or arrangement emphasizes the need for a coherent and fluid presentation of ideas, while style refers to the need to tailor messages to the audience. Numerous facets may apply here, including working with audience opinions, culture, language, values, and so forth. *Delivery* focuses on presentation, such as the use of gestures and varying voice. Finally, *memory* stresses the imperative to study and know a persuasive message thoroughly.

Rhetoric as a whole may not be as important today as it was in the past, but the five canons are essential in many arenas of public life. Lawyers, politicians, newscasters, even job hunters: Their likelihood of credibility and success are largely dependent upon their ability to skillfully use one or more of the canons. Virtually every public speaking course or text covers these principles, because they have proven effective throughout human history.

### **Methods of Persuasion: Elaboration Likelihood Model**

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM), created by Petty and Cacioppo, focuses on receivers of the message (Reinard, 1988). It states that persuasion occurs in two ways: The *central route*, which appeals to people's reasoning by using facts, statistics, logic, evidence,

soundness of arguments, etc; and the *peripheral route* “relies on persuasive elements external to the message itself” (Reinard, 1988, p. 7), such as a speaker’s credibility or attractiveness, elaborate presentation, or pressures of a situation. Essentially, the peripheral route bypasses any critical thinking on the part of the audience (Reinard, 1988). While this sounds deceptive – and often is – the peripheral route can be an effective means of persuasion when an audience member has limited ability to process information, usually due to lack of knowledge (Borchers, 2005).

According to Borchers (2005), Petty and Cacioppo believed that the central route produced more permanent persuasion, because reasoning requires greater effort than experiencing an attitude change due to appeals indirectly related to the subject. While this is likely true in situations where there is limited exposure to the audience, such as politician-constituent or marketer-public relationships, for more involved relationships such as parent-child, it is reasonable to assume that appeals using both central and peripheral routes could complement each other and be more enduring.

### **Media Uses and Effects: Cultivation Analysis**

According to cultivation theory (CT; Gerbner, 1998), humans are storytelling creatures. They tell stories to develop a sense of self, community, and nation, as well as to explain the world. Individual and collective world views, morals, and values are all shaped by the repetition of carefully crafted stories.

The nature of storytelling changed dramatically, however, with the advent of modern communication – particularly television. Rather than each community and region possessing its own unique stories and perspectives, television has become the prime storyteller for all classes of society. This, CT proposes, has resulted in the greatest loss of cultural diversity humans have ever known. Instead of communities developing their own tales, the stories now “come from a

small group of distant conglomerates with something to sell.... Other interests, religious or educational, minority views, and the potential of any challenge to dominant perspectives, lose ground” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 176).

Evidence supporting the idea that perspectives are shaped through frequent television consumption is found in the “mean world syndrome”. During their investigations, Gerbner and his associates found that the more time people spent watching television, the more their view of the world mirrored the world of television – namely that it is a hostile, violent place where people cannot be trusted (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980).

Perhaps the most important concept of CT, then, is how recurring stories facilitate the molding of humanity’s values, morals, perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions. If stories do indeed cultivate views – and decades of evidence suggests that they do (for example, see American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009; Coyne, 2007; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) – then this suggests that, long-term, television is one of the most effective mediums of persuasion.

### **Cognitive Processing and Behavior: Theory of Planned Behavior**

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) has generated a remarkable amount of studies within the academic world. It evolved from the theory of reasoned action (TRA), which states that an act is best predicted by behavioral intentions, which are comprised of attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm (a person’s perception about what others think of the action). Icek Ajzen, who co-created the TRA with Martin Fishbein, recognized that this formula did not account for actions where internal or external control interfered with performance. So Ajzen added a third element, perceived behavioral control (PBC), and named the new formula the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985). PBC is comprised of normative beliefs (behavioral expectations of important people or groups), a person’s motivation to comply, and beliefs (real or

imagined) concerning whether or not an action can be accomplished (Ajzen, Brown & Carvajal, 2004). Numerous studies have shown that PBC adds significant accuracy to the prediction of behaviors where internal or external factors may influence the performance of a behavior (e.g., Madden, Ellen, and Ajzen, 1992; Armitage and Conner, 2001; Chang, 1998).

Although the TPB has traditionally been applied to the prediction of behavior, its model of identifying the causes of behavioral intentions make it easily adaptable to persuasion.

Manipulating subjective norms so that a person feels social pressure to act in a particular way is perhaps the simplest application. Madden, Ellen, and Ajzen (1992) noted that an individual's perception of control could theoretically be manipulated in order to change behavior. An example of this may be found in what Langer (1976) referred to as the "Illusion of Control":

With little provocation, people participating in chance events will behave as if they were engaged in a skill situation and attempt to exert an influence over the outcome.

This perspective asserts that by encouraging or allowing participants in a chance event to engage in behavior that they typically engage in when participating in a skill event, the person is initially led into perceiving that (s)he is involved in a skill situation. (pp. 42-43)

Thus by manipulating people's PBC, they may temporarily believe that they have more control over a situation than they actually do.

It should be noted that using this example in support of the TPB is ironic, because Langer believed that actions are largely an unthinking process, especially for familiar decisions; whereas Ajzen's TPB assumes that each behavior is weighed and planned via behavioral intentions before it is acted out. But it may be argued that the example can support both views: Langer said that the lapse in judgment was due to "mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action" (1976, p. 38),

whereas Ajzen might say it is the result of tricking or distracting thinking people so that they temporarily assumed more behavioral control than they actually possessed. Which argument is right may require further testing to learn.

### **Mindless apes or superior minds?**

This raises an interesting argument among persuasion theorists. Cialdini (1993) agreed with Langer, insisting that people frequently use “shortcuts” instead constant evaluative thinking. When explaining why this is done he took a kinder view than Langer, however. He explained that the behavior is not simple “mindlessness”; it is done in order to bypass obtaining and evaluating large amounts of information every time a new decision needs to be made. Cialdini identified six main kinds of shortcuts: reciprocation (feeling obligated to respond in kind when something is given), commitment and consistency, social proofs, likability or charisma of individuals, and authority. These shortcuts, he explained, are frequently manipulated in order to gain compliance.

Langer (1976) explained that each time a behavior is repeated, less and less cognitive processing is required. Eventually even complex actions (especially social) may become “overlearned” so that the entire process becomes thoughtless. A good example of this is when an American gives the standard reply to an expected greeting, only to find the greeting was different than expected. Thus the question, “What are you doing here?” receives a reply of, “Good.”

Interestingly, both approaches to decision making have plenty of data to support their views; so the answer likely lies somewhere in-between. This leaves individual researchers a choice: Continue investigating under the assumption that most decisions result from a combination of evaluative processes, or as Langer (1976) put it, “Perhaps the more general issue that needs to be considered is how much time is actually spent in any kind of thoughtful action” (p. 35).



### **Guiding Communities and Nations: Agenda Setting**

Traditionally, the news media have held great power as the trend setters in society. In a concept known as gatekeeping, the media receive the news first, and then select which stories the public will hear and how those stories will be told. In this way politicians, business professionals, and other decision-makers are influenced by the stories that are told (Valenzuela and McCombs, 2009). What stories are told (and not told), how much emphasis (time) stories receive, and how news stories are presented all help determine people's awareness and perception of the world. Despite this, agenda setting theory does not assume that the media can tell people what to think, but they are successful at telling people what to think about (Borchers, 2005).

Agenda setting is like the aggressive, driven twin of gatekeeping theory. Both theories refer to the same process of selecting what information to send through to the public and what to withhold, and both are involved in how stories are presented. Where the two differ is in motive: While gatekeeping's goal is the dissemination of important news, agenda setting is the intentional manipulation of information through channels in order to create a specific outcome. This may be done through presentation, withholding or promoting information in order to make their agenda become the public agenda, which in turn becomes policy agenda (Borchers, 2005).

As mentioned, the news media have traditionally wielded tremendous power in the United States and other countries. That power is shifting, however, with the advancement of social media and the internet. Where newspapers and television news shows were once the number one sources for news, people are now going online to learn of current events. This shift of power is significant for several reasons: 1) Influential power is more evenly distributed, so that agendas are not so readily disseminated. 2) Greater distribution of influence suggests greater diversity of ideas, but also provides the possibility of less national and cultural cohesion. 3) More

information is going to make it through the “news gate”, but this also makes information overload more likely to happen to people. 4) With such a diversity of sources, credibility will be much harder to ascertain and regulate.

In short, agenda setting theory seeks to outline agendas of the news media as well as the effects of agenda setting on society and public policy. Even as media methods evolve and the professional news media shrinks, the theory remains important because it provides a model to understand shifts and trends in society.

### **Conclusion**

As long as humans communicate, persuasion will play a central role in their lives. Today more than ever, persuasive voices call from virtually every sign, store, shirt, television, song, movie, or Internet web site. Current theories provide fascinating insights into the anomaly of human persuasion, but volumes more will be written as technology continues to change the parameters of communication.

**References**

- Ad C. Herennium de ratione dicendi: (Rhetorica ad Herennium)*. (1954). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rhetorica\\_ad\\_Herennium/Introduction\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rhetorica_ad_Herennium/Introduction*.html)
- American Academy of Pediatrics (2009). Policy statement – media violence. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 124(5), 1495-1503. doi:10.1542/peds.2009-2146
- Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2002). The effects of media violence on society. *Science*, 295, 2377-2378.
- Ajzen, I., Brown, T. C., & Carvajal, F. (2004). Explaining the discrepancy between intentions and actions: The case of hypothetical bias in contingent valuation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1108-1121.
- Armitage, C. J., & Conner, M. (2001). Efficacy of the theory of planned behaviour: A meta-analytic review. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 40, 471-499.
- Borchers, T. A. (2005). *Persuasion in the media age* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Chang, M. K. (1998). Predicting unethical behavior: A comparison of the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 17, 1825-1834.
- Coyne, S. M. (2007). Does media violence cause violent crime? *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 13(3), 205-211.
- Gass, R. H., & Seiter, J. S. (2007). *Persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. *Mass Communication and Society*, 1(3-4), 175-194.

- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1980). The "mainstreaming" of America: Violence profile no. 11. *Journal of Communication*, 30(3), 10-29.
- Langer, E. J. (1976). Rethinking the role of thought in social interaction. In J. H. Harvey, W. J. Ickes, and R. F. Kidd (Eds.), *New Directions in Attribution Research*, Vol. 2 [pp. 35-58]. NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Madden, T. J., Ellen, P. S., Ajzen, I. (1992). A comparison of the theory of planned behavior and the theory of reasoned action. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 1, 3-9.
- Reinard, J. C. (1988). The empirical study of the persuasive effects of evidence: The status after fifty years of research. *Human Communication Research*, 15(1), 3-59.
- Valenzuela, S., & McCombs, M. (2009). The agenda-setting role of the news media. In D. W. Stacks & M. B. Salwen (Eds.), *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). NY: Routledge.