

Social Influence through Persuasion: Public Buy-In and Mobilization

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Overview of Issue

At various points in time, US security will require quick and potentially widespread mobilization of the public, directed by the agencies safeguarding our country. When this is necessary, mass communication through various media (e.g., television, internet, radio) will be the most effective means. Attempting to do this without a thorough understanding of how communication and persuasion work, however, could lead to serious negative consequences. Over the past 80 years, social psychologists have learned a lot about when message recipients do and do not pay attention to persuasive communications (a key in determining the long-term effectiveness of the communication).¹ Although there is much to learn, existing social psychological theories would provide strong guidance for how to study the determinants of how people think about and later act upon information about security and threat.

Determining the Effectiveness of Persuasive Communications

Long-term effects from a persuasive message cannot occur if people are not convinced that the recommended actions make sense. For example, if people do not believe that plastic and duct tape will effectively protect them from biological attacks, then even the most effective means of getting people to pay attention to the message will not result in successful change in people's behaviors. Many aspects of the messages themselves can determine whether people will find them compelling (perhaps summarized by whether acceptance of the message would serve the message recipient's salient goals, including expression of core values, accurate knowledge of the world, and utilitarian self-interest).² However, even if a truly compelling message can be crafted, agents of change face the challenge of getting people to pay attention to (and carefully think about) the message. When people pay close attention to a message, the resulting attitudes are likely to last over time, to resist change in face of attack, and to guide behavior.³ Each of these consequences of attitudes is extremely important. Even if people are convinced in advance that a particular action makes sense (e.g., gathering stores of food and water to last through a period without utility service), the persuasive attempt could come to nothing if the attitude does not persist from the time of the persuasive communication until the opportunity to make those purchases (which may be days, weeks, or longer, depending on the nature of the behaviors), if naysayers in the media or friends and family convince the person that the action is unnecessary, or if the positive view of the action is not strong enough to guide the relevant behaviors. Thus, in order to create a maximally effective communication strategy, it is crucial to establish the factors that lead people to form strong attitudes supporting the advocated actions.

Research has shown that many aspects of the message, the source of the message, and the recipient of the message determine whether people think carefully about the information (and, therefore, whether strong attitudes are created).¹ For example, an agency might decide to place an announcement during a popular television situation comedy in order to efficiently reach a large number of citizens. This may make sense from the sheer efficiency of seeking a large audience, but it may not make sense from the standpoint of effective persuasion. This is because research shows that positive moods (of the type induced by comedy shows) decrease the processing of persuasive communications that include negative information.⁴ Thus, although large numbers of people might be reached, they may pay little attention to the information, and the long-term effects of the announcement may be minimal. Recent research suggests that these effects of positive mood might be overcome when recipients learn that the message will help them to avoid future negative events.^{5,6} Specific effects of negative emotions such as fear and sadness have also been shown in the persuasion domain.⁷ There are many more influences on the long-term effectiveness of persuasive communications. For example, in addition to elaboration (careful thinking) about persuasive messages, attitudes that are associated with high levels of confidence, knowledge, importance, and accessibility (i.e., likelihood of quickly and spontaneously coming to mind) are also more likely to last over time, to resist change, and to guide behavior.^{8,9,10,11}

Recommendations

Effective mobilization of the public can only occur through effective mass communication. In order to create communications that have the desired effects within the security domain, it will be necessary to directly study the message, source, and recipient characteristics that produce the desired initial and long-term reactions to the messages. Although much has been learned about effective persuasion, much is left to learn about how the specific security-related content, likely sources of the information, and contexts in which security messages are conveyed influence the long-term effects of these appeals. Up-front attention to these issues could greatly improve the effectiveness of advocacies for public action.

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