CHAPTER 15
ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

Outline

I. The central route and the peripheral route: alternative paths to persuasion.
   A. Richard Petty and John Cacioppo posit two basic routes for persuasion.
   B. The central route involves message elaboration, defined as the extent to which a
      person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive
      communication.
   C. The peripheral route processes the message without any active thinking about the
      attributes of the issue or the object of consideration.
      1. Recipients rely on a variety of cues to make quick decisions.
      2. Robert Cialdini has identified six such cues.
         a. Reciprocation.
         b. Consistency.
         c. Social proof.
         d. Liking.
         e. Authority.
         f. Scarcity.
   D. Although Petty and Cacioppo’s model seems to suggest that the routes are mutually
      exclusive, they stress that the central route and the peripheral route are poles on a
      cognitive processing continuum that shows the degree of mental effort a person
      exerts when evaluating a message.
   E. The more listeners work to evaluate a message, the less they will be influenced by
      content-irrelevant factors; the greater the effect of content-irrelevant factors, the less
      impact the message carries.

II. Motivation for elaboration: is it worth the effort?
   A. People are motivated to hold correct attitudes.
   B. Yet the number of ideas a person can scrutinize is limited, so we tend to focus on
      issues that are personally relevant.
   C. Personally relevant issues are more likely to be processed on the central route;
      issues with little relevance take the peripheral route (credibility cues take on greater
      importance).
   D. Certain individuals have a need for cognitive clarity, regardless of the issue; these
      people will work through many of the ideas and arguments they hear.

III. Ability for elaboration: can they do it?
   A. Distraction disrupts elaboration.
   B. Repetition may increase the possibility of elaboration.

IV. Type of elaboration: objective vs. biased thinking.
   A. Biased elaboration (top-down thinking) occurs when predetermined conclusions color
      the supporting data underneath.
B. Objective evaluation (bottom-up thinking) considers the facts on their own merit.

V. Elaborated messages: strong, weak, and neutral.
   A. Objective elaboration examines the perceived strength of an argument.
      1. Petty and Cacioppo have no absolute standard for differentiating between cogent and specious arguments.
      2. They define a strong message as one that generates favorable thoughts.
   B. Thoughtful consideration of strong arguments will produce positive shifts in attitude.
      1. The change is persistent over time.
      2. It resists counterpersuasion.
      3. It predicts future behavior.
   C. Thoughtful consideration of weak arguments can lead to negative boomerang effects paralleling the positive effects of strong arguments (but in the opposite direction).
   D. Mixed or neutral messages won’t change attitudes and in fact reinforce original attitudes.

VI. Peripheral cues: an alternative route of influence.
   A. Most messages are processed through the peripheral route, bringing attitude changes without issue-relevant thinking.
   B. The most obvious cues for the peripheral route are tangible rewards.
   C. Source credibility is also important.
      1. The principal components of source credibility are likability and expertise.
      2. Source credibility is salient for those unmotivated or unable to elaborate.
   D. Peripheral route change can be either positive or negative, but it won’t have the impact of message elaboration.
   E. Celebrity endorsements constitute some of the most effective peripheral cues, yet the change can be short-lived.

VII. Pushing the limits of peripheral power.
   A. Penner and Fritzsche’s study of Magic Johnson’s HIV announcement suggests that the effect of even powerful peripheral cues is short-lived.
   B. Although most elaboration likelihood model (ELM) research has measured the effects of peripheral cues by studying credibility, a speaker’s competence or character could also be a stimulus to effortful message elaboration.
   C. It’s impossible to make a list of cues that are strictly peripheral; cues that make a listener scrutinize a message are no longer mindless.

VIII. Choosing a route: practical advice for the persuader.
   A. If listeners are motivated and able to elaborate a message, rely on factual arguments—i.e., favor the central route.
   B. When using the central route, however, weak arguments can backfire.
   C. If listeners are unable or unwilling to elaborate a message, rely on packaging rather than content—i.e., favor peripheral route.
   D. When using the peripheral route, however, the effects will probably be fragile.
IX. Critique: elaborating the mode.
   A. ELM has been a leading theory of persuasion and attitude change for the last twenty years, and its initial model has been very influential.
   B. Petty and Cacioppo have elaborated ELM to make it more complex, less predictive, and less practical, which makes it problematic as a scientific theory.
   C. As Paul Mongeau and James Stiff have charged, the theory cannot be adequately tested and falsified, particularly in terms of what makes a strong or weak argument.
   D. Despite these limitations, the theory synthesizes many diverse aspects of persuasion.

Key Names and Terms

Richard Petty and John Cacioppo
Psychologists from Ohio State University and the University of Chicago, respectively, who created the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion.

Elaboration
The extent to which a person carefully thinks about the issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive communication.

Central Route
Cognitive processing that involves scrutiny of message content; message elaboration.

Peripheral Route
Cognitive processing that accepts or rejects a message based on nonrelevant cues as opposed to actively thinking about the issue.

Biased Elaboration
Top-down thinking, in which predetermined conclusions color the supporting data.

Objective Elaboration
Bottom-up thinking, in which the facts are scrutinized without bias.

Strong Argument
A message that generates favorable thoughts when heard and scrutinized.

Paul Mongeau and James Stiff
Arizona State University researcher and communication consultant, respectively, who charge that descriptions of ELM are imprecise and ambiguous and thus cannot be adequately tested.

Robert Cialdini
Arizona State University researcher who has identified six peripheral cues that trigger automatic responses.

Louis Penner and Barbara Fritzche
University of South Florida psychologists whose study of Magic Johnson’s HIV announcement suggests that the effect of even powerful peripheral cues is short-lived.

Principal Changes

This chapter, which previously was Chapter 14, remains essentially the same. Griffin has updated his examples and the Second Look section. In addition, he has edited for clarity and precision.
Suggestions for Discussion

A strict line between the central and peripheral routes?

When discussing this chapter, we believe it is important to stress the notion of the two routes as poles on a cognitive processing continuum. Drawing a bold line between the “extensive cognitive work” of the central route and the “automatic pilot” of the peripheral route is theoretically clean and elegant, yet as Petty and Cacioppo stress, it may not be true to the complex reality of influence. We like to discuss, for example, how Cialdini’s six cues for the peripheral route (217) may not always indicate a complete abnegation of strong cognitive processing. For example, the appeal to consistency resembles the very credible rule of justice emphasized by rhetoricians Chaim Perelman and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 218-19, as well as the argument from precedent, which lies at the heart of legal reasoning. Our judiciary depends upon the practice of marshaling earlier cases as guideposts for present decisions.

Social proof may seem mindless at the outset. It is very similar to the rhetorician’s bandwagon fallacy, yet its central mechanism is far from illogical. Thus, in the midst of tough decisions about policy, wise college administrators often research how other schools have handled the same issue. Many times, the trends that other institutions have established encourage a president or dean to follow suit. Heeding authority can be extremely logical if—as is so often the case in this age of increasingly complex technology—the essential reasoning in the case is beyond our expertise. It is perfectly reasonable, for example, to heed the advice of one’s mechanic and replace bald tires, even though the precise physics of friction and steering may be unknown to us. Likewise, although the intricate chemistry of cholesterol is known to very few laypersons, millions of us have wisely altered our long-term eating habits based primarily on the authority of relatively few health professionals. There is skill involved in evaluating persuasive elements such as consistency, social proof, and authority that is both complex and rational.

Emotional appeals

Petty and Cacioppo’s reason-based approach does not put much stock in appeals to the emotions of the audience. It may be useful to challenge your students to imagine instances when such appeals may be the most appropriate available, even with a motivated audience capable of elaboration. For example, campaigns to ban the killing of harp seals and whales have been based primarily on establishing affection for these creatures. One of the strongest arguments in favor of the death penalty is based on vindicating or avenging the relatives of murder victims, a goal that is primarily emotional in nature.

In recent years, many interpretive scholars have come to believe that emotions are legitimate—in fact, essential—components of the persuasive process. Said another way, the rigid distinctions between passion and judgment/reason (or heart and head) are in many academic circles being increasingly challenged. More and more, humanists are coming to believe that emotion and reason work together to forge belief. Instead of compartmentalizing the human psyche, such scholars are piecing together an integrative picture of the mind (and of discourse) that is inclusive, rather than exclusive. Along these lines, Lynn Worsham writes that emotion is “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed
and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings” (“Going Postal: Pedagogical Violence and the Schooling of Emotion,” *JAC* 18, 2 [1998], 216). Concerning research in the history of rhetoric, Patricia Bizzell praises scholars who have adopted “radically new methods . . . which violate some of the most cherished conventions of academic research, most particularly in bringing the person of the researcher, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul, into the work” (“Feminist Methods of Research in the History of Rhetoric: What Difference Do They Make?” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30 [Fall 2000], 16). Thus, the work of Worsham, Bizzell, and others suggests that it is mistaken to think of emotional arguments as peripheral in relation to—or even separate from—logical appeals. And, although he is hardly a new name, William James makes a very famous argument in “The Will to Believe” that in the arguments most significant to us, we must accept—embrace—the inevitable links between reason and belief, passion, faith, and emotion.

**Which is central and which is peripheral?**

Peter Andersen, a communication theorist from San Diego State University, shared with us a very intriguing critique of ELM. He argues that the two routes are misnamed. The central route, because it is seldom used in public discourse, should really be labeled peripheral. Likewise, the peripheral route, because it is the more common road to persuasion, should be considered central. Try this out on your students.

**Biased and objective elaboration**

The difference between biased and objective elaboration should also be scrutinized carefully by your students. As Griffin mentions, social judgment theory suggests that our evaluation of arguments is inherently based on our own opinions. Is it therefore possible to receive an objective hearing from a motivated audience? Would an elaboration continuum be more appropriate than a binary opposition here? It’s also important that students expose the potentially circular reasoning that underlies Petty and Cacioppo’s definition of strong arguments. (Essay Question #25 addresses this issue.) A useful classroom exercise would be to attempt to generate more specific criteria for solidly reasoned argumentation.

**Cialdini’s programmed responses**

You may want to devote some time to unpacking Cialdini’s programmed response cues with your students. As Griffin mentions in the text, these cues form an automatic pilot response when faced with an influence attempt—they allow for a snap decision. But, be sure to note for your students that Cialdini’s responses do not suggest that we have no cognition about the decision, only that they are already preprogrammed much like the buttons on a car radio. After the user has tuned their dial and saved it to memory, they can be used again without having to think through the listening choices. Bringing back the issue of ethics in persuasion, you might want to ask students if pulling on one of these “presets” is ethical. While short-term response might be favorable, will the persuaded still think well of you if they later feel they have been manipulated by reciprocity, authority, or scarcity?

* Many classical scholars argue that at least as far back as Aristotle, rhetorical theorists have sought to characterize the inherent logic of emotions and emotional appeals. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here.
Revising the flowchart

No doubt you’ve noticed that Figure 15.1 (the flow chart on p. 218) may be incomplete. As you work down the central route, there is no line showing the path of biased elaboration or “top-down thinking,” which Petty and Cacioppo believe simply boosts the audience’s original beliefs. You may enjoy working with your class to revise the chart to account for biased elaboration. Richard Perloff offers a somewhat more complex chart in The Dynamics of Persuasion, 120.

Sample Application Log

Andy

It’s the peripheral route that I want to emphasize here. For several years I’ve been aching to go skydiving. My parents, especially my mom, were adamantly opposed. However, two years ago my dream came true. It was near the beginning of the summer and I had just graduated from high school. I was really working on my mom to allow me to go. I’d be turning 18 in a month, so the only thing stopping me was the okay from the parents. I tried everything—literature, brochures, movies—everything I knew about skydiving I shared with them. But no matter what I tried, the answer kept coming back “NO.” Then things changed in my favor. A new employee started at the daycare where my mom worked, and she was an avid skydiver. She was 20 years old and had been jumping for several years now. And thanks to her I was able to go. My mom wouldn’t listen to reason, she wouldn’t read any of the literature that I brought home (the central route), but she listened to this girl she worked with (peripheral route: likeness). I have to admit that the girl at the daycare probably knew less about skydiving than I did, but because my mom liked her, and she felt it was safe, my mom decided it would be okay for me to go. (Of course, now she says I’ll never get to go again, but I’m working on it.)

Exercises and Activities

Constructing an argument

Griffin’s discussion of Rita’s crusade aptly exemplifies ELM in action, but it may be useful to assign for homework or to discuss in class other situations in which the two routes toward persuasion can be applied. (Essay Question #23 below addresses this issue.) We’ve asked students to imagine that they are development officers putting together a capital campaign for the college. How would they craft their message to encourage alumni to give generously? If your institution is currently involved in a persuasive effort of another sort, it may also serve as a useful case study for ELM. It may be useful to compare such arguments with those made in high-school peer groups to encourage participation in forbidden behaviors such as drinking, sex, and so forth. Media advertising and college recruitment literature also make excellent texts for such analysis.

“Need for Cognition Scale”

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he walks through Figure 15.1 (the flow chart on p. 218) very deliberately with the class. With a specific example not included in the chapter, he demonstrates the step-by-step approach of the theory. He is particularly interested in making the point that it is ultimately the audience that picks the route to be taken in the argument.
Griffin also finds it useful to share with students the “Need for Cognition Scale” he discusses on p. 200. (Footnote 5 in the textbook directs you to the source.) A fruitful exercise would be to administer the 18-item scale to your students.

**Political pamphlets**

When Ed McDaniel teaches this theory, he finds political election pamphlets and brochures to be effective illustrators for ELM. Election materials can easily be divided into those directing the reader toward the central or peripheral routes, and those focusing on the peripheral route can be used to point out persuasive cues (e.g., the brochure contains only a list or organizations endorsing the candidate).

**Adapting a social judgment exercise for ELM**

Ron Adler’s social judgment exercise (see our treatment of social judgment, Chapter 14) could easily be adapted for ELM. What does ELM elucidate in this communicative situation that social judgment theory does not consider? Likewise, what does social judgment theory make clear that ELM cannot address?

**Further Resources**

- For studies that follow in the tradition of Petty and Cacioppo, see:
- Perloff’s *Persuading People to Have Safer Sex: Applications of Social Science to the AIDS Crisis* applies ELM to disease prevention (80-81).

Other relevant articles by Richard Petty

Emotions in persuasion


Cialdini’s programmed responses


Feature films

- Four films that feature masterful manipulation of the peripheral route are *Glengarry Glen Ross, The Last Seduction, Body Heat, and Bob Roberts.*
Sample Examination Questions

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