

## CHANGING THEORIES OF RESISTANCE TO CHANGE\*

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Those who would warn us of the dangers of propaganda or advertising often imply that people are easily manipulated--puppets in the hands of hidden persuaders. Studies of Mass communications effects, however, suggest that people resist change, that it is difficult to cause major shifts in attitudes or behavior except under quite limited conditions. And when those conditions are met, it is difficult to tell the puppet from the puppeteer--each, in a sense, is 'pulling the strings.'

Let me oversimplify things a bit and talk about four major theories of mass persuasion. The first and most naive I call the injection theory. This theory maintains that the propagandist, advertiser, or promoter simply 'injects' his message into the receiver. The receiver is passive. If enough material is injected, it is assumed that he will change in a predictable direction.

The person who fears communist speakers on campus because even a little communism 'injected' into a student may cause an infection, the advertiser who repetitiously hammers home his message, and the authoritarian teacher who assumes he possesses 'knowledge' that can be poured, pounded, or injected into passive students all operate on the injection theory.

When simple 'injection' seemed inadequate to explain the effects of persuasive messages (some subjects were obstinately resistant to change), an 'erosion' theory developed. Here, again, the receiver was assumed to be passive, but 'tougher' in some areas than others. Repeated messages would wear him away provided they worked on his 'soft spots.'

Perhaps these simple cause-effect, stimulus-response theories seemed so reasonable because they follow the natural one-directional logic of our language--actor, action, acted upon. In 1946 Smith, Lasswell and Casey (1) compiled a list of 150 titles '...Selected from among the writers of all periods of history and all places who have appeared to be most comprehensive...in supplying answers to the question which is central in the minds of scientific students of the communication process: If who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, what will be the results?' This may become a classic example of the logic of language becoming the logic of research. With this question 'central in their minds' it took some time for students of communication to discover the hidden assumption: that the sender does all the acting,

that the receiver is merely 'acted upon.'

These simple cause-effect theories have persisted in spite of many studies which relate the effectiveness of a message to the receiver's needs, goals, attitudes, and experience.

In recent years research has made it clear that the receiver is not passive. He chooses to be in some audiences, not in others; he listens to some messages, not to others; he pays attention to parts of a message, not all of it; he acts on some messages, not others. He is now recognized as an active ingredient in the communication process, but why and how does he make his choices? Homeostatic theories answer, 'To re-establish an equilibrium, to maintain a kind of internal status quo.'

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (2), Osgood and Tannenbaum's congruity theory (3), Heider's balance theory (4), and Newcomb's 'strain toward symmetry' (5) exemplify homeostatic theories. All involve 'a kind of balance-of-forces approach in which an overloading of one type of factor gives rise to changes designed to restore balance.' (6)

Maccoby and Maccoby (6), in discussing homeostatic theory in attitude change, report, '... much research and theorizing has been centered around the identification of the conditions which determine whether dissonance or imbalance or inconsistency will result in attitude change or in some alternative course of action. The possible alternatives have been frequently noted: they include (1) strengthening the original attitude by discounting the source of the disturbing communication, or by seeking additional information which will support the initial attitude; (2) refusal to attend to the message, or repressing or de-verbalizing it once it is received; and (3) compartmentalizing or fractionating the attitude so that the inconsistencies are not so readily apparent.'

Berelson and Steiner in Human Behavior, An Inventory of Scientific Findings (7) report several findings that support the homeostatic theories:

1. People tend to see and hear communications that are favorable or congenial to their predispositions...And the more interested they are in the subject, the more likely is such selective attention. (p. 529)
2. People tend to misperceive and misinterpret persuasive communications in accordance with their own predispositions, by evading the message or by distorting it in a favorable

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direction. (p. 537)

3. The more trustworthy, credible, or prestigious the communicator is perceived to be, the less manipulative his intent is considered to be and the greater the immediate tendency to accept his conclusions. (p. 537)

4. In cases where the audience approves of the communicator but disapproves of his conclusions, it tends to dissociate the source from the content. (p. 538)

5. People respond to persuasive communications in line with their predispositions, and they change or resist change accordingly. Communications will be most effective--that is, will secure the response most in line with the intention of the communicator--when they are in accord with audience predispositions; when they tell people what they (most) want to be told. (pp. 540-541)

6. Communications are most likely to reinforce existing positions, then to activate latent positions, and least likely to change or counter existing or latent positions (i.e. convert). (p. 541)

The receiver is now in the act--with a vengeance! He is no longer pictured as passive; he is actively resisting changes in his psychological status quo. Those of us who feared propagandists and hidden persuaders might, at this point, heave a sigh of relief. Man is not as easily manipulated as we were led to believe.

But from another point of view, these findings are disturbing. In a world of ever more rapid change, can man survive by resisting change, by clinging to 'predispositions,' by misperceiving and distorting to maintain these 'predispositions'? In an atomic era, what happens if we cling to ideas about and attitudes toward 'defense' that became obsolete 20 years ago? Somehow our attitudes must keep pace with our social and scientific developments.

The homeostatic man strikes me as too rigid, too defensive to meet current problems, and he is hardly one to seek adventure, novelty, excitement, or self-fulfillment.

Fortunately, the homeostatic theories, while contributing much to our understanding of human behavior, tell only a part of the story. Rokeach in *The Open and Closed Mind* (8) summarizes the situation in this way: 'The beautiful thing about a belief system is that it seems to be constructed to serve both masters at once: to understand the world insofar as possible, and to defend against it insofar as necessary. We do not agree with those who hold that people selectively distort their cognitive functioning so that they will see, remember and think only what they want to. Instead, we hold to the view that people will do so only to the extent that they have to and no more. For we are all motivated by the desire which is sometimes strong and sometimes weak, to see reality as it actually is, even if it hurts.' (p. 400)

Transactional theories of communication overcome many of the limitations of the homeo-

static theories. Here the receiver plays an even more active role in the communication process. According to W. Philips Davison (9): '...This approach emphasizes that the communicator's audience is not a passive recipient--it cannot be regarded as a lump of clay to be molded by the master propagandist. Rather, the audience is made up of individuals who demand something from the communications to which they are exposed, and who select those that are likely to be useful to them. In other words, they must get something from the manipulator if he is to get something from them. A bargain is involved. Sometimes, it is true, the manipulator is able to lead his audience into a bad bargain by emphasizing one need at the expense of another, or by representing a change in the significant environment as greater than it actually has been. But audiences, too, can drive a hard bargain. Many communicators who have been widely disregarded or misunderstood know that to their cost.' (p. 360)

The transactional theories allow the receiver some initiative, some room for growth, for development, for change in response to changing conditions. They restore to the individual some dignity as a human being. He is no longer a puppet, a robot, a defensive reactor. Indeed, the receiver in effect influences the communicator by the role it forces him to play. The communicator, to be effective, must tailor his image, his appeal, his 'product,' his media and his message to the receiver. We might well ask, 'Who is influencing whom?'

This new emphasis on the 'activity' of the receiver is not confined to man-to-man communication. Through the work of the late Adelbert A. Ames, Jr., and the transactional psychologists (10), we have learned that man plays a very active role in interpreting the 'messages' from the world around him.

It has been thought by most people that perception was very simple; that one merely looked at an object, saw what it was, and that settled the matter. The object from which the light rays came was the important part of the process, and the person receiving the rays was merely a receptor, took what came to him, and had no control over it. Ames has shown us that we, through our interpretation, make an object what we can, that we never see anything exactly as it is, and that no two people interpret any object exactly the same. Of course, in the case of common, inanimate objects the difference may be slight, but in uncommon and animate objects, such as other people, the difference may be very great.

(11, p. 171)

Because of these new insights, transactional theories of communication are much more complex

than the notion of a 'bargain' would suggest, for behind each bargain are the purposes, goals and values of each of the parties involved in the transaction. Each of us comes into the world unique. Because we occupy a particular bit of space-time, our perceptions are necessarily unique. Because of the processes of abstraction (selective sensation, perception, categorization, memory, etc.), our pictures of the world are necessarily unique. It is not surprising, then, that our higher order abstractions--our purposes, goals, and values--are also unique. But these higher-order abstractions, in turn, influence our perceptions:

Man never can know more of the external world than those aspects which are directly relevant to the carrying out of his purposes. Each man's perceptions are therefore his own, unique and personal; common perceptions become possible in so far as common experiences and common strivings are shared among individuals. This approach places perceiving squarely within the context of human striving, the 'thing perceived' being inseparably a part of the 'process of perceiving' and both reflecting 'reality' only by virtue of the active participation of the perceiver in the full-bodied, ongoing process of living. (10, p. 4)

Perhaps some young graduate student, looking for a dissertation topic, will explore the influence of general semantics on transactional psychology and transactional psychology on general semantics, for certainly they are related. Both emphasize a process orientation, the uniqueness of each human being, the uniqueness of perception, the process of abstraction and projec-

tion, unconscious assumptions, the circularity of knowledge, a general principle of uncertainty, the limitations of language, and the organism-as-a-whole-in-environments. Both lend dignity to each unique individual

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