

Democracy, Political Perceptions, and New Media

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ABSTRACT

The participation of citizens in a democratic government is often influenced by the media, particularly new communication technologies. The differences between mass media and new media are pertinent to understanding how each works to shape our opinions and perceptions. Students need to understand the role of both traditional mass media outlets and new media in shaping public participation in our society.

Keywords: democracy, new media, political perceptions, political science, social media

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion and the participation of citizens in a democratic government are closely tied to the media, particularly new communication technologies. Mass media outlets have developed numerous strategies to gain an influential power position and impressive communication ability. Students need to understand the role of both traditional mass media outlets and new media in shaping public participation in our society. One means of understanding the persuasive techniques brought to bear by mass media is through the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL (ELM)

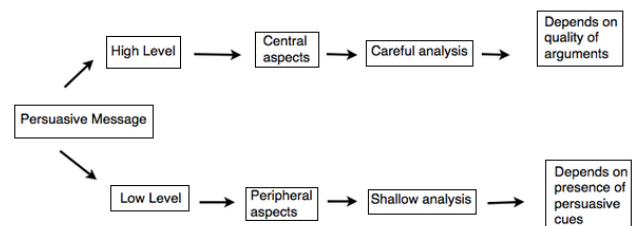
With many new and emerging technologies, the media has numerous avenues to communicate its message to the public. To understand how the media can gain its vast power, it is necessary to first understand how humans process information and the various routes to persuasion. For the purpose of this paper, persuasion is defined as the process by which one's perspectives or behaviors are influenced by receiving a message. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) was first described by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo in 1986; ELM is considered a comprehensive model of persuasion. This effective theory is used by public speakers and the professional media in order to captivate their audiences [1]. The ELM offers specific persuasion strategies that are outlined in relation to the source, message, channel, and receiver of any given communication.

As we know, humans have two memory banks, the working, or short-term, memory where information is processed and assessed, and the long-term memory, where information is stored within nodes in the brain for future access. However, accessing nodes in the long-term memory takes time if they are

not accessed regularly [2]. The process of accessing long-term memory nodes is somewhat more time-consuming than retrieving information from the short-term memory.

According to the ELM model, there are two routes to persuasion: central and peripheral. In central route processing, which takes place in the long-term memory bank, persuasion is accomplished by the quality of the argument, therefore this type of processing is based on high message elaboration. In sum, in central route processing, the receivers or viewers are motivated to engage in effortful information processing of the message or information provided by the information source, or medium.

The other route of persuasion is through peripheral route processing. In this route of persuasion, the receivers are influenced by other factors besides the quality of the message given. For example, the receivers may be persuaded by the message or by the speaker's credentials or attractiveness [3]. With this route of persuasion, various sources of media, most notably television news networks, can capture their audience through the use of attractive anchors or state-of-the-art graphics on screen, as well as three-dimensional images and logos for the beautification of network news programs and websites. In peripheral route processing, humans take cognitive shortcuts, which respond at a top-of-the-head level to relatively subtle cognitive cues, rather than storing gross amounts of information in the brain nodes [4].



The media uses this knowledge of cognitive processing to construct cue words and sound bites. A viewer's attention is grabbed by displaying a message which in one word or a group of a few key words serves as an external cue. An external cue such as "9-11," can cause viewers to immediately recall information in their long-term memory more quickly as they label the nodes. By adding additional words or headlines to "9-11," the media can construct a hard-hitting message as the viewer undergoes short-term persuasion. Obviously this system of storage, along with its routes of persuasion, can serve as a problem in some events.

Interesting headlines created by intertwining cue words such as “Osama Bin Laden” and “the Middle East,” may cause a viewer to take the peripheral route and begin to associate the two as one in the same, as the particular headline consistently appears in an attractive graphical format on-screen. Another example is the use of “Saddam Hussein” and “Iraq” in conjunction with one another. When the two cue words are constantly meshed together in a single message, many people, especially in the U.S., begin to form an association so that whenever the name Osama Bin Laden is mentioned, the brain automatically associates “terrorist” with the Middle East and the symbol of “9-11.” Obviously such associations are likely to evoke negative emotions. Trending Twitter hashtags like #Muslimwatch, #Muslimterrorist and #Blamethemuslims are demonstrative of the common negative associations made by many people. This is one place where the news media has the responsibility to clearly distinguish between nations and their menaces. Overall, the menaces and events tend to serve as the necessary symbols for faster recollection of the information.

SYMBOLIC POLITICS

Students also need to understand that symbolic politics is another important aspect of how the media communicates with the public. Of course, all communication is symbolic in nature. Humans are naturally creatures of symbols which they can use to participate in interactions with other cultures. However, there are few, if any, culturally neutral symbols; it is important to note that symbols are subjective. Communication scholars Gudykunst and Kim emphasize the subjectivity of symbols when they state that “symbols are only symbols because a group of people agree to consider them as such” [5].

Therefore, the use of symbols by the media may lead to fallacies and misassumptions that in turn may spark conflicts. For example, in Europe and America, most citizens view communication as a way to interact in order to accomplish tasks. However, people in Japan, Taiwan, and China believe that information is “internalized by most members of culture.” In such, high-context cultures, the shared background and knowledge of the individuals communicating with one another is a given and much of the information resides not in the explicit message but in a shared cultural context.

In every nation, the rules, values, and traditions of a culture all have a powerful impact on the communications system as a whole [6]. Therefore, political symbols often evoke and mobilize human emotions. These intense emotions historically energized some of the most devastating social, political, and religious conflicts. According to media coverage, virtually all wars that involved the U.S. have been fought around rallying symbols. The Boston Tea Party symbolized the colonials’ rebellion against the British rule in favor of American liberty and self-determination [7]. Pearl Harbor symbolized the beginning of American involvement in World War Two for protection of peace and freedom, and ended the traditional policy of isolationism in favor of constructive engagement. Additionally, Japan’s image was that of the military aggressor, which was made clear with their attack on Pearl Harbor, an attack that led to the United States declaring war on Tokyo. More recently, “9-11” symbolized the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. Political symbols, however, may cause serious problems if they are not presented fairly and properly.

Furthermore, visual symbols or figures play a large role in human emotions, and the same images elicit different emotions in different citizens [8]. For some individuals, images of religious figures (e.g. Buddha, Ayatollah Khomeini), or radical political leaders (e.g. Hitler, Stalin, Castro), or events (e.g. World War Two, Vietnam War) are emotional experiences. Again turning to the symbol of “9-11” and the constant footage of the attacks in New York, various types of emotions surfaced, from sadness to anger and from fear to hate. These emotions, in combination with a lack of worldly knowledge, topped with distorted media coverage, complete a perfect a recipe for a range of problems, from local harassment of Muslims to national disputes between Washington and others. Thus, the media repeatedly displays images, which in turn transplants symbols, and eventually forms human perceptions [9]. Harrowing pictures and stories about “9-11” or in support of troops deployed in the Middle East, which villainize Muslims, are “shared” and “retweeted” through new media even today, acting to solidify and reinforce these perceptions.

POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

An individual’s political perceptions may be shaped by mass media and by emerging digital media. Political perceptions can be defined as the process by which individuals develop impressions of the characteristics and positions of other nations and their foreign policies. These perceptions may be related to both international and domestic public opinions.

Other influences on the development of these perceptions may include cultural and social experiences, personal understanding, and the impact of institutions. These perceptions can be formed through sources of media that influence people during the crucial adolescence and adulthood periods [10]. The media’s influence on perceptions is also supported by the fact that an overwhelming majority of people, for example in the United States, obtain their information about the world from television news, therefore the media unquestionably forms some impressions. In fact, cultivation theory suggests that television cultivates a world view that is inaccurate, but that viewers often assume that the view presented reflects real life [11].

This theory can be applied when the media covers politics inaccurately or by the way in which they slant news coverage to the best interests of a particular political party. In 1989 there was a sharp increase in the number of people (68 percent of the general public in the U.S.) who believed that in reporting political news the media tended to favor one side of the story [12]. However, political perceptions influenced by various sources of media also have a major international impact in addition to a domestic one. For example, the global governance position of the U.S. has led to the international significance of American presidential campaigns in the mass media.

The global media, and increasingly new media, often influences the political perception of the international public; to understand how this influence occurs it is necessary to identify two perception factors: external stimuli and internal perception. To identify which set of factors has more influence, it is necessary to recognize whether the perceptions originate from the image of the candidate (stimuli), or judgment of the candidate through the perceiver’s own values, attitudes, and beliefs (internal perceiver). Research indicates that most voters form political perceptions and select candidates based on external stimuli [13]. However, external stimuli may also be rooted in a person’s

social group. New media may shape or reveal aspects of an individual's social group. Social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook, SMS text messaging, YouTube and e-mails constitute new media. Through these outlets ideas and beliefs are rapidly circulated primarily through the use of emotional appeals.

GROUP CONFLICT

Media plays a key role in determining cultural values and norms at the same time that it influences how we view other cultures internationally [14]. Each individual develops within a particular social universe, or a specific social category or group. For instance, some broad social classifications include: racial categories (e.g. "black" or "white"), ethnic or racial categories (e.g. "American" or "Japanese"), or religious categories (e.g. "Christian" or "Islamic"). The establishment of such categories is necessary for an individual to deal with the overwhelming complexity of the natural and social universes. Media plays a role in helping individuals position themselves within a social universe by associating their identity visually with a specific social universe category. The majority of such categories represent social groups, and individuals establish memberships in groups [15].

When establishing membership within a group, individuals also become aware of those individuals who are not members of their group; the terms in-group and out-group are used to define the relative positions of individuals within and outside of various societies. For the purpose of this discussion, the in-group is defined as the existing social universe, which is considered socially acceptable by the majority. The out-group consists of individuals who do not share the same beliefs and values as the in-group and who are considered socially unacceptable by the majority. Due to the divergent nature of having an in-group and out-group, one assumption of in-group/out-group conflict is that all people will strive to achieve a positive social identity.

One of the means that individuals use to help manufacture a positive social identity is the process of discriminatory comparison of the in-group with some relevant out-group [16]. This discriminatory process is can be seen in media depictions of various co-cultural groups today, where misinterpretations, fallacies, and racial distortions are present. The international media is not above "in-group polarization." In fact, the media is not a neutral monitor, as it follows discursive models in which conflicts are often framed according to Western conventional wisdom [17].

The problem arises when the media products, along with their (hidden or obvious) social universe (e.g. Hollywood movies), are exported to other nations. When intercultural contact of this nature occurs, there are major implications, including cultural imperialism [18]. The process of cultural change resulting from the contact between two groups is known as acculturation, which has many implications specifically regarding ethnic identity and the social universe [19]. Hollywood productions such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Generation Kill* and *Homeland* exemplify American perceptions of Muslim culture and are widely quoted and referenced in new media through use of Twitter, Facebook and online forums, particularly in casual discussions of terrorism.

Ethnic identity refers to an individual's subjective feelings belonging to a particular group. If the dominant social universe

is contrary to an individual's ethnic identity, then in order to maintain his self-esteem an individual may decide to defect from the old group and join another. As noted earlier, all members wish to belong to a positive social group. If a group is viewed negatively or is not socially acceptable, then group members may wish to defect, practice social creativity, or establish social competition. The important aspect for this topic is the choice to establish a social competition against the out-group. The in-group may attempt to achieve positive distinctiveness by direct competition and confrontation with the high-status out-group. This confrontation usually manifests itself over material assets or collective political action, such as insurgency [20]. A prime example is the Americanization or Westernization process in the Middle East.

MEDIA AND POWER

Media and power (meaning soft power) go hand in hand. We generally define power as the ability of one to change the behavior of another without the use of violence. Our definition is general enough to bridge diverse definitions of power, while it is specific enough to distinguish between power (the ability to persuade) and the use of violence (or force). Moreover, this definition considers two important points. First of all, its main focus is behavior, a general term referring to action, speech, and thoughts of an individual, a group, or a nation. Furthermore, our definition takes a neutral position by using the term "change," as opposed to "improve" or "worsen."

Knowing that the media has no military capabilities or official political authority, one may ask: what sources of power does the media occupy? Here the distinction rests on tangible and intangible conceptions of power. Western media is an example of intangible power, that is, media influence is often attributed to cultural impact (soft power), as opposed to military advancement (hard power). There are many factors involved here, but in this paper, we focus on media's power through communication, and then address some of its influential capabilities.

The news media has often been referred to as the fourth branch of government given the power of media coverage of American politics to influence political outcomes and perceptions [21]. The amount of air-time and attention given to a story affects the viewer's perception of the impact of the topic on their individual life. Post 9/11 coverage of official terror alert changes, shown below in figures 1 and 2, demonstrate the mass media's emphasis on the raising of the terror alert. This translates to an increase of concern in Americans shown in figure 3.

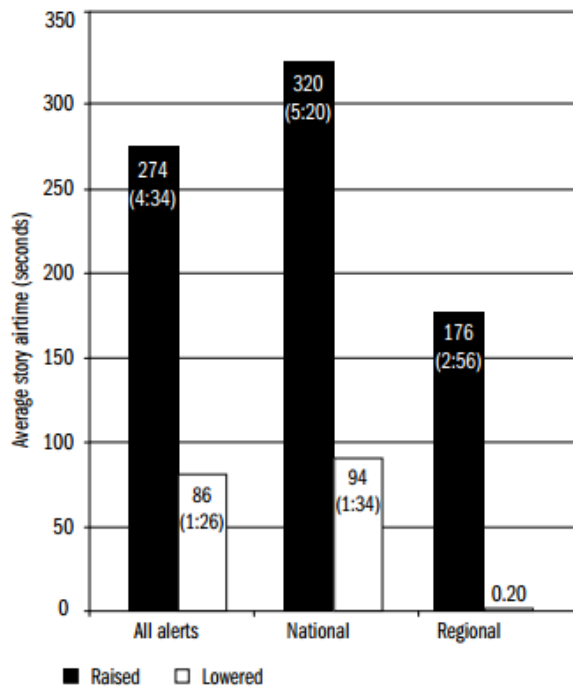


Fig. 1: TV Coverage of official terror alert changes by airtime. [22]

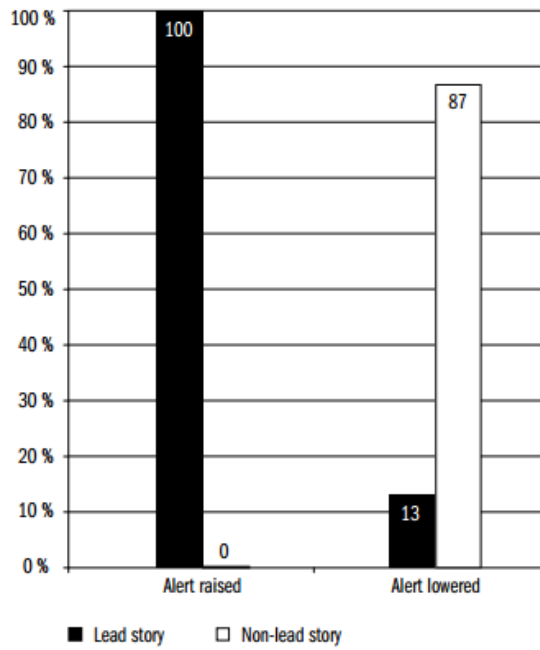


Fig. 2: TV Coverage of official terror alert changes by placement. [22]

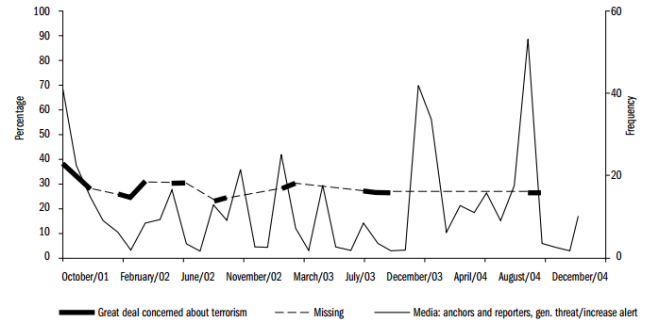


Fig. 3: Concern about major terrorist attacks [22].

CONCLUSION

The differences between mass media and new media are pertinent to understanding how each works to shape our opinions and perceptions. While mass media typically offers more credibility, new media better exemplifies the democratic spirit by allowing all individuals to participate in the discussion and reporting of information. Citizens are able to take a new and more active role in politics through interactive discussion and debate. New media also enables the reporting of real-time events, giving individuals greater access to information and the opportunity to form their own opinions and analysis before one is told to them through mass media. This allows for individuals to become critical consumers of media.

The result of new media is a diverse but accurate reflection of reality. Global trends in new media tend to support credible information and allow for the distribution and circulation of important stories and information that may have otherwise gone unreported by mass media.

Further research should examine how new media influences members of different generations and whether the consumption of and/or participation in it affects voting patterns and political perceptions. Considering the interests of the youth in the new media, research conducted on students may be beneficial in understanding the role of new media on changing perceptions of individual roles within politics, in addition to political perceptions in general. Published works that examine the influence of new media on specific minority groups versus the general population are largely rare and insufficient. Filling such gaps in the literature would certainly provide additional insight(s) into the impact of the new media in contemporary politics. Moreover, it could even contribute to our understanding of changes in individual's attitudes and/or group behavior.

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