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Book Reviews


Ever since the rhetoricians in ancient Greece, people have been intrigued by the question which message characteristics make people yield to the claims put forward. During the second world war, Hovland and his colleagues started to employ experimental methods in order to address this question. Their example has set of an avalanche of experiments in which messages are manipulated on one or two dimensions and the audience's beliefs, attitudes, or behavior are observed. In this way, scholars sought to identify the message characteristics that facilitate or inhibit the persuasion process.

Despite the effort of many talented scholars, the large number of studies in the field has not resulted in a clearer picture of which message characteristics influence in which way the persuasion process. Some scholars would even claim the opposite: the results of different studies are more likely to contradict than to corroborate each other. However, comparing studies is difficult. Even experiments on the same message characteristic, e.g., the fear appeal, may differ on important aspects such as the sort and number of participants, the way in which the dependent variable is measured, or the topic of the message employed. And even when two studies are identical on these aspects, the inevitable sampling error may yield equivocal results. As a result, the large number of experiments appears to have blurred the picture of the relation between message characteristic and persuasion instead of making it clearer.

Using meta-analysis as a means to more reliably assess message variable effects, may help the scholars interested in this topic as is claimed by Hamilton and Hunter in the opening chapter of this volume. In a meta-analysis, all (published and, hopefully, unpublished) studies on a certain message characteristic, for instance, the use of testimonial evidence, are compiled. Relevant statistics of each study, for instance, the effect of using testimonial evidence on the participants' attitude, are compiled in order to compute a more reliable estimate of the effect size. Several methods are available to correct for such artifacts as the sampling error, the measurement error, lacking construct validity, the dichotomization of continuous variables, and the restriction of range. Furthermore, it is often possible to test whether there are any interacting factors influencing the effect size, such as the participants' education level, or the topic used.

During the past decades, a large number of individual studies have been conducted on several message characteristics. Therefore, it is fruitful to review these individual studies using meta-analysis. In the volume edited by Mike Allen and Raymond W. Preiss, meta-analytic reviews are published on the effects of message characteristics (fear appeals, inclusion of testimonial evidence, one-
sided versus two-sided messages, language-intensity, rhetorical questions, powerful versus powerless language, explicit versus implicit conclusions) and on the influence of context factors (forewarning of persuasive intent, effects of distraction during persuasion, the sleeper effect, performing a counter attitudinal advocacy). Apart from these meta-analytic reviews, the volume contains four other chapters in which the principles of meta-analysis are outlined, the criticisms of the method are refuted, the results of the meta-analytic reviews are compared to the conclusions in textbooks on persuasion, and the way in which the results of meta-analysis can provide guidance for future research.

The different chapters show the strength of the meta-analytic approach. In some cases, the meta-analysis reveals a relatively robust effect. For instance, the inclusion of testimonial evidence is shown to have a reliable (but relatively small) effect on the persuasiveness of a message. In other cases, a careful consideration of the operationalizations of the manipulation shows that seemingly contradictory findings are in actuality in accordance with each other. For instance, when a two-sided message is interpreted only as a message in which counter-arguments are included and refuted (instead of simply including counter-arguments), the meta-analysis reveals a clear advantage for the two-sided message compared to the one-side message (which leaves counter-arguments out of the picture). In still other cases, the results of the meta-analysis reveal that more studies are needed to figure out exactly how the message characteristic influences the persuasion process. For instance, in the case of rhetorical questions there are too few studies in which the position of the rhetorical question is varied, leaving the issue unresolved whether the positioning of the question is crucial to its functioning (as is claimed by some).

For anyone interested in the persuasion process, this volume is a must have (read). That is not to say that the volume is flawless. It would have benefitted greatly when the chapters containing meta-analytic reviews had had the same structure. Now the points raised in a chapter differ from author to author. And there are also some minor points. The chapter in which Hunter and Hamilton try to defend meta-analysis against its critics, turns gradually into a polemic with the proposals put forward by Jackson and Jacobs on how to conduct research on the persuasive effects of message characteristics. In the chapter on the fear appeal literature, the influential work by Witte and her Extended Parallel Processing model is ignored. Still, Allen and Preiss have succeeded in bringing together an interesting collection of meta-analytic reviews that clearly underscores the importance of this technique to the field of persuasion. And whether all these results fit neatly into McGuire's information-processing paradigm, as is claimed by Hamilton and Hunter, may give rise to an interesting discussion.

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Negotiation and Influencing Skills is meant as a negotiation tool for self-taught learners who have some experience in the field. The author explains that every negotiation can be redefined in terms of creating and claiming value. Creating value corresponds roughly with getting all the information needed to be able to come up with a successful agreement for both parties (‘expanding the pie’). Claiming value is reaching a satisfactory outcome (especially for oneself ‘getting what you want’). A successful negotiator should be highly competent in these two domains. Since the book aims at being a tool for auto-diagnosis and self-help, it starts with a chapter on assessing ‘your current negotiating style’ and continues discussing the properties of an effective negotiator. These aspects are further developed in a discussion on how to approach difficult people or situations. Original ideas can be found in the chapter on higher-order skills, where McRae illustrates that awareness of a certain skill at a higher (more distant) level, focusing on the specific use of that particular skill, can provide insights that enable the negotiator to improve that skill. This may affect the skills that need improvement, as well those in which one is already very skillful. For this purpose, the author introduces a method which is appealingly called P.R.I.C.E (Pinpoint, Record, Intervene, Coach, Evaluate). Finally, the author highlights some important negotiation strategies in a detailed description of a personal experience.

This interesting book derives most of its merits from its clear structure. In each chapter, the reader is guided through the content of the lesson. The attractive layout of the text certainly contributes to the transparent presentation. Each time a topic has been discussed, a short summary follows, clearly meant to support the didactic purpose of the book. However, in case of less substantial issues, this summary seems somewhat overdone, and even slows down the reader who is eager to learn more. In other words, the author has to be complimented for his concern with the pedagogical aspects of the book, yet at several points this very concern also hampers its attractiveness.

While the structure on the formal level is explicit throughout, the way the content is treated is not always that obvious. The more one progresses in the book, the more implicit the division of a negotiation into creating and claiming value becomes. Although chapters 5–8 are certainly valuable and often quite pleasant to read, the distinction between the two axes is unclear. Given the importance of this dichotomy in the title of the book and in the first chapters, I would have expected a more explicit evaluation in terms of creating and claiming value of, for example, the skills needed to deal with difficult people. The same holds for the chapter on the power of commitment, in which McRae describes extensively the
strategies he used to have a department store change safety measures in the children’s department. The description of the case certainly reads like a fascinating story, but at the end, a detailed evaluation of the case in terms of the important skills that have been dealt with in the previous chapters would certainly not be misplaced. For instance, it is clear that the author goes through phases of creating and claiming value, but this is left implicit. This contrasts sharply with the high degree of explicitness of the preceding chapters. Since readers are more or less spoiled by the teacher, they will probably feel the need to get an evaluation of the McRae-case in the light of the topics that have been treated.

Right from the start, the author underlines the fact that a large part of all communication consists of negotiations. The broad definition is respected in a wide range of examples taken from various situations that occur in everyday life. In my view, the choice of examples is one of the strongest points of the book. The author has succeeded in satisfying the needs of a broad public with diverging interests.

The exercises for self-study and self-enhancement are certainly useful but seem to promise more than one could reasonably expect from a book. The inevitable drawback of self-teaching is that learners are left on their own when it comes to judging their mistakes. Furthermore, unlike in a course on, for instance, mathematics, there is obviously no set of keys in the book. The learner has to evaluate his participation and behavior in previous negotiations by answering questions such as:

(3) Briefly summarize another negotiation. Rate your effectiveness in creating value (1–10) [...] (5) From your observations in these [...] negotiations, what specifically do you need to improve your skills in creating value? (Chapter 2, p 18)

This approach carries some serious risks. First of all, each individual will have his own subjective summary of a negotiation. Secondly, it is very difficult to rate one’s own behavior reliably: depending on one’s personality, people will tend to overemphasize negative or positive behaviorist aspects. However, having a psychological background himself, the author is aware of the risk of unreliable information. Therefore, he instructs the reader/learner regularly to ask a good friend or colleague to act as a mentor who gives unbiased feedback, and to fill out some of the forms provided in the book itself. These friends must have experienced the learner as a negotiator, and they must be able to give a detailed evaluation. I do think that only trained observers will be able to provide the information asked for; others have to be instructed beforehand to comment on the learner’s behavior during a given negotiation. Furthermore, these comments may well be too threatening. In view of not putting his relationship with the learner at risk, the friend or colleague may withhold crucial information. Therefore, I am slightly pessimistic about the number...
of readers who will seriously do the exercises each chapter proposes.

Personally, I would have encouraged the idea of elaborating the negotiation cases and discussing all kinds of possible outcomes. Next, readers could be guided in determining their own choices for a certain strategy in the given case. Each choice could then be evaluated. Ideally, this calls for a multi-media approach in which at different stages in the negotiation the learner can decide on alternative ways to continue. For each of the alternatives, the program would have the appropriate feedback available. Learners would not be left on their own, and they can still discuss problems with friends or mentors. Nevertheless, McRae’s approach is certainly valuable, since even merely stopping to consider aspects of one’s own experience in the field of negotiation is already a useful step. And in this respect the book is a success.

Throughout the book one notices explicitly and implicitly the influence of the Harvard Project on Negotiation (HPN). Since the specialists of the HPN have provided the world with excellent books on negotiations, this influence certainly adds to the value of the book. Some typical HPN-like aspects of the book I really appreciate can be found at the end. In his conclusion, McRae gives detailed information on where to go to for more information, and the annotated bibliography in the appendix is very useful, especially for beginners in the field who do not know where to start their reading. The author even provides web-site addresses that may be useful (in spite of the liability of such information).

All in all, Negotiating and Influencing Skills is a very valuable book with sharp insights and attractive examples, a possible help for anyone who is interested in the process of negotiating, and, perhaps most importantly, it is fun to read.

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Media Dynamics & Regulatory Concerns in the Digital Age

For many decades after they first emerged, broadcast media remained determined by political decisions. In the seventies broadcast media products were an increasingly commonplace sight on the international markets. As of the eighties the broadcasting houses themselves had become a commodity, on a background of soaring technological innovation. Since then, two central questions have dominated the media scene:

• can the nature of media products still be considered cultural, or are they mere economic commodities?
• to what extent does regulation or deregulation power over the media still belong – de jure or de facto – to the national authorities?

Within the European Union a decision level is being added and international media politics are consciously being practiced. A regulated deregulation? The options followed on the European level have regularly triggered clashes with the national governments. Public broadcasters – a typically Western European phenomenon – are finding it hard to position themselves within the new context.

After a look at the relevant legal and economic issues, the book describes the media landscape in major Western European countries as well as in Russia, the United States of America, and Canada.

Patterns throughout the world are clearly beginning to converge, both regarding content and structure. After a fascinating but rather brief period – no more than half a century – is broadcasting landscape diversity already a thing of the past?

The book will be a useful tool for undergraduate and graduate students in communication science, as well as for policy makers and media professionals and anyone with an interest in a comparative approach to recent developments on the broadcast media scene.