



Do we (unknowingly) buy what we sell? Persuasion and attitude polarization

Leslie Nolan, Tori Ladrondeguevara, Serena Avitia, & Chris Holland (Charles Lord Faculty Advisor)

Texas Christian University, Department of Psychology

email: leslie.nolan@tcu.edu



Introduction

We in the Lord Lab research how people develop extreme attitudes from the perspective of Attitude Representation Theory (Lord & Lepper, 1999). Through previous research, we know that this can happen with people who go beyond the information they are given.

People tend to slant their communication to tell people what they believe their audience wants to hear, which is known as biased communication.

Present Research

In the present research, we looked at how biased communication affected participants' attitudes. We looked at how communicating about a slightly negative topic to a friend could make their attitudes more negative towards that topic.

We were also interested in the effects of the form of communication being written. Could a longer message like an essay have a bigger effect than a shorter message like a tweet?

Study 1

Description: Study 1 was designed to test our prediction that communicating information to a close other is sufficient enough to polarize an existing, albeit a newer, attitude. We wanted to take participants from all over age and education ranges in order make sure our research is generalizable to a wider population.

Participants: 257 Mechanical Turk workers that were paid \$1.25 for their participation. These workers were screened prior to participation for country and English ability

Study Method

- Participants filled out a pre-attitudes assessment about Mahrainians (attitude object) and Peruvians (distractor object) after reading a short description.
- Mahrain is a completely fictitious place, so the information we provided participants should be the only knowledge they have of Mahrain.
- Participants were then split into either the control condition and asked to write about the weather or into the experimental condition and asked to write about Mahrainians.
- Participants were asked to write to a friend a persuasive message about the topic they were given. Within these conditions the participants were then split again and either asked to write a short message (less than 25 words) or a long message (at least 250 words). Participants were then asked some post-attitudes questions about Mahrainians that we later compared to the initial assessment.

Study 1 Results

We ran a 4-factor one way ANOVA to determine whether or not participant's attitudes polarized after writing a message based on what that message was about. As expected, those who wrote to a friend about the weather, regardless of length, did not experience a significant change in attitude regarding Mauritians.

When participants were given slightly negative information on a nationality they did not know, writing a longer persuasive message of at least 250 words about that nationality to a friend resulted in them adopting significantly more negative attitudes toward the people of that nationality as shown in the chart (middle) by the change in attitudes from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment.

Discussion

Overall, our research continues into the development of extreme attitudes that may motivate radical behaviors. We are working to understand how people, on their own with no input for larger organizations, might radicalize. This is especially interesting when people engage in everyday activities like speaking with friends.

The present research is one of the first demonstrations that people's attitudes may radicalize unknowingly when communicating to others, despite that fact that *no new information was learned or presented*. Telling others how we feel makes us feel that more strongly.

References

Lord, C. G., & Lepper, M. R. (1999). Attitude representation theory. In *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 31, pp. 265-343). Academic Press.

Data

	Weather Short	Weather Long	Mahrainians Short	Mahrainians Long
Pre-Attitudes	5.12	5.47	5.48	5.05
Post-Attitudes	5.21	5.67	5.39	4.40
Change	+0.09	+0.20	-0.09	-0.65

New Information

Communicate to Others

Attitudes Unknowingly Change

