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Mass Communication, Propaganda, and Persuasion

It is a truism to say that we live in an age of mass communication. The truism has never been more accurate. In the twenty-first century, the Internet has transformed the world into a global village. Indeed, this change has been so rapid, politicians have not quite adapted to the fact that the average citizen now has access to a wealth of information. For example, at a 2006 press conference, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated that no one ever said the war in Iraq would be easy. Within hours, thousands of citizens went online and called up a statement Rumsfeld had made four years earlier, on the eve of the Iraq invasion, to the effect that the war would be over within a few months. John McCain, who in 2008 ran a campaign for president that repeatedly extolled his virtues as a political maverick, made the curious claim in a 2010 interview that "I never considered myself a maverick." That same day, a flood of YouTube videos appeared on the Internet displaying clip after clip of McCain calling himself a maverick.

The global village did not begin with the Internet. In the United States, where almost every household has at least one TV set, an en-

tire population can be exposed to a similar diet of information as soon as it becomes available. Let me provide you with a few graphic examples of this phenomenon and some of its consequences. In 1977, American television presented its very first blockbuster miniseries. More than 130 million viewers tuned in to watch at least one of the segments of *Roots,* the ABC television network's production of Alex Haley's history of several generations of an African-American family in the United States. The show received widespread acclaim for promoting the awareness of black history and for inspiring blacks' pride in their heritage. Six years later, ABC aired *The Day After,* a made-for-TV movie that graphically depicted the aftermath of a nuclear attack on the United States. In November 1983, nearly 100 million U.S. households tuned in; the audience was far larger than our wildest predictions. Weeks before it was shown, *The Day After* was the subject of numerous cover stories in national news magazines. Movie stars, physicists, and political leaders (including the president) aired their views about the program and its potential impact.[1]

The Day After clearly had an impact, even on those who had not actually watched the show but had merely heard some of the hype. After the movie aired, watchers and nonwatchers alike thought more about nuclear war, thought nuclear war was more likely, felt that surviving such a war was less likely, and viewed survival as less positive. Moreover, both groups reported that they intended to work toward preventing a nuclear war by supporting a nuclear-weapons freeze and engaging in other antinuclear activities. These effects were generally stronger for the watchers than the nonwatchers. Amazingly, just two hours of prime-time television had a major impact on most Americans, influencing both their attitudes and their intentions to do something constructive about the threat of nuclear war.[2]

A simple two hours of television can also have powerfully negative effects, preventing viewers from taking action. In 1974, CBS aired a film called *Cry Rape.* Essentially, the story made it clear that a rape victim who chooses to press charges against her attacker runs the risk of undergoing an ordeal that may be as harrowing as the rape itself. In this case, the rapist, exuding boyish innocence, presented a convincing argument to the effect that the woman had seduced him. During the next few weeks, there was a sharp decrease in the number of rapes reported by victims to police—apparently because victims, taking their cue from the television movie, feared the police would not believe them.[3]

In 1995, tens of millions of viewers sat transfixed in front of their TV sets for several months, watching the murder trial of O. J. Simpson. During that period, lawyers of every stripe paraded in front of the video cameras offering their expert opinions on every nuance of the proceedings. Millions of viewers were insatiable—they couldn't seem to get enough of the trial. When the verdict was finally announced and Mr. Simpson was found not guilty, we witnessed a vivid example of a powerful racial division in this country: Most blacks felt it was a just verdict; most whites felt it was a miscarriage of justice. It was as if white people and black people had been watching two different trials.

And then, September 11. How many times did TV viewers see the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapse? The images of the falling buildings, the shocked onlookers, the heroic rescue workers, and the grieving relatives remain embedded in the minds of most Americans and have had a major impact on our fear and anger at terrorists, our patriotism, our willingness to go to war, and alas, in some people, unwarranted prejudice against Muslims.

Attempts at Persuasion

We live in an age of mass communication; indeed, it can even be said that we live in an age characterized by attempts at mass persuasion. Every time we turn on the radio or television set, every time we open a book, magazine, or newspaper, or log onto the Internet, someone is trying to educate us, to convince us to buy a product, to persuade us to vote for a candidate or to subscribe to some version of what is right, true, or beautiful. This aim is most obvious in advertising: Manufacturers of nearly identical products (aspirin, for example, or toothpaste, or detergent) spend vast amounts of money to persuade us to buy the product in *their* package. But influence through the mass media need not be so blatant. The impact of *Roots, The Day After,* and the O. J. Simpson trial extended far beyond their most obvious effects as docudramas or real-life court dramas. This influence can be very subtle indeed, even unintentional. As the example of the film about rape aptly illustrates, even when communicators are not making a direct attempt to sell us something, they can succeed in influencing the way we look at the world and the way we respond to important events in our lives.

Let's look at something supposedly objective—like the news. Are the newscasters *trying* to sell us anything? Typically not. But those who produce television news exert a powerful influence on our opinions simply by determining which events are given exposure and how much exposure they are given.

In 1991, a motorist named Rodney King was stopped for reckless driving. In the course of the arrest, he was savagely beaten by a group of Los Angeles policemen. By a fluke of luck, a resident of the neighborhood recorded the event on videotape; during the next several weeks, the tape was shown over and over again on TV screens across the nation. Subsequently, in the spring of 1992, when a jury found the police innocent of any wrongdoing, the inner city of Los Angeles erupted in the worst riot in American history. By the time peace was restored, 53 people had been killed, some 2,000 were seriously injured, and entire city blocks in South-Central Los Angeles were in flames—resulting in over one billion dollars in property damage. Needless to say, there were many causes of the riot. But certainly one of the triggers was the fact that people had seen that beating many times and therefore were in a position to be outraged by the verdict.

Given the power of TV newscasts, it is reasonable to ask what factors determine which news items are selected for television newscasts. The answer is not a simple one, but one major factor is the need to attract viewers. Indeed, it has been said by no less an expert than the director of the British Broadcasting Corporation that television news is a form of *entertainment.* Recent studies suggest[4] that when those in charge of news programming decide which news events to cover and which fraction of the miles of daily videotape to present to the public, they make their decisions, at least in part, on the basis of the entertainment value of their material. Film footage of a flooded city has much more entertainment value than footage of people building a levee to prevent such flooding; it is simply not very exciting to watch a construction project. And yet the levee may be more important news.

Just as action events such as football games are more entertaining on television than quiet events such as chess matches, it is more likely that riots, bombings, earthquakes, massacres, and other violent acts will get more air time than stories about people working to prevent violence. Thus, news telecasts tend to focus on the violent behavior of individuals—terrorists, murderers protesters, strikers, or

police—because action makes for more exciting viewing than does a portrayal of people behaving in a peaceful, orderly manner. Moreover, people tend to be drawn to the negative. Roger Johnson[5] recently analyzed the content of television news programs, including the broadcasts of major and local networks for a period of 6 months. In terms of the number of stories and the amount of time devoted to the stories, violence, conflict, and human suffering dominated the news, accounting for more than 53 percent of the newscast. Moreover, Johnson found that the most violent stories were reported earliest in the broadcast, a choice that sends the implicit message that the violent stories were the most important news of the day. Johnson's analysis thus found truth in the old journalist's adage "If it bleeds, it leads." He found the bias to be especially strong in the local news, which devoted nearly 80 percent of the typical newscast to violent crime. Such coverage presents a distorted picture of the world, not because the people who run the news media are evil and trying to manipulate us but simply because they are trying to entertain us and get us to tune in. And, in trying to entertain us, they may unwittingly influence us to believe that people behave far more violently now than ever before. This may cause us to be unhappy and even depressed about the temper of the times or the state of the nation. Ultimately, it may affect our vote, our desire to visit major urban centers, our attitudes about other nations, and so on. As we shall see in Chapter 6, it may actually cause people to behave more violently.

Of course, some violent events are important and warrant a great deal of coverage. As I mentioned earlier, following the terrorist attack of September 11, most Americans sat glued to their TV sets because they wanted to know what was happening and they needed reassurance that the situation was under control. In the process, many of us saw the collapse of the Twin Towers dozens of times as the cable news channels gave that event round-the-clock coverage. How can we be sure that is what our citizens wanted at that time? In the two weeks following the attack, the number of people who tuned in to CNN jumped 667 percent and the *New York Times* sold a quarter of a million more newspapers on September 12 than it did on September 10.[6]

It is always good to be informed—and the media play an important role in keeping us informed. But there can be a downside to this kind of exposure, as well. Whether it is intentional or not, repeated

vivid imagery of this sort shapes attitudes and opinions. The constant images of the collapsing Twin Towers, as well as the repetition of bellicose slogans on cable news channels ("The War on Terror," "America Fights Back!"), contributed to the arousal of intense emotions in viewers and doubtless served to reduce the possibility of any real debate about the wisdom of invading Iraq. Moreover, one year after September 11, 2001, when President George W. Bush somehow managed to link Saddam Hussein with the al-Qaeda terrorists, his request for the authority to invade Iraq sailed through Congress with hardly a murmur of opposition. This is a social psychology book, not a political treatise. I am not commenting on the wisdom of these policies. What I am suggesting is that, in a democracy, important decisions, like whether to go to war, benefit from rational public debate. Strong emotions, such as those stirred up by the news media, often get in the way of rational decision-making. As Hermann Goering, one of Adolf Hitler's top aides, said before being sentenced to death at Nuremberg, "The people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders . . . All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country." [7]

Media Contagion

The power of the media is perhaps best illustrated by a phenomenon known as **emotional contagion**. For example, in October 1982, when seven people in the Chicago area died after taking Extra Strength Tylenol capsules laced with cyanide, the tragedy was widely publicized by the national news media. Indeed, for several days it was difficult to turn on the television or radio or to pick up a newspaper without learning about the Tylenol poisonings. Of course, it was both tragic and bizarre—and therefore very good copy. The effects of this prominent coverage were immediate: Similar poisonings were reported in cities across the country, involving the contamination of mouthwash, eye drops, nasal spray, soda pop, and even hot dogs. Dramatically billed as "copycat poisonings," these poisonings, in turn, received widespread media attention. The public reaction took on all the properties of a spiral: Many people panicked, seeking medical aid for burns and poisonings when they suffered from no more than common rashes, sore throats, and stomachaches. False alarms

outnumbered actual cases of product tampering by seven to one.[8] Because these events occurred just prior to Halloween, worried officials in scores of communities banned trick-or-treating, fearing that many individuals might mimic the murders by contaminating children's candy.

The initial Chicago poisonings were almost certainly the work of one person. Subsequent events were caused by the publicity given to the Chicago poisonings. But the belief was spread that the wave of poisoning constituted "an epidemic without a cure," in the words of one news service,[9] and was itself the symptom of a "sick" society, a country going "crazy." Many newspapers found themselves in the ironic position of first sensationalizing the poisoning incidents and then sensationalizing the subsequent critical comments of media experts discussing the disastrous consequences of such publicity.

A few years later, four teenagers in New Jersey made a suicide pact and then carried out their plan. Within a week of this multiple suicide, two teenagers in the Midwest were found dead under similar circumstances. Media reports no doubt spotlighted the confusion and grief surrounding teenage suicide. But is it possible that the media's coverage of these tragedies actually inspired copycat suicides? According to sociologist David Phillips, the answer is a qualified "yes."

Phillips and his colleagues[10] studied suicide rates among teenagers following network television news or feature stories about suicide. Their research tracked fluctuations in teenage suicides by comparing suicide rates before the stories with rates after the stories. Within a week of the broadcasts, the increase in teenage suicides was far greater than could be explained by chance alone. Furthermore, the more coverage devoted by major television networks to suicide, the greater the subsequent increase in suicides among teenagers. The increases held, even when the researchers took other possible causes into account. Thus, the most likely explanation for the increase in teenage suicides following media publicity is that such publicity actually triggers subsequent copycat suicides.

Copycat suicides are not something peculiar to teenagers. In another study on the effects of highly publicized suicides, Phillips chose to examine fatal car crashes.[11] Some people, trying to save family members from the trauma of a suicide, will choose to kill themselves in car crashes designed to look like accidents. These suicides should show up on official records as single-car, one-passenger fatal accidents. Phillips

reasoned that after a publicized suicide, there should be a dramatic increase in these types of accidents, and that the victims should be similar in some respect to the publicized suicide victim. This is exactly what he found after examining highway-patrol records both before and after highly publicized suicides. There were no changes in multiple-car accidents or single-car accidents with passengers, and the victims in these accidents did not resemble the publicized suicide victims. There was, however, an increase in suicide-type accidents, and the victims' ages were highly correlated with the age of the publicized suicide victim. Again, the most likely explanation for these findings is that the publicity of one suicide incited others to take their own lives.

The Tylenol poisonings and copycat suicides were newsworthy. I am not suggesting that the media created these events or that they should not have been reported. Rather, I am underlining the obvious fact that selective emphasis puts the media in the position of determining subsequent events—not simply reporting them.

Again, this form of influence is probably unintentional; the news media are not *trying* to foster violence or create the illusion that most people are cruel. But the pervasiveness of electronic media cannot be overstated. In fact, sometimes the role of the media in reporting an event becomes more newsworthy than the event itself. For example, let's look at the Beirut hostage crisis of 1985, in which 153 passengers and crew on a TWA jet were held captive by Shiite terrorists. Television cameras offered viewers back home around-the-clock coverage of all aspects of the crisis—important and trivial alike. There were press conferences held by the terrorists, press conferences held by the hostages, intimate shots of anguished families, demands, counter-demands, pistol-wavings, outrageous statements, luncheon menus, and so on. The television camera crews did everything but follow the hostages into the restrooms!

At one point, it was suggested that the electronic media might be prolonging the ordeal by giving so much free publicity to the Shiite cause. So what did the television networks do? They televised a series of panel discussions by pundits about the role of the media in such a situation. The message became the media. In its endlessness, this series of events reminded me of a brand of table salt, popular when I was a kid: On the box was a picture of a little girl holding up a box of the table salt on which there was a picture of a little girl holding up a box of the table salt on which there was a picture of a little girl. . . .

With the advent of 24-hour cable news, this sort of ironic exercise has become commonplace. In 2010, on his MSNBC news show, Ed Schultz recently spent a significant portion of the hour railing at the media for focusing attention on the strange behavior of an unknown (and possibly unstable) pastor in Georgia who planned to mark the anniversary of the September 11 attacks by publicly burning the Koran. Schultz ranted at length about how, by drawing attention to the pastor's anti-Islamic behavior, the media were complicit in provoking acts of Islamic terrorism against American troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Effectiveness of Media Appeals

What about intentional persuasion? How credible and effective are obvious attempts to package and sell products (toothpaste, aspirin, presidential candidates) through the mass media? The prima facie evidence suggests that they are extremely effective. Why else would corporations and political parties spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year trumpeting their products? Moreover, as parents, most of us have seen our children being seduced by toy commercials that artfully depict the drabbest toys in an irresistible way. Similarly, a child watching the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, or the Cartoon Network is deluged by fast-paced ads for cereal, junk food, and candy. The aim is to get kids to demand that their parents buy them the products they have seen in the commercials, and it seems to work. More than 90 percent of preschool children asked for toys or food they saw advertised on television, according to a survey of their mothers.[12] In fact, almost two-thirds of the mothers reported hearing their children sing commercial jingles they learned from television, most by the age of three.

Most children catch on after a time; my own children, after several disappointments, developed a healthy skepticism (alas, even a certain degree of cynicism) about the truthfulness of these commercials. Indeed, one survey[13] found that only 12 percent of sixth-graders believed television commercials told the truth all or most of the time; by the tenth grade, only 4 percent felt they were truthful even most of the time. This kind of skepticism is common among adults, as well. A public opinion poll showed that the overwhelming majority of the adult respondents believed television commercials contain

untruthful arguments. Moreover, the results indicate that the more educated the person, the greater the skepticism, and further, people who are skeptical believe their skepticism makes them immune to persuasion. This might lead us to conclude that the mere fact of knowing that a communicator is biased serves to protect us from being influenced by the message. This is not true. Simply because we *think* we are immune to persuasion does not necessarily mean we *are* immune. In the case of many consumer products, the public tends to buy a specific brand for no other reason than the fact that it is heavily advertised.

Let's look at the headache-remedy business. Daryl Bem[14] provides us with an interesting analysis of our susceptibility to television commercials even when we know they are biased. A well-known brand of aspirin (which we will call "Brand A") advertises itself as 100 percent pure aspirin; the commercial goes on to say that government tests have shown that no other pain remedy is stronger or more effective than Brand A. What the maker didn't bother to mention is that the government test actually showed that no brand was any weaker or less effective than any of the others. In other words, all tested brands were equal—except in price, that is. For the privilege of popping Brand A, consumers pay approximately three times the price of an equally effective but unadvertised brand.

Another product proclaims it uses the special (unnamed) ingredient "that doctors recommend." By reading the label, we discover the mystery ingredient to be good old inexpensive aspirin. Several pharmaceutical companies also market "extra strength" varieties of "arthritic pain" formulations. You will pay a premium price for these products, but are they worth it? Actually, their extra strength comes from extra aspirin (or acetaminophen, an aspirin substitute), along with a dose of caffeine. Taking additional aspirin would be less expensive, but it sounds great in the ads: "Not one, but a combination of medically proven ingredients in an extra-strength formula."

Such blatant attempts at mass persuasion seem pitifully obvious. Yet tremendous numbers of consumers apparently set aside their skepticism even though they know the message is an obvious attempt to sell a product. Of course, there may be a basic difference between susceptibility to aspirin commercials and susceptibility to commercials for presidential candidates. When we are dealing with identical or very similar products, mere familiarity may make a huge difference.

Robert Zajonc[15] has shown that, all other things being equal, the more familiar an item is, the more attractive it is. This explains why people prefer faces they've seen 10 times to equally attractive faces they've seen only 5 times.[16] It also explains why people prefer words that contain the same letters as those in their names[17] and why we prefer pictures of ourselves that are backward (and thus match the familiar view of our faces that we see in the mirror every day), whereas our friends prefer the nonmirror image (that *they* are accustomed to seeing).[18] Unless there is something inherently noxious about a stimulus, the more we are exposed to it, the more we will like it.

Suppose I walk into a grocery store looking for laundry detergent. I go to the detergent section, and I am staggered by the wide array of brand names. Because it doesn't matter too much to me which one I buy, I may simply reach for the most familiar one—and, chances are, it is familiar because I've heard and seen the name on television commercials over and over again. If this is the case, then sudden increases in television exposure should produce dramatic changes in familiarity and, perhaps, in sales. And that seems to be the case. For example, several years ago, the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company conducted a nationwide poll to find out how well the public recognized its name. It came out thirty-fourth among insurance companies. Two weeks later the company repeated the poll. This time it came out third in name familiarity. What caused this amazing leap from obscurity to fame? Two weeks and $1 million worth of advertising on television. Familiarity does not necessarily mean sales, but the two are frequently linked—as evidenced by the fact that A&W Root Beer boosted its share of the market from 15 percent to 50 percent after 6 months of television advertising.

But is voting for a presidential candidate the same kind of decision as choosing toothpaste or root beer? The answer, again, is a qualified "yes." Several years ago, Joseph Grush and his colleagues[19] found that, by and large, the congressional candidates who spent the most money typically received the most votes. More recently, Michael Pfau and his colleagues[20] have shown that spot television commercials are by far the most effective determinants of how people vote. Moreover, spot commercials on TV are especially effective when the campaign centers on a highly charged issue that arouses strong emotions in voters. For a compelling illustration, let's go back to the 1988 presidential campaign between George H. W. Bush and

Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts. In the summer of 1988, Bush trailed far behind Dukakis in the race for the presidency. Many observers were convinced that Dukakis's lead was insurmountable. Within a few short months, however, the lead had all but evaporated and, on Election Day, Bush won handily. A number of political analysts credit Willie Horton with playing a major role in this turnaround. Indeed, *Time* magazine went so far as to refer to Willie Horton as "George Bush's most valuable player."[21]

Who was Willie Horton? He was not one of Bush's advisors, nor was he a major financial contributor to the Bush campaign. Indeed, the two men had never met. Willie Horton was a convicted felon who had been released from a Massachusetts prison before the end of his term as part of a furlough program. While on furlough, Horton escaped to Maryland; there, he raped a woman in view of her male companion, whom he had wounded and tied to a chair. Michael Dukakis was governor of Massachusetts when Horton's furlough was granted. Claiming that Dukakis was soft on crime, Bush ran a series of television ads showing the mug shot of a scowling Willie Horton and depicting criminals going in and out of prison through a revolving door. These ads struck a chord with many Americans who had legitimate fears of street crime and who strongly suspected that the criminal justice system favored criminals at the expense of victims. Moreover, the fact that Willie Horton was black, and that his victims were white, was not lost on most viewers.[22]

How did Dukakis fight back? With facts and figures: He pointed out that Massachusetts was only one of many states with furlough programs and that even the federal government (of which Bush was a member) furloughed inmates from its prisons. In addition, he noted, furlough programs were generally very effective. For example, in 1987, 53,000 inmates received more than 200,000 furloughs and only a small percentage got into trouble.[23] Dukakis also pointed out that, typically, furloughs were granted to convicts who were near the end of their terms, and that the furloughs were intended to orient them to the outside world. He insisted that the whole issue was a contrivance—that, if elected, George Bush had no intention of changing the furlough system.

Are you getting bored yet? So were the voters. If Michael Dukakis had had a social psychologist on his staff, he would have received better advice. As Anthony Pratkanis and I have pointed out,[24]

when people are scared and angry, facts and figures alone are not very convincing. They can be effective if they are tied to solutions to problems the voters are deeply concerned about. In the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, candidate Bill Clinton (apparently having learned a lesson from the Dukakis campaign) kept the attention of the American people focused on one overriding issue—the state of the economy—and did not allow himself to be sidetracked by emotional issues on which there was no real difference between the candidates.[25]

In the congressional elections of 2010, the most successful candidates were those who capitalized on the public's anger at the government bailouts of the Wall Street investment banks; candidates had a harder time when they attempted a more reasoned approach, such as explaining the complex economic rationale for those bailouts.

Education or Propaganda?

Aspirin commercials are obvious attempts to sell something at a high price by intentionally misleading the audience. They can be considered propaganda. "Selling" a presidential candidate, however, is much more complicated. Thus, the devices used by political consultants and speech writers to display their candidate in a favorable manner could conceivably be considered as education—an attempt to educate the public on the policies and virtues of the candidate by allowing him to present his views as clearly, efficiently, and articulately as possible. What is the difference between propaganda and education? *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines *propaganda* as "the systematic propagation of a given doctrine" and *education* as "the act of imparting knowledge or skill." Again, we could all agree that aspirin ads are propaganda designed to promote the sale of certain brands. But what about television, which often depicts women, old people, and minorities in stereotyped roles? Or, more subtly, what about the vast majority of high-school history textbooks that until recently totally ignored the contributions made by blacks and other minorities—and now tend to pay mere lip service to these contributions? Is this simply imparting knowledge?

The problem of distinguishing between education and propaganda can be even subtler still. Let us look at arithmetic as taught

in the public schools. What could be more educational? By that I mean, what could be more pure, objective, factual, and untainted by doctrine? Watch out. Do you remember the examples used in your elementary-school arithmetic text? Most of the examples dealt with buying, selling, renting, working for wages, and computing interest. As Zimbardo, Ebbesen, and Maslach[26] point out, these examples do more than simply reflect the capitalistic system in which the education is occurring: They systematically endorse the system, legitimize it, and, by implication, suggest it is the natural and normal way. As a way of illustrating multiplication and percentages, the textbook might have Mr. Jones borrowing $15,000 at 9 percent interest to purchase a new car. Would this example be used in a society that felt it was sinful to charge interest, as early Christian societies believed? Would this example be used in a society that believed people should not seek possessions they can't afford? I am not suggesting it is wrong or immoral to use these kinds of illustrations in arithmetic books; I am merely pointing out that they are a form of propaganda and that it might be useful to recognize them as such.

In practice, whether a person regards a particular course of instruction as educational or propagandistic depends, to a large extent, on his or her values. Reflect, for a moment, on a film about drug abuse my children were required to see in their high school. At one point, the film mentioned that many hardcore narcotics addicts began by sampling marijuana. I'm certain that most school officials would probably regard the presentation of this piece of factual knowledge as a case of "imparting knowledge," and most marijuana users would probably regard it as "the systematic propagation of a given doctrine"; that is, the implication that marijuana leads to the use of harder drugs. By the same token, consider the topic of sex education in the schools as viewed by a member of the Christian Right, on the one hand, or by the editor of *Playboy* magazine, on the other hand. This is not to say that all communications are drastically slanted and one-sided. Rather, when we are dealing with emotionally charged issues upon which people disagree, it is probably impossible to construct a communication that people on both sides of the issue would agree is fair and impartial. I will present a more detailed discussion of communication as viewed through "the eye of the beholder" in the next chapter. For now, it is important to note that, whether we call it propaganda or education, persuasion is

a reality. It won't go away if we ignore it. We should therefore attempt to understand it by analyzing the experimental literature on persuasion.

Two Major Routes to Persuasion

When confronted with a persuasive argument, do we think deeply about it or do we accept it without much thought? This question underlies much of our understanding of persuasion. According to Richard Petty and John Cacioppo,[27] we are inclined to think deeply about an issue if it is one that is relevant and important to us. In these circumstances, we tend to give the argument careful scrutiny. But sometimes, even if the issue is important, we may not process an argument carefully, because we are distracted or tired—or because the communication is presented in a way that lulls us into acceptance.

Petty and Cacioppo argue that there are essentially two ways that people are persuaded—centrally or peripherally. The **central route to persuasion** involves weighing arguments and considering relevant facts and figures, thinking about issues in a systematic fashion and coming to a decision. In contrast, the **peripheral route to persuasion** is less judicious; rather than relying on a careful process of weighing and considering the strength of arguments, the person responds to simple, often irrelevant cues that suggest the rightness, wrongness, or attractiveness of an argument without giving it much thought. For example, considering arguments about how to remedy an ailing economy has to do with the central route; getting scared and angry by the image of Willie Horton has to do with the peripheral route. Likewise, when a man decides to buy a particular computer because the ad depicts it as having the kind of user-friendliness, processing speed, memory, and data storage capacity that he needs, he is being moved by the logic of the argument. This is the central route. But, if he decides to buy the computer because his favorite movie star owns the identical model, he is being moved by issues irrelevant to the product. This is the peripheral route.

It should be noted that few persuasive appeals are purely central or peripheral; most contain elements aimed at both routes to persuasion. A well-known ad campaign, for example, shows two individuals, one playing the role of a Macintosh computer, the other a PC. The Mac is played by Justin Long, who is cool and handsome, a clear

contrast to John Hodgman, Long's older, fatter, and stodgier counterpart, who represents the PC. The central content of the ad—the technological superiority of the Mac—is enhanced by these peripheral cues.

Lawyers and politicians often make great use of the combination of arguments and peripheral cues. In 1995, the murder trial of O. J. Simpson riveted the nation; millions of viewers tuned in to see the Hall of Fame running back and his "dream team" of lawyers fight the charges that Simpson had brutally murdered his ex-wife and her friend. In one of the most dramatic moments of the trial, the prosecutor asked Simpson to try on the bloodstained gloves worn by the murderer. The gloves fit Simpson very tightly. In his summation, Simpson's lead attorney, Johnnie Cochran alluded to that moment, making a theme of it, and in so doing, adding a persuasive peripheral cue. Cochran repeatedly intoned, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit." The statement was persuasive, but not because of the argument's logic—after all, it is certainly possible to commit murder wearing tight gloves. Rather the statement had power because when people are evaluating the quality of an argument, they can be influenced by the way things are phrased. In Cochran's case, his rhyme gave the statement a ring of truth. Research by Matthew McGlone[28] reveals our susceptibility to such tactics. He found that college students were more persuaded by unfamiliar aphorisms that rhyme ("woes unite foes") than the same ideas presented in nonrhyming form ("woes unite enemies"). The peripheral route to persuasion can be surprisingly subtle—yet surprisingly effective.

In recent years, the science of choosing the right words (even if they don't rhyme) has become an essential tool of political campaigns. For example, most Americans are in favor of taxing individuals on wealth they inherit from their parents. In other words, most of us support what used to be called the "estate tax." However, public opinion about the estate tax changed dramatically when its name was changed by a clever political consultant named Frank Luntz. Luntz's research[29] suggested that people could be turned against the tax law if politicians began referring to it as a "death tax," which conjures the image of being unfairly penalized for dying. Likewise, when people consider an educational policy named "No Child Left Behind," it can sound so heart-warming that the defects of the policy escape careful scrutiny. Politicians and political action groups rou-

tinely give proposed policies labels that belie the actual content of the legislation. Recently, the 2009 health care reform bill nearly failed in congress. One of the most effective attacks upon it came when a politician charged that a provision in the bill would allow doctors and insurance companies to decide the fate of patients with serious illnesses. In their attack on the bill, these decision-making meetings were given the scary name "death panels," implying that strangers could decide, as one opponent of the bill put it, "to pull the plug on grandma." In reality, the provision simply required that insurance companies pay for consultation between patients and their doctors to consider options for terminally ill patients—a far cry from the image conjured by the "death panel" nickname.

Similarly, the producers of high-fructose corn syrup, a low-cost alternative to sugar found in soft drinks and thousands of processed foods, have come under attack for the alleged role of the sweetener in the epidemics of obesity and diabetes. Fearing that their product has become something of a dirty word, and that food producers may switch to alternative sweeteners, the Corn Refiners Association decided in 2010 to take bold action to protect their embattled product. What did they do? They changed its name. Hereafter, high-fructose corn syrup will be called "corn sugar." As we shall see repeatedly throughout this book, whether true or false, the pictures that pop into our heads can have enormous influence over our beliefs, feelings, and behaviors, and these pictures depend greatly on the specific words we use to label them.

What are the key factors that can increase the effectiveness of a communication or persuasive attempt? Basically, three classes of variables are important: (1) the source of the communication (who says it), (2) the nature of the communication (how he or she says it), and (3) characteristics of the audience (to whom he or she says it). Put most simply: Who says what to whom? We will look at each of these separately.

The Source of the Communication

Credibility Picture the following scene: Your doorbell rings, and when you answer it, you find a middle-aged man in a loud, checkered sports jacket. His tie is loose, his collar is frayed, his pants need