Persuasive effects of foreign news in the print media: some preliminary ideas

SYED ARABI IDID

Aim of study

Information is important as it enables people to cape in a complex world. Yet such information is informative only when an individual imputes meanings that are compatible to his cognitive structure. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) said that virtually every persuasion or attitude change theory is in some way concerned with information (pg. 50). Information, reinforces beliefs, but an individual without any belief toward an object would initiated to form one.

While one can study informational impact on the individual, one can also investigate how print media users perceive the various messages on foreign events as several critics of the present information order (Smith, 1980) said that media audiences hold a distorted view in perceiving Third World nations in negative terms (such as being prone to coups, conflicts and corruption) but holdings a balanced view of industrialized countries. Yet not many studies have been conducted on the audiences in Third World and industrialized nations to really test these assumptions.

Recognizing the importance of media as moulders of images and opinions, this study will identify the different actors in the communication process (source, channel, medium and receiver) on how readers perceive the significance of messages. A literature review of the relevant issues and made certain conceptualizations are made.

This paper investigates the role of media as persuaders in the dissemination of foreign news from a cognitive perspective.

Functions of mass media

Mass media are said to perform the role of (a) surveillance of the environment, (b) correlate with the components of society, and (c) transmit social inheritance (Lasswell, 1948). Such media functions serve to make the institution important in gathering and disseminating world news as it keeps the citizens abreast of events abroad, and helps explain the various incidence, that are, in the judgement of media, of concern to society.

While some scholars measure media effects isomorphically by media exposure, others cautioned that exposure effectiveness is determined primarily by certain psychological characteristics (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947).

Some communication researches have assumed effects of media messages to be behavioristic, cognitive or affective (Aitken, 1973). Taking development communication as an example, it was assumed that the mere presence of a modern media system would make people modern (Inkeles & Smith, 1976: Lerner, 1958; Pool, 1963; Rogers, 1976; Schramm, 1976). In political communication or in advertising, it was assumed that people, exposed to the media, would vote a particular political candidate that he had been exposed to or purchase the product advertised.

Early communication scholars had neglected to explain the connection between source, message, and receiver by treating them as discrete variables rather than studing communication as a process. The theoretical orientation of media studies has been subsumed under the dominant paradigm (Rogers, 1976) of an powerful media, at times referred to as the "hypodermic needle model." Under this paradigm, media messages are said to act on the audience directly as individuals.

Closely tied to this omnipotent model of communication is the belief of a passive audience who merely responds, but not initiate the communication process. The dominant paradigm of communication

research resembles somewhat past persuasion models. Bettinghaus (1973) said that he most popular model of persuasion was on the "Rational man," one that ignored genetic and environmental factors. Later models, however, took account of the role played by reference membership and significant groups (Brembeck & Howell, 1976), by setting standards to determine individual behaviour and serving as check-points for making decisions about persuasive messages (Fotheringham, 1966). Audience members or receivers were not seen as gullible and messages were not regarded as powerful.

Brembeck and Howell (1976) define persuasion as "an intention to influence choice", the communication being seen as symbolic, while Bettinghaus (1975) views it as a conscious attempt by the individual to change the attitudes, beliefs or the behaviour of individual or group through the transmission of messages." Persuasion is thus said to be a (a) conscious intention by the sender to (b) affect the reciever through (c) a message transmission. This conscious attempt involves altering the representational picture or beliefs held by the receiver, as scholars realize that the beliefs, attitudes, or intentions mediate the way messages are received (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

Researchers in persuasion have focused on effects, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the process.

Cognitive Structure of the Individual

Communication can be studied at the macro or at the individual level, the latter drawing its perspective from cognitive psychology. The approach this study will draw is on cognition, that is to understand the individual's higher mental processess that include memory, perception, reasoning and understanding.

Information-processing psychology is committed to the concept of representation, namely those objects that are perceived and stored in the brain's storage bins. One of the early significant thoughts about

media messages and cognition was provided by Lippman (1921) who said that individuals respond to pseudo-environments from the pictures they themselves construct. How he responded was based not on direct experience and certain knowledge, but merely pictures created by himself.

The individual seeks out information to reduce uncertainty in the environment. Every information gain is organized and meaningfully integrated with previous information. The cognitive structure is conditioned by previous experience and meanings are derived and provided by needs.

Man is an organizing and gregarious animal. Although he might receive information in bits, the resultant impression on his mind is rather organized in form (Asch, 1964).

To gain meaning from his environment, the mental set of the individual determines the perception, which is related to an organized set of beliefs, of morals, and cultural frame of reference. Cognitive psychology sees the individual as an active information seeker and user of information. The social world is perceived and explained by his social behavior and the general principles of cognition.

The Communicator, Source and Encoder

An evaluation of the effectiveness of a persuasive message can be made when the persuaders intention known. In presenting the news, media owners say that their intention is to inform the public, but the latent objective may be to sway readers toward a particular point of view. Gans (1980) say that journalists, by selecting news, are not detached in choosing the news in response to source power. Media owners harp on the professionalism of their reporters to back up their claim that what they are interested in its to present the news in an objective manner it is up to readers to interpret. This assertion of "objectivity" and

"professionalism" is a one way to prop credibility. It directly influences the audience Hovland and Weiss (1951) found out that credibility of source produced more net change of opinion than a less credible source.

The selective process of selecting various events happening in society every day as news and displaying them in the various pages are persuasive attempts. Some news items are boldly displayed on the front pages, with banner headlines that readily catch the eye of readers. Other are relegated as filler stories. This salient display of news is an attempt by editors to persuafe readers how a particular news in very important for them, that it is newsworthy for public discussion, that it is of concern for everyone in society. It thus has a behavioural intention.

Other stories of varying levels of persuasion are those accompanied by pictures (sometimes with color, others not), above the fold or as page-leads. These varying displays are attempts to gain the attention of readers and as McGuire (1963) says, attention a determinants of persuasion.

It is thus established that the newspaper is an active agent of persuasion.

It is thus established that the newspaper is an active agent of persuasion. By selecting certain events as news, by displaying them differently on the pages, by providing different adjectives, the editors have attempted, rather subtly at times, to influence readers.

Another aspect worthy of note is that news items are actually organizational messages. The presentation of foreign news, like other news, requires that the persuasive messages be seen in the organizational context, as the news is contained in a medium produced by a company. In fact the bulk of persuasion today is carried out by organizations (Fotheringham, 1966), and this is no exception of media. The resources need to put out messages require money and manpower that only organizations are capable of providing. Organizations

are, after all, a combination of machines and manpower, and in media organizations they might consist of the typewriters, the printing machines, the papers, pencils, reporters and editors.

Some characteristics of organizations are that their functions are specialized (newspapers are to report events, not to directly sell cars), the expected role of personnel (reporters are to gather news), and the expected role of organizations (to produce the newspapers) are clearly defined.

Unlike an individual, an organization has varied resources at its disposable. It has the capacity and capability far greater than an individual has to get messages across to the attention of the public (Simons, 1976). It even appears to be more credible than an individual.

Structure of Study

1. Mass Media and Persuasion

1.a Concepts of Mass Media and Persuasion

1.b Message Effects

2. Cognitive Structure of the Individual

3. Aim of Study

3.a The Communicator, the Source and Encoder

3.b Interests in Foreign News

3.c Source Credibility

4. Hypotheses

5. Overview of Study

Interests in foreign News

Robinson (1967) found that people most likely to be interested in foreign affairs in U.S are the college-educated and those occupying managerial positions. they are keenly interested in certain areas where they might have personal or business interests. Not all people are informed of all events at any time. McNelly, Rush and Bishop (1968) found that in Madison, those high on international affairs knowledge were those who read out of town newspapers and those who were highly educated.

The education that a person receives might predispose him/her to be interested in foreign events or countries. Motivation might be yet another variable to account for this interest. Although not all people are informed of all events at any time, there is, however, consistent evidence that interest in foreign affairs tends to be generalized (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947).

The demographic factors provide a description of people exposed to foreign events rather than positing any explanations. One of the reasons that people are likely to be exposed to foreign news through the media is interest. Hence one can categorize the audience in terms of their interests and involvement in the subjects. Some subjects or topics are of no special interests to readers, while others may provide information that readers can use for future consumption and are therefore "stored" in the memory bins. Other subjects are of more immediate utility for himself/herself that he/she can use for conversations or other immediate concerns. His/her ego is involved in such form of information. One can, therefore, classify the interests of the reader in foreign news as follows:

(a) No interest : Not reading foreign news at all

(b) Slight interest : glancing at foreign news, by reading the the headlines

(c) Low interest : skimming the foreign news

(d) Some interest : reading foreign news with some interest

(e) High interest : reading with real interests, and showing concerned with the news.

The varying interests of the readers toward foreign news items as categorized above would have effects on the persuasive attempts of media organizations. Readers who have high interests (or ego-involved subjects) store information in their memory and that such information are crystallized as beliefs. The new information must be integrated with other prior information, as well as with other opinions and attitudes least they be rejected or modified. The amount of information a receiver has acquired before treatment of a persuasive message is a core of resistence because the prior acquired information has already assimilated into the person's belief system, that subsequent reception of the same information has reduced impact. New information unless consistent with the prior beliefs will be resisted or rejected (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Therefore to predict a person's attitude, it is not only sufficient to know that information he has been given, rather it is necessary also to assess his prior salient beliefs.

New information would be different for the no-interest or low-interest readers as this would go for the formation of first impressions. Such "neutral" readers are more likely to be influenced by the order of presentation (hence the importance of salient displays, the adjectives being used by the reporters) (Axch, 1946) or attention decrement over passages read (Anderson & Hubert, 1963; Hendrick & Constantini, 1970).

What happens when an ego-involved subject reader receives an information that is discrepant with the person's prior belief? The theory of cognitive dissonance states that the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, would motivate the person to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance. Dissonance can only operate on informed readers as only

they can be able to evaluate a message as being discrepant. An uninformed reader will not be able to associate the message and object because to him the situation is irrelevant.

Having reviewed the relevant literature and identified the problems, one can conceptualize the variables to postulate certain hypotheses.

"Ego-involved issues" are those that a person has high interests in them. The issues are pertinent to the cognitive structure of the individual, and new information is either integrated with this cognitive field, modified or rejected.

"Interests" can be operationalized as the intensity and time devoted to a particular news event. This can be measured by hours spent reading the news item and the subsequent actions.

In ego-involved issues, a reader is more likely to select certain messages that are functional to his/her well-being. A selective process is operative here, where only objects that are of immediate purpose and not discrepant to beliefs are entertained.

Source credibility

Hovland and Weiss (1951) examined the effects of communicator credibility on various respondents and found that, on the average, a highly credible source would produce a greater net opinion change than would a low-credible person. However, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) showed that the findings of Hovland and Weiss (1951) could be interpreted as demonstrating that communicator credibility had no effect on the acceptance of belief statements. Gorn and Tuck (1968) said that the effect of communicator credibility on attitude change was due not to the increased acceptance of a message coming from a high credible source but rather to its greater impact effect on relevant external beliefs. All in all, more research is required to know of the characteristics of the communicator in influencing attitude change as findings have so far been inconsistent.

Source credibility has been measured either as a unidimensional or as a multidimensional concept. The components of source credibility may not be the same across situations but would instead depend on the role of the communicator as he/she is expected to perform in a given context. Many studies recognized the influence of situational factors as well as the possibility of changes occurring in the receiver's impression during the communicative act (Anderson & Clevenger, 1972).

Another factor that has not been given strong emphasis is on issue salience. McGarry and Hendrick (1974) found that when the position indicated is undesirable to the subjects, variation in the perception of the communicator's characteristics will be independent of his persuasiveness. In a newpaper regarded as credible by the reader, he may be quite capable of liking and respecting the medium (communicator) but rejecting the message if the message were against his basic beliefs. Nevertheless, a positive message were against his basic beliefs. Nevertheless, a positive message can be vitiated by a negative image of the source (Greenberg & Miller, 1966).

In the study by Hovland and Weiss (1951) and several other subsequent studies, the independent variable, communicator, was manipulated on his credibility, but the recievers were not differentiated. Exposure and interest in foreign news involves different sources and communicators event by event and also the audience members are differentiated in terms of their interests in the news items. Thus studies could be made to seek the facilitating factors as the interested readers would be more knowledgable and not yeliding to accept statements from the medium, despite the influence of credible sources.

In this study "credibility" is conceptualized as perceived objectivity of a news report and the expertise of the source. It is a multidimensional concept involving "objectivity" and "expertise".

In reading foreign news, an individual is likely to determine the credibility of numerous items,

although admittedly perceived credibility of the particular medium is constant at the period of time. The reader could determine the credibility of the original source, the medium itself, the news organization, and the writer of the report (indicated at times by the by-lines). For example, the individual might give credibility scores to the source, the Prime Minister of country X as quoted in the story, and the reporter, John Doe. Such credibility scores are based on the molar beliefs of the reader vis-a-vis the report read. Overall the reader might provide a summated score of credibilities as follows, on a seven-point scale:

Credible _____,_____,_____,_____, Not Credible
(source, newspaper, organization,
reporter)

He would be more likely to have a net change of opinion or attitude if the summated scores were nearer the end of the credible scale.

In subjects where an individual is deeply interested (ego-involved) and has through knowledge, the reader might be able to determine only one source credibility and rejecting others.

As reviewed in the literature above, a reader may be capable of rejecting a message without compromising his liking of the medium. The reader knows that the newspaper (medium) is prestigious and credible, but there are variations in the quality of news. The readers that reject but maintain the credibility of the medium are likely to be not so deep in the knowledge of the relevant issues as it is conceived that an interested person would reject the message and also the source.

Overall view

This study investigated the persuasiveness of media messages on foreign news items from the cognitive

perspective and viewed media institutions as persuaders in society as they do have intentions to change the "picture" held by readers. It noted that although earlier studies had found at higher educated to be more interested in foreign news, readership could also be categorized according to interests. This makes it more challenging at persuasion as the interested readers have more information and are more critical, despite organized attempts by the media to come to a particular point of view. The study also posited the view that credibility is what is perceived by the reader. Differences are therefore expected among the readers in perceptual abilities, interests in subjects and credibility of sources. Several hypotheses were forwarded for an empirical study to be made.

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