

A LINE ON LIFE

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How Great Is the Power of the Media? *

Many people believe the media is capable of brainwashing us. However, their effect seems to be over-estimated.

Their power is limited, because relatively few people receive what the media produces. For example, even though the average home has their TV on about 7 hours a day, almost 20% of the time, nobody is even in the room! About another 20% of the time, the people are in the room, but they are engaged in other activities besides watching the TV. (In fact, while I am writing this article, the TV is on.)

Over an average two-week period in the 1970s, most adults in the United States didn't see *any* national news broadcast. Of those who watched, relatively little was remembered. In a 1976 telephone survey, viewers recalled less than an average of 2 out of the 20 stories given on the national news that evening. Even if the stories were summarized, viewers could not remember seeing half of them.

In addition, people tend to engage in **selective exposure** – we tend to tune in only the portions of the media, which express opinions that go along with our points of view. Democrats mainly listen to Democrats, and Republicans listen to Republicans. Liberals usually read liberal magazines and newspapers, which are rarely seen by conservatives. The *Wall Street Journal* not only supplies business information, but it also backs the more conservative political views of the people who read it. All of us tend to seek information that supports our own views.

Even if the message does reach us, we may display **selective attention**. In some clever psychological experiments, subjects listened to persuasive messages with static that made hearing difficult. To hear the message better, a button could be pushed to clear the static. Listeners removed the static much more often for messages that supported their views. Students favoring legalization of marijuana removed static from neutral messages, ones that favored legalization, and even easily refutable arguments. However, they did *not* stop the static with opposing messages that were difficult to refute.

Even if we do pay attention, we tend to engage in **selective interpretation** – interpreting messages in terms of the beliefs and attitudes we hold. Selective interpretation is a major reason why politicians are so vague in answering questions. If they can be relatively ambiguous in their answers, more people are likely to interpret the politicians' answers as agreeing with their own views.

Media is not as powerful as some people think, but it is still an important factor in influencing people.

In this light, the current multi-million dollar media blitz against smoking in California would seem to be a waste of money. However, this seems to be contradicted by a 1972 Stanford study of three communities on efforts to combat heart disease. They wanted to see if people could be convinced to change their smoking, exercise and eating habits to reduce heart disease. Planned by social psychologists, communication experts and media production people, they used everything they knew about persuasion, communication and behavior modification to change deeply ingrained habits of smoking and overeating.

Two California communities – about 11,000 in population – were experimented on with a third, similar community acting as a control. In each community, a random sample of 400 people was repeatedly surveyed over a two-year period to measure the effects of the campaign. Over the two years, the experimental communities received *"3 hours of television programs, over 50 television spot announcements, 100 radio spots, several hours of radio programming, weekly newspaper columns and newspaper advertisements and stories that dealt with heart disease and its prevention."* Posters were put up on buses, in stores and places of work, and mailings were sent directly to participants. All of this was done in both English and Spanish.

The knowledge about heart disease increased about 30% in the 2 experimental communities but only 6% in the control. In contrast to the control community, participants in the other two showed much greater decreases in *"saturated fat intake, cigarette smoking, plasma cholesterol levels, systolic blood pressure, and overall probability of contracting heart disease."* For example, the probability of heart disease *increased* in the control community about 10%, while it *dropped* in the other two by about 15%.

The two communities were also compared to a select group of people at high risk for heart disease. Beside the media blitz, this group received direct counseling and instruction over a ten-week period. In the first year, this select group did much better than the media-only subjects in reducing their high-risk behaviors. However, by the end of the second year, the media-only subjects produced almost as much change in high-risk behaviors as the intensive counseling group.

Mass media *can* be successful in persuading – if the campaign is carefully and intensively carried out. However, the information sources had **high credibility**. They were experts in heart disease and – in contrast to politicians – had nothing to gain personally from the recommended changes.

This study has been successfully followed by several others, and the Stanford group is probably behind the current antismoking media blitz. Even though the media is not as powerful as some people think it is, it is still an important factor in influencing people.

* Adapted from Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith & Bem's *Introduction to Psychology*,
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1990, pages 753-756.