

CHAPTER 14

Public relations, propaganda and the psychology of persuasion



Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe and evaluate the components of propaganda and persuasive communication
- describe and distinguish between attitudes and their effect on behaviour
- describe and evaluate theories of attitude learning and change
- apply these concepts to a communication campaign
- describe and evaluate the ethics of persuasive communication

Structure

- Public relations and propaganda
- Public relations and persuasion
- Who says: the question of credibility
- Says what: the nature of the message
- To whom: the audience perspective
- To what effect: forming and changing attitudes and beliefs
- Ethical persuasion: is it possible?

Introduction

Many journalists assume that public relations is largely propaganda. Public relations practitioners – and some academics – tend to treat this as an outrageous accusation, denying that they would ever seek to persuade anyone about anything. Students and those wishing to practise responsible public relations may prefer a more rigorous response, based on examination of the issues rather than simple rejection of all charges.

This chapter examines the connections between propaganda and public relations, particularly in their shared history. This is then linked to persuasion and the processes involved in trying to persuade others. It uses a simple communication model to describe the stages of persuasion in some detail, drawing on theories from social psychology to understand concepts such as attitudes and their effect on behaviour. The perspective is largely that of the public relations practitioner seeking to influence others.

It concludes with a discussion of ethical principles for producing persuasive communication. Examples are given from the history of public relations and from recent world events.

think about 14.1

Are these examples of propaganda or public relations?

- Libya's leader, Colonel Gadafy, is seeking public relations advice. So is the Arab TV station Al-Jazeera (*PR Week* 21 January 2005).
- The Pentagon tried to set up its own propaganda unit before the 2003 war on Iraq.
- Advertising and communications agency Ogilvy and Mather is teaching Chinese students the benefits of capitalism (*Wall Street Journal* 26 January 2005).
- An Iraqi media mogul is accused of running a propaganda campaign financed by Saudi Arabian intelligence (*The Guardian* 26 January 2005).
- A new lobby group, Alliance for American Advertising, is created by food manufacturers and advertisers to defend advertising to children (*Wall Street Journal* 27 January 2005).
- The UK government hired a public relations agency to campaign for approval of the European constitution in the referendum then planned to take place in 2006 (*Financial Times* 20 January 2005).

Public relations and propaganda

See Think about 14.1. Critics of public relations say that much of public relations *is* propaganda; its practitioners insist public relations is only practised for the public good. Both agree that propaganda is harmful; the latter deny it has anything to do with them. These views are very simplistic and have a strong 'either/or', 'good/bad' approach to the subject. One group assumes all public relations is propaganda; the other that none is. It is also much easier to accuse others of propaganda than to examine one's own practices – you do propaganda; I do public relations. The realities are more complex and take some unravelling. Let's start with trying to explain the differences.

The word propaganda has its origins in the seventeenth-century Catholic Church, where it meant to 'propagate the faith'. It played a major part in recruiting support for the First World War, when the key Committee on Public Information (CPI) was established in the USA. (See Box 14.1, p. 270, for the impact this committee had on the development of public relations in the UK and USA.)

L'Etang (1998) notes that propaganda was a neutral term at the start of the twentieth century when theorists such as Bernays (1923), Lippman (1925) and Lasswell (1934) saw no problem with trying to organise the responses of mass audiences. Indeed, they saw it as 'democratic leadership' in Lippman's phrase, and Bernays, sometimes called the father of public relations, called his second book *Propaganda* (1928). As Weaver et al. (2004) say: 'In these terms, the real value of propaganda lies not in its dissemination and promotion of ideas but in its ability to orchestrate public opinion and social action that supported the ruling elite' (2004: 6–7).

Propaganda was not seen as a pejorative (negative or disparaging) concept until after the Second World War. When everyone saw the power of Nazi propa-

ganda, especially their use of film, to promote anti-Semitism and the horrific consequences of that message, it is hardly surprising that communicators distanced themselves from the concept of propaganda. Nevertheless, propaganda is part of our everyday lives, not just something from history. As Pratkanis and Aronson (2001:7) point out: 'Every day we are bombarded with one persuasive communication after another. These appeals persuade not through the give-and-take of argument and debate, but through the manipulation of symbols and of our most basic human emotions. For better or worse, ours is an age of propaganda.'

Many scholars who study propaganda concentrate on its wartime application. However, there are increasing numbers of academics, journalists and campaigners who are examining the role of public relations in civil and corporate propaganda. There are websites dedicated to monitoring public relations activity, such as the US-based Center for Media and Democracy (www.prwatch.org), which contains extremely interesting and disturbing examples of unethical corporate public relations, and the UK-based Corporate Watch, (www.ethicalconsumer.org/magazine/corpwatch.htm), which is particularly concerned with environmental aspects of corporate behaviour. The most interesting – and sometimes challenging – site for public relations students is probably the UK-based Spinwatch (www.spinwatch.org.uk), which describes itself as:

An independent organisation set up to monitor the PR and lobbying industry in the UK and Europe and the spin and lobbying activities of corporations. Spinwatch is a registered charity and is not linked to any political party in the UK, Europe or elsewhere. Spinwatch exists to provide public interest research and reporting on corporate and government public relations and propaganda.

Spinwatch is edited by a team of independent researchers who have extensive experience of researching

activity 14.1

Public relations or propaganda – how would you classify these examples?

- Several sugar companies create a body to promote sugar consumption. They call it the Sugar Information Centre (SIC) and commission scientific research into the effects of sugar consumption. One finding suggests that children's teeth are less affected by sugar than previous research believed. This finding is published by the SIC and carried in major news outlets. The fact that the research was funded by the sugar industry and involved fewer children than previously is not mentioned (invented example).
- Greenpeace takes a video of its activists gaining access to the Brent Spar oil platform in 1995 and releases the tape to media organisations who screen it as a lead news item. It turns out there are serious errors in the report and, of course, no other point of view covered in the tape (Varey 1997).
- The government dossier setting out the reasons for invading Iraq and presented to Parliament in 2003 is found to contain differences in emphasis from the original source documents, with statements suggesting the information should be treated with caution edited out. Another dossier contains material from a PhD student, which is only properly acknowledged after journalists identify the source (Miller 2004).
- In 1993, a group called Mothers Opposing Pollution (MOP) appeared, calling itself 'the largest women's environmental group in Australia, with thousands of supporters across the country'. Their cause: a campaign against plastic milk bottles. It turned out that the group's spokesperson, Alana Maloney, was in truth a woman named Janet Rundle, the business partner of a man who did public relations for the Association of Liquidpaperboard Carton Manufacturers – makers of paper milk cartons (Rampton and Stauber 2002).

Feedback

Do the examples fall neatly into one category or another? Can you tell what, if anything, is wrong with any of these examples? Do you find you don't mind the questionable statements if you approve of the overall message? It's not easy to decide, is it?

the PR industry, corporate PR and lobbying, front groups, government spin, propaganda and other tactics used by powerful groups to manipulate media, public policy debate and public opinion. The editorial board of Spinwatch includes academics, activists and freelance journalists.

Source: © 2004 Spinwatch.

See Activity 14.1.

Defining propaganda

Propaganda has been described as 'the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate

cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992: 4). This emphasises the purposefulness of propaganda, its organisation and the way propaganda seeks to further the sender's not the receiver's interests. It also shows that the propagandist seeks to influence the thoughts and behaviour of the audience. The problem is that it could equally describe a great deal of public relations activity.

Grunig and Hunt (1984: 21) locate propaganda in the press agency model, the first of their four models: 'Public relations serves a propaganda function in the press agency/publicity model. Practitioners spread the faith of the organisation involved, often through incomplete, distorted, or half-true information.' This links (some) public relations activity to propaganda, but later makes clear this is often unethical in content and tends to associate it with historical examples.

An alternative description is provided by Taylor (1992), who suggests that: 'Propaganda is a *practical process of persuasion* [his emphasis] . . . it is an



PICTURE 14.1 James Montgomery Flagg's memorable recruiting poster (produced under the direction of the Division of Pictorial Publicity of the Committee on Public Information) was successful in stimulating American public opinion in favour of US involvement in the European conflict during World War II. (Source: LLC/Corbis.)

box
14.1
Public relations – a little history

Edward Bernays (1891–1995), is widely described as the ‘father of public relations’ and his life and career sheds some interesting light on current dilemmas regarding public relations, persuasion and propaganda.

Born in Vienna, Bernays was the nephew of the pioneering psychologist, Sigmund Freud. He developed the practice of applying his uncle’s theories of mass psychology to the practice of corporate and political persuasion. He started the first educational course in the subject at New York University in the 1920s and introduced the term ‘public relations counsel’ in his 1923 book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, which was the first text on the subject. His next book was called *Propaganda* (1928) because he believed that public relations was about engineering social responses to organisational needs (he also wrote *The Engineering of Consent*, 1955). His influence on the twentieth century is described in a fascinating BBC documentary *The Century of the Self* (BBC2 April/May 2002 – see www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/century_of_the_self.shtml for details), which looked at the impact of persuasion techniques and psychology on commercial and political communication throughout the twentieth century.

In the 1920s when the American Tobacco Company asked for his help in promoting cigarette smoking among women, Bernays persuaded a group of young women’s rights campaigners to light cigarettes on the New York Easter march, as ‘Torches of Freedom’ (a slogan that he ensured was the caption to all the media photographs of the event), thus combining the image of the cigarette with women’s independence – a powerful image that affected consumer behaviour for the rest of the twentieth century (Wilcox et al. 2003). He had learned some of these techniques during the First World War when he served on the US Committee for Public Information (see previous section).

The CPI included many of the leading public relations practitioners in the post-war period. As Bernays said in *Propaganda* (1928): ‘It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind. It was only natural, after the war ended, that intelligent persons should ask themselves whether it was not possible to apply a similar technique to the problems of peace’ (cited in Delwiche 2002).

More information about Bernays and his contemporaries can be found at www.prmuseum.com/bernays. There is an interesting account of Stuart Ewen’s interview with the 90-year-old Bernays (Ewen 1996) which also has a website at www.bway.net/~drstu/chapter.

The history of UK public relations also demonstrates its origins in propaganda. Unlike the growth of the field in the USA, European public relations is rooted in public service information traditions, with the emphasis on local and central government supply of information (L’Etang 1998). This was also the source of persuasion campaigns, such as the 1924 campaign – including films and posters – to promote the British Empire to the rest of the world, led by Sir Stephen Tallents, who went on to found the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in 1948, and wrote *The Projection of England* (1932), which was influential in ‘persuading British policy makers of the benefits of a cultural propaganda policy’ (L’Etang 1998). He was active in producing propaganda for both world wars, as were the founders of several major public relations companies in the interwar period, many of which survive to this day. A more negative response came from George Orwell, who resigned from the BBC ‘sickened by the propaganda he had had to do’ (Ewen 1996) and proceeded to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949) ‘as a response to the experience’ (L’Etang 1998).

inherently neutral concept . . . We should discard any notions of propaganda being “good” or “bad”, and use those terms merely to describe effective or ineffective propaganda.’ He says that the issue of intent is important in propaganda – not just who says what to whom, but *why* (Taylor 2001). This approach is in line with some public relations academics (L’Etang, Weaver) who believe propaganda should be re-examined rather than demonised in public relations texts.

A more political approach was developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) who proposed a model of propaganda to explain the use of power (particularly state and

corporate power) in communication, especially outside totalitarian states. They suggested five ‘filters’ or layers of control whereby messages could be manipulated to suit certain interests. These can be summarised as:

- 1 the size and concentration of media ownership
- 2 the role of advertising in providing income for media organisations
- 3 the reliance of journalists from the mass media on government and other ‘official’ sources of information
- 4 ‘flak’ (complaints to programmers/editors) as a means of controlling media content

think about 14.2 Propaganda or persuasion?

Does Bernays' success in persuading women to smoke by associating cigarettes with 'freedom' (see above) illustrate a successful public relations campaign or the unethical use that can be made of persuasion? Is this propaganda or persuasion?

5 'anti-communism' as a 'national religion' and control mechanism.

In this model, propaganda is not neutral but is designed to give the appearance of a 'free press' while actually producing messages that favour the views of government and business above other voices. If one substitutes anti-terrorism for anti-communism, the model still seems relevant and has been hugely influential. The role of public relations in political, military and corporate communications, not just publicity, is seen as fuelling propaganda. (See Think about 14.2.)

Public relations and persuasion

So far we have looked at propaganda and the part it has played in public relations past and present. Now it is important to see how persuasion fits into the picture.

As already stated, early public relations theorists had no problem with acknowledging the centrality of persuasion to public relations; indeed, Bernays considered public relations to be about 'engineering public consent'.

However, more recent public relations theory has tended to move away from this aspect of communication and concentrate on the more acceptable images of negotiation and adaptation. Very few public relations textbooks really explore persuasion. This is largely because the Grunig and Hunt (1984) models stress the positive aspects of excellent public relations and relegate persuasion to 'second best', the two-way asymmetric model (see Chapter 8 for details of systems theory and Grunig's approach). Moloney (2000) notes that they treat persuasion as an inferior or less ethical activity than negotiation or compromise, but argues that one often involves the other. Moreover, it is hard to maintain that persuasion is so unacceptable an endeavour – after all, it seems a very human impulse to seek to influence other members of society. Jaksa and Pritchard (1994: 128) stress that 'it cannot be seriously maintained that all persuasion is bad or undesirable' and Andersen (1978: 41) asserts that persuasion can serve others well so long as the communicator attempts to bring about 'voluntary change in the attitudes and/or actions of . . . receivers'.

And yet persuasion is still underexplored in public relations literature. Instead, we have to turn to other bodies of theory for guidance and insight. The two approaches that study persuasion in detail are the social psychology schools, which are covered later in the chapter, and the study of speech acts, or rhetoric. Rhetoric is an ancient topic of study, and refers to texts from ancient Greece, particularly Aristotle. (See Chapter 9 for more about the study of rhetoric and its relevance to public relations.) Persuasion was seen as an essential skill for leadership and democracy, where one party would produce rational arguments to persuade others to support or oppose a particular point of view. Study of persuasion here means examining the use of words, images, symbols, media and emphasis to understand the meaning and intent of the speaker. For example, many commentators explored the use of religious imagery and concepts in President Bush's second inaugural address (in 2005).

Miller (1989) is also interested in public relations and persuasion as using symbols to 'exert control over the environment', such as influencing the attitudes of others. He sees the similarities between persuasion and public relations as 'overwhelming'.

It is not always easy to separate persuasion from propaganda as the above examples illustrate, and this may be one reason why it is not examined more closely by public relations theorists. However, certain key concepts recur in the discussion of persuasion that might help public relations practitioners avoid the charge of propaganda. These are:

- *Intent*: Taylor (2001) says that *intent* is a key determinant, as the communication itself is neutral. The question should not be is it good or bad communication, but was it effective or ineffective? Of course intent is hard to measure, even from the communicator's perspective – it is possible to have good intentions with damaging outcomes.
- *Free will*: Many of the definitions of persuasion emphasise the 'free will' of the receivers; for example, O'Keefe (1990: 17) describes persuasion as 'a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom'. Again, the issue of power in communications is contested – people can feel constrained by social norms, lack of alternative opinions, etc.

- *Truth*: While most public relations people would say they never lied, many would have to confess to not telling the *whole truth all the time*. But Schick (1994) declares that ‘the intention of withholding a truth is to deceive’. Martinson (1996: 46) says that if the public relations practitioner is to practise ethical persuasion, they ‘must adopt truthfulness as a norm . . . have internalised it as a value and . . . be ever vigilant in recognising that those inevitable temptations to communicate somewhat less than substantially complete information must be taken for what they are – temptations to manipulate others for the practitioner’s own, or a client’s, selfish ends’.
- *Autonomy of audiences*: The idea of the autonomous, active audience is important for the creation of ethical persuasion. It underlines the importance of dialogue; it suggests a notion of equality. As Jaksa and Pritchard (1994) argue, ‘human beings . . . should not be treated merely as a means to an end; they are to be respected as ends in themselves’. The freedom of the audience to participate on equal terms was central to Habermas’s ideas of ethical dialogue (see Chapter 9 for details).
- *Communication ethics* (see end of chapter).

Given these indicators and the work on ethics explored at the end of the chapter and in Chapter 15, let’s look at the process of persuasion and, in particular, see what public relations practitioners can learn from social psychologists.

Persuasion and psychology

The US post-war research (led by scholars at Harvard and Yale) into the psychology of persuasion was driven both by the threat of the *Cold War* and fears of (as well as interest in) brainwashing, and the promise of the consumer boom in goods and services. Many organisations and advertising agencies recruited psychologists to help create powerful and effective messages. This led to some concern about commercial brainwashing, which was highlighted by Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). It was seen as deeply sinister then, but the only technique he described which is no longer in regular use is subliminal advertising (where images are flashed on a screen too quickly for the brain fully to register them). It seems that we have become used to the fact that persuasion is an integral part of mass communication. The use of psychology in designing persuasive messages is now a widely recognised practice. One website that promotes the skills of psychologists in helping businesses is www.influenceatwork.com. It offers a self-test and examples of how psychology can help communication campaigns.

The latest development in using psychology for promotion is called neuromarketing, where neuroscientists identify which parts of the brain are stimulated by different tastes, sounds and images, and help manufacturers test the response to their products. For example, recent research (reported in *The Guardian* 29 July 2004) shows that while people liked the taste of Pepsi better than Coca-Cola in blind tests, they preferred Coke when they knew which brand they were drinking. Brain scans showed that while one (rewards) section of the brain was activated by the tasting, a different (thinking) centre responded to the brand names, suggesting that we call on memories and impressions associated with a name, rather than just the direct experience.

This chapter will not be probing anyone’s brains, but draws on more theoretical models of how people make decisions and what influences them.

Definition: *Cold War* refers to hostile relations between the former Soviet Union and the USA, and their respective allies between 1946 and 1989.

Propaganda, persuasion and public relations all involve communication, although they have other aspects, and it is worth examining the communication process to understand what is involved. Persuasion and propaganda tend to conform to the transmission model of communication, summarised by Harold Lasswell (1948) as ‘Who (1) says What (2) in Which channel (3) to Whom (4), with What effect (5)’. The second half of this chapter analyses persuasive communication and the role of the sender (1), the message (2) and the receiver (4) in achieving (or failing to achieve) an effect (5). It does not analyse the use of different media in constructing persuasive messages, as the chapter focuses more on psychology than media relations. It draws on social psychology theories to illustrate the personality variables of sender and receiver, the effectiveness of different message strategies, and finally how the elements all fit into a persuasive campaign.

Who says: the question of credibility

These elements concern the nature of the sender or sender variables. Aristotle said that communication consisted of: *Ethos* – the character of the speaker; *Logos* – the nature of the message; and *Pathos* – the attitude of the audience. He placed most emphasis on the speaker’s (orators tended to be male, then) character: ‘We believe good men more fully and more readily than others . . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses’ (cited in Perloff 1993: 138).

Credibility has been an important – but hard to define – element of persuasive communication ever since. Look at today's newspapers and concerns about the credibility of politicians to see how relevant it is today. A great deal of public relations activity is designed to enhance the credibility of the organisation or individual. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair has had to deal with massive loss in credibility following inaccurate statements made in the run-up to the 2003 war in Iraq. It was not necessary to prove any deliberate untruths for his credibility to be damaged. Many politicians today make credibility their central platform for election – 'trust me' is their key message. However, the Edelman public relations firm's survey of eight countries found that 'pressure groups and charities have overtaken governments, media and big businesses to become the world's most trusted institutions' (*Financial Times* 24 January 2005).

Many scholars in the USA in the 1950s, especially at Yale and Harvard, concentrated on attributes of speakers – how attractive are they, how expert, etc. – to try and measure credibility. But later scholars, like McCroskey (1966), said that 'credibility is the attitude toward a speaker held by a listener'. In other words, it is something that is given by the audience and cannot be demanded by the speaker. An interesting theory in this area is attribution theory (Eagly et al. 1978), which says that audiences want to know why the source is taking a particular position. Politicians are expected to say 'Vote for Me' so the message is not particularly persuasive – we would expect them to say that, wouldn't we? If they suggested we vote for someone else, *then* we would be interested! We want to know why someone is saying what they are saying – is it for money, or status, or because it's their job – or do they really believe what they are saying?

Another fascinating discovery from the Yale school was the 'sleeper effect' (Hovland et al. 1953), which showed that however much effort was put into providing a credible source, when audiences were tested several weeks after exposure to the message, they remembered the message but forgot the source!

Perloff (1993) summarises the four key elements by which audiences evaluate speakers as:

- 1 *expertise* – how competent the speaker is on this issue
- 2 *trustworthiness* – this includes confidence and likeability
- 3 *similarity* – credible speakers should be like the receiver (*homophily*) unless the subject concerns different experiences or expertise, in which case they should be dissimilar (*heterophily*)
- 4 *physical attractiveness* – people tend to trust attractive speakers – which may reflect the social value attached to appearance, as in celebrity public

relations – unless the speaker is so attractive that their looks distract from the message (adapted from Perloff 1993).

Definition: *Homophily* means similarity between speaker and audience.

Definition: *Heterophily* means difference between speaker and audience.

Other theorists (Raven 1983) added 'power' to the list, saying that the kind of authority the speaker has over the listener can influence the persuasion process. Bettinghaus and Cody (1994: 143–145) summarise Raven's types of power as:

- *informational influence* – access to restricted information gives authority to a speaker
- *referent influence* – membership of key social groups can confer power
- *expert influence* – knowledge of the field
- *legitimate influence* – authorised by law or other agreement (e.g. traffic warden, safety officer)
- *reward/coercive influence* – are there rewards for being persuaded or punishments for resisting?

The role of power in persuasion is also important to critical approaches to public relations theory (see Chapter 9 for details).

The issues of credibility covered above are of direct relevance to public relations where it is essential to establish credible sources for messages. Activity 14.2 illustrates the sorts of decision public relations practitioners need to make which require knowledge or insight into credibility.

activity 14.2

Speaker credibility

Which speaker or presenter would you choose for the following events:

- 1 Launch of new carburettor using methane gas to audience of motoring journalists: (a) TV motoring correspondent; (b) lead engineer from motor company; (c) learner driver?
- 2 Promotional campaign for new mobile phone aimed at youth market – poster ads: (a) phone engineer; (b) television personality contestant; (c) CEO of phone company?
- 3 Video about safe sex for showing in schools: (a) minister for education; (b) doctor working in genitourinary health unit; (c) young person?

Feedback

These choices involve considerations about expertise and trustworthiness, and illustrate that there are times when you want a speaker who resembles the audience (*homophily*) and other occasions when the differences will increase credibility (*heterophily*).

Now let's take the next element in Lasswell's phrase, 'says what – the nature of the message'.

Says what: the nature of the message

This element of persuasion looks at which kinds of message are most convincing and the ways in which messages are absorbed and used by people. Message research included investigating whether messages using fear or humour were more persuasive and whether it was more effective to appeal to the audiences' reason or emotion. At first it was thought that fear made a message more powerful but a later theory, fear protection motivation schema (Rogers 1983), suggested that if a message is too frightening, receivers tend to block the message to protect them-

selves from being alarmed. This is borne out by experience of early AIDS campaigns in the 1980s when ads showing tombstones with the message 'Don't Die of Ignorance' were subsequently seen as counterproductive (Miller et al. 1998). Scholars do not agree on this issue – what do you think?

One of the most interesting theories concerning how messages are processed is the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), which suggested that there are two routes to persuasion: the central and peripheral routes (see Figure 14.1). The central route involves processing (or elaborating) the arguments contained in a message, using reason and evaluation. The peripheral route involves reacting emotionally to a message that appeals to a range of responses – such as humour or feelings towards the person giving the message (such as a celebrity) – without having to weigh up the arguments for and against the message. The central route is more likely to lead to



Central route	Peripheral route
Simon is considering a new life insurance policy	Rowena has a plane to catch but needs to pick up travel insurance on the way
The decisions he makes will effect the financial well-being of his family after his death	The policy will only last for the duration of her holiday
He wants to take his time comparing options, and will talk to his advisors	She scans the web to compare prices
Simon chooses the policy that balances the cost of the premiums with the benefits to his loved ones	A link comes up with bright graphics and a link to holiday cover. A celebrity from a TV travel show is shown giving the thumbs up. The price is about right for one-off cover. She doesn't check the small print
He visits the insurance offices to sign the forms	She buys it online
Simon is persuaded by the quality of the policy, its costs and benefits, despite the time taken to choose	Rowena is persuaded by images and ease of purchase, regardless of the actual policy benefits

FIGURE 14.1 Elaboration likelihood model (source: adapted from Petty and Cacioppo 1986)

long lasting attitude change; the peripheral route, often used by advertisers, works for short-term messages.

Use of arguments to persuade

If the message aims to involve the receiver in internal reasoning or elaboration, then it has to ensure that there is a good range of arguments to support the message. The communicator also has to decide whether to present all the arguments in favour of their position or whether to deal with the counterarguments as well. Research suggested that more educated or hostile audiences often prefer to be given both points of view, even if the message concludes with the preferred position of the communicator. People who already support the point of view – fans of a band, members of a political party, for example – are more receptive to messages reinforcing just that one point of view. Petty and Cacioppo also suggested that some people had a ‘need for cognition’, that is a motive to find out things and a preference for making choices based on thought and reflection rather than impulse. Of course, if the messages are unclear, or irrelevant to the receiver, then they will not be motivated to elaborate further.

Toulmin (1958) suggested that effective messages use evidence (data, opinions, case studies, etc.) to make a claim (the message the communicator wants the receiver to agree with), which is then backed by

a warrant (reason to agree). An example might be the UK NHS anti-smoking adverts shown regularly on television. These tend to show a terminally ill person (evidence) talking about their life expectancy (claim) and close with statements about the effectiveness of support lines (warrant). There is an excellent website explaining current campaigns, key messages and target groups, with examples of TV, press and poster ads at www.givingupsmoking.co.uk (see Picture 14.2).

In the increasingly visual environment of modern communication, messages are more likely to appeal to the emotions of the receiver than their reason. There is some evidence that making people feel good is more effective than making them feel bad. According to a UK Sunday newspaper article (*Observer* 17 October 2004) three researchers went to a beach full of sunbathers in New England (USA) to find out whether positive or negative messages were more persuasive. They approached 217 sunbathers and gave them either ‘gain’ messages (‘protect yourself from the sun and you will help yourself stay healthy’) or ‘loss’ messages (‘not using sunscreen increases your risk of early death’). They then gave the sunbathers coupons to exchange for free sunscreen. Seventy-one per cent of people given a positive message got up to get their free cream, whereas only 50% in the loss frame were motivated.

However, there are also examples of fear campaigns being conducted by both parties in the 2004 US presidential election, and previous election campaign

WHY GIVE UP?
HOW TO GIVE UP
STAY STOPPED
NHS STOP SMOKING SERVICES
ASK AN EXPERT **NEW**
ESSENTIAL RESOURCES
SECONDHAND SMOKE
SMOKING & PREGNANCY
SOUTH ASIAN GROUPS
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For more help and advice call the NHS Smoking Helpline on 0800 169 0 169

PICTURE 14.2 Giving up smoking. See www.givingupsmoking.co.uk/CNI. (Source: HMSO.)

analysis has revealed that suggesting to voters that they will be less safe with an opponent in charge can be very effective. (See Activity 14.3.)

Approaches to persuasion

Another angle to studying persuasive messages is the rhetorical approach, which looks in detail at the language used by communicators, and the exchange of information, or discourse, between parties seeking to influence each other through the use of words and symbols. They do not see persuasion as inherently good or bad but as the stuff of human interaction: 'Through statement and counterstatement, people test each other's views of reality, value, and choices relevant to products, services and public policies' (Heath 2001: 31). They see public relations as the search for shared meaning and emphasise the importance of relationship in achieving such understanding. (See Chapter 9 for more about *rhetoric* and public relations.)

Definition: *Rhetoric* means the study of language and how it is used to create shared meanings.

Semiotics is also a fascinating approach to studying messages and, unlike many traditional public relations models, the perspective is that of the receiver, not the sender. Its leading theorists (Pierce, Saussure) proposed the study of texts and symbols as acts of decoding or deconstructing, whereby the receiver extracts the meaning that is relevant or comprehensible to them, regardless of the intention of the sender.

Semioticians propose that messages consist of:

- *denotative* meaning (the literal, dictionary meaning)
- *connotative* meaning (the internal associations each reader/viewer brings to the message)
- *ambiguous* meaning (perhaps the message has multiple dictionary meanings)
- *polysemic* meaning (perhaps it has multiple associations, varying not only from person to person but from culture to culture).

activity 14.3

Message appeals

Look at the messages around you – can you find examples of appeals to your feelings? What about engaging your reason? Can you see 'feel good' messages? What about fear campaigns? Do you prefer a message that makes you laugh?

Feedback

Look at the posters produced by candidates in elections – whether for local, general, EU or student elections. Are they creating positive images of themselves or negative images of their opponents? Which do you think are more effective?

Definition: *Semiotics* means the study of language, symbols and images and how they are created by audiences or used to generate relevant meaning.

The distinguished UK practitioner, Reginald Watts (2004), argues that visual language is replacing written communication and that public relations should become more actively engaged in the study of semiotics, given that signs and symbols are the bedrock of most contemporary communication. (See Think about 14.3.)

Both the above groups use media content analysis to examine the content of messages, whether from corporations, politicians or mass media. These tools allow them to explore the surface meanings and the deeper associations. Political speeches are increasingly analysed to decode their underlying meanings. For example, the use of language like 'crusade against terrorism' or 'evil axis' in speeches by US President George W. Bush can reveal a world view that refers back to medieval views of Christians versus infidels.

These approaches offer useful insights to the public relations practitioner because they remind us that messages *received* are often very different from those *sent*. Failure to understand the different values and attitudes that people might bring to understanding a communication can destroy an organisation's reputation. Senders who use their own terms of reference or

think about 14.3 Corporate logos

Look at the logos of big corporations, political parties and other organisations. What symbols do they use to represent themselves? Count how many have flowers as their key symbols – why do you think they chose flower images? Do any use military symbols, like swords? If so, why do you think they chose those symbols?

(See also Chapter 13 on image, reputation and identity.)

value systems will not create understanding or ‘shared meaning’, as rhetoric puts it. Sometimes this involves literal mistranslations as when a leading pen manufacturer translated the line ‘our pen will not leak in your pocket and embarrass you’ for its Mexican launch, but used the word *embrazar* . . . meaning to make pregnant. Other problems concern point of view: a leading tobacco manufacturer proudly announced that smoking-related premature deaths saved Czechoslovakia \$147 million a year in benefits (Fineman 2001). Good news or what?

The next section looks at the ‘to whom’ part of Lasswell’s saying and in particular examines whether some people are easier to persuade than others and the role of the receiver’s psychology in creating successful communication.

To whom: the audience perspective

Receivers can be grouped in many ways. There is a range of media theories showing how publics come together to use a particular medium to gain information or entertainment, for example. They can be categorised by age, geography, occupation, gender, marital status, etc. This is called *demographics*. Then there are the theories that look at *psychographics*, or differences in personality.

Psychologists have investigated a number of theories that might explain why some people are easier to persuade than others and the internal process by which persuasion takes place. Aspects of personality, such as self-esteem, are examined as are the internal structures of personality, such as attitudes and behaviour. This section looks at the psychology of persuasion from the individual receiver’s perspective.

Self-esteem was felt to be an important component of persuasion and research showed that people with lower self-esteem were much easier to persuade. However, it was not entirely simple, as people with low self-esteem were more easily influenced by superficial aspects of the message, whereas people with higher self-esteem tended to engage with relevant thinking on the issue before deciding whether to agree or disagree with the message. As a result, those who were most easily persuaded by peripheral cues (colour, music, celebrity) tended not to internalise the message and were therefore equally easily persuaded by the next message to use the same tactics. There was also evidence (Cohen 1959) that people with high self-esteem avoided or deflected unwelcome or challenging messages – a bit like smokers leaving the room when anti-smoking ads come on. This is called ego-defensive behaviour, as it allows the person to maintain self-belief by avoiding contradictory evidence. These findings

suggests that different tactics are needed for different audiences – with reasons to agree provided to those who prefer to process messages and simple, non-threatening messages to those who do not. There are echoes here of the elaboration likelihood model outlined above.

Definition: *Demographics* means external differences between people – e.g. race, age, gender, location, occupational status, group membership.

Definition: *Psychographics* describes internal differences between personalities – e.g. anxious, approval-seeking, high self-esteem, etc.

Another personality variable that affected how easily an individual could be persuaded was discovered by Snyder and DeBono (1985) who showed that some people are more likely to look outside themselves for clues about how to respond (high self-monitors), while others look inwards (low self-monitors). The former is influenced by the reactions of those around them, especially people they would like to be accepted by (sometimes called the referent group). The latter consults their own values and beliefs before responding to messages. (See Activity 14.4 and Think about 14.4, overleaf.)

This theory also raises the issue of the influence of groups on the persuasiveness of the individual. There are a number of theories that look at how individuals behave in group situations, of which the most relevant here is social comparison theory (Festinger 1954). This applies when individuals have to evaluate an opinion or ability and cannot test it directly. (See Box 14.2, overleaf.)

activity 14.4

Are you a high self-monitor?

Bettinghaus and Cody (1994: 165) provide the following statements as tests for self-monitoring:

- ‘I have considered being an entertainer.’
- ‘I’m not always the person I appear to be.’
- ‘I may deceive people by being friendly when I really dislike them.’
- ‘I guess I put on a show to impress or entertain others.’
- ‘I can make impromptu speeches even on topics about which I have almost no information.’

The authors suggest that people who agree with most of these statements are likely to be high self-monitors. They go on to identify key areas of difference that are important to understand if one wishes to construct relevant messages (to work out which group you belong to see Table 14.1).

TABLE 14.1 Personality types (source: based on Bettinghaus and Cody 1994)

High self-monitors (HSM)	Low self-monitors (LSM)
Concentrate on the actual and potential reactions of others in social situations	Refer to their core values
Adaptable and flexible, presenting aspects of themselves most suitable for each occasion	More consistent in any given situation
Actively contribute to the smooth flow of conversation and bind participants together by using 'we', 'our' words, humour and exchanging self-disclosures, as appropriate	Less able to facilitate conversation
More likely to have different friends for different activities	Are more likely to do different things with the same people
Have other HSMs as friends	Have other LSMs as friends
Males are more concerned with the physical appearance of a potential date, have more and briefer relationships	Males are more concerned with date's personality, more likely to make a commitment
More responsive to messages that emphasise image, status, public approval, glamour or sex appeal	More interested in the quality and good value of a product

think about 14.4

Personality and public relations practitioners

It is interesting to note that the HSM attributes are quite common among public relations practitioners – are they all high self-monitors? If so, is this good because they are sensitive to people around them, or bad because they fit in with others' expectations rather than develop values of their own?

This, and similar theories, show how important it is to understand the group dynamics when communicating important messages. Just think about how hard it is to persuade people to stop drink driving if all their friends think it is a brilliant thing to do. Messages that conflict with group beliefs, or norms, are most likely to be rejected by the group.

So is it even possible to persuade people to stop drink driving? Why not just use legal powers and

stop trying to persuade these hard-to-reach groups? But what if the message is to encourage people to take more exercise, use less energy, join this organisation, visit that country?

The law cannot help here. Threats will not work. Persuasion is the only tool. After all, it is said that the objective of most public relations campaigns is either 'to change or neutralise hostile opinion, crystallize unformed or latent opinion or conserve favourable

**box
14.2****Theory in practice – social comparison theory**

Student X might be asked whether they think dissertations are a valuable element in a degree programme. As X has not yet done one, they have no direct experience. In these circumstances, individuals are likely to compare their responses to those around them, by waiting, perhaps to see what others have to say first. The individual is more likely to agree with someone with whom they already have things in common than someone with very different attitudes. To continue the example, if X enjoys working hard and has friends who share this approach, they are likely to agree about the value of dissertations. X is less likely to be influenced by someone who has said they don't care what kind of a degree they get. This process explains how groups often come to hold strong common beliefs, but also how there is a pressure to conform within groups. If X was really unsure, but their friends all strongly supported dissertations, X is more likely to say nothing than risk the disapproval of the group.

opinions by reinforcing them' (Cutlip et al. 1985: 152). These are all acts of persuasion. The question for practitioners is – what works?

In order to understand whether or not persuasion has any effect, we need to understand what attitudes consist of, how they are acquired and then how they can be changed.

To what effect: forming and changing attitudes and beliefs

Before examining attitudes, let us look at some related aspects of thoughts and feelings that affect the way we see the world, such as beliefs and values. *Belief* is seen as a function of mind, assembling thoughts to create a system of reference for understanding.

Definition: *Belief* is 'commitment to something, involving intellectual assent' (Columbia 2003).

We can all make many thousands of belief statements (sentences beginning 'I believe that...') (Rokeach 1960), which can be sorted into *descriptive*, *evaluative* and *prescriptive*: *descriptive* beliefs describe the world around us (I believe the sky is blue, this is a good university, etc.); *evaluative* beliefs weigh up the consequences of actions (I believe this course is right for me); and *prescriptive* beliefs suggest how things ought to be (I believe men and women should share housework).

Another approach is to divide beliefs into central and peripheral beliefs, where central beliefs are close to values and describe what we hold most important ('I believe in equality, justice, etc.). These may then underpin peripheral beliefs (I believe in the secret ballot, jury trials, etc.). It is also possible to have peripheral-only beliefs (I believe this shampoo will clean my hair). Rokeach (1960) suggests there are two types of central beliefs – those that are agreed by everyone, such as 'rocks fall when dropped', and those that are personal, such as 'I believe in horoscopes'. Bettinghaus and Cody (1994) also talk about authority-derived beliefs, where we adopt ideas proposed by those in authority, although recent social developments suggest reduced trust in traditional authority figures like politicians or even doctors.

Persuasion attempts often target peripheral beliefs because they are most easily changed (I believe *this* shampoo is even better), whereas authority-based beliefs, such as family values or childhood religion, change more slowly, and central beliefs hardly at all. Central beliefs are very close to values, as are prescriptive beliefs. Values are the core ideals that we use as guides and that express ourselves – they concern issues like justice or the environment or freedom. How we treat each other reflects our central values – whether that is 'you've got to look out for yourself first' or 'we have to sink or swim together'. (See Figure 14.2 for examples of how values affect beliefs, attitudes and opinions.)

This is a blurred area: many of the definitions for beliefs overlap with opinions and values. The simplest way to note the difference is that beliefs and



Dave



Sarah

Opinion, peripheral beliefs	This is expensive so it must be better quality	I like own-brand products – they're just as good
Attitudes	Poor people are losers. They're all scroungers. My worth is my bank balance	It could be me in trouble. I like to help. Money isn't everything
Central beliefs	Competition is good – as long as I win. You make your own luck	If we work together we can improve life for everyone
Values	Fair reward for fair effort. Self-reliance	Equality for all. Cooperation

FIGURE 14.2 Opinions, attitudes and values

opinions usually involve thoughts; values and attitudes also involve feelings. It is also worth remembering that while psychology scholars need to divide us into smaller and smaller boxes to examine the contents, we actually use all of these aspects in combination to negotiate our way through the world.

Now, let's turn to attitudes, where our beliefs about what is right and wrong meet our feelings about right and wrong.

Attitudes

Allport (1935), an early researcher in this field, said that *attitudes* underpin our reactions to people and events, creating a filter or system against which we measure our responses to messages and events. We said above that values affect our attitudes. These attitudes may, in turn, affect our behaviour by causing the GM protester to buy organic goods, for example (although, being human, they may drive to the health food shop). Attitudes do not predict behaviour but they do provide a reasonable guide and so are well worth further investigation by communicators wishing to understand their audiences. (See Activity 14.5 and Think about 14.5.)

Definition: 'When we talk about *attitudes*, we are talking about what a person has *learned* in the process of becoming a member of a family, a member of a group, and of society that makes him react to his social world in a *consistent and characteristic way*, instead of a transitory and haphazard way. We are talking about the fact that he is no longer neutral in sizing up the world around him: he is *attracted or repelled, for or against, favourable or unfavourable*' (Sherif 1967:2).

Attitudes are also more likely to affect behaviour if you are in a position to act on them (*individuated*). You are less likely to act out your attitudes if you are in a group (*de-individuated*) whose members hold different views or if you are in a formal situation like a lecture theatre where the range of available behaviours is restricted (*scripted*). These are called situational factors.

However, there is some evidence that the link between attitude and behaviour change can be overes-

activity 14.5

Attitudes towards television

- *Big Brother* (European TV show that has 24-hour camera surveillance on contestants) is a fascinating experiment.
- *Big Brother* is cheap entertainment at others' expense.
- TV is dumbing down.
- TV has always been a mix of good and bad.
- Programme makers only produce what audiences want to watch.
- I don't care about TV.

Which of these statements reflects your own views? How far does the selected statement connect with other attitudes – to television, to entertainment, to society at large?

timated. An *Observer* journalist (17 October 2004) interviewed Sheila Orbell, a health psychologist from the University of Essex in the UK who has spent the past 15 years teasing out which public health interventions make people change and which do not.

It would not be unreasonable to assume, she says, that if people know something is bad for them and want to change, they will change. But that would be wrong. 'Fifty per cent of the time, people act against their intentions', says Orbell, referring to a study about health-related intentions and subsequent actions. She reveals that 77% of the time there is no correlation between how serious we think it would be to have a disease and our behaviour. Even more surprisingly, there is almost no correlation between our fear of contracting a disease (such as lung cancer) and our long-term actions (stopping smoking) (*Observer* 17 October 2004).

So where do attitudes come from? How are they acquired? Social psychology suggests a number of paths to explain how we learn attitudes.

- 1 Classic conditioning, made famous by Pavlov (1849–1936), who showed the difference between unconditioned and conditioned responses. The former refers to physiological reactions to certain stimuli – to blink at bright lights, flinch from pain, or in the case of Pavlov's dogs

think about 14.5 Your attitudes

Have you ever boycotted a product or service, signed a petition, voted for or against something or someone, got into an argument with friends or family? Do you have strong attitudes on a range of subjects? If so, can you identify the core values which underpin them? Or do you feel fairly neutral about most things and avoid disagreement on such subjects?

- (and humans) salivate at the smell and sight of food.
- 2 Instrumental or operant conditioning, which means using rewards and/or punishment to encourage/discourage behaviours and attitudes. Most parents will use these techniques to instil attitudes towards road safety, table manners, etc.
 - 3 Social learning theory, which says that we acquire our attitudes either by direct experience, by playing out roles that mimic experience and/or by modelling, that is watching how others behave in a range of situations. For example, we might learn how to react by watching characters in soap operas deal with betrayal, disappointment, bereavement or crisis.
 - 4 Genetic determinism disputes all these explanations and looks for the roots of our motives in our genes. There has always been a conflict between scientists who believe human psychology is determined by biology and social psychologists who believe how we are raised and life experiences contribute more to our personality. The new discoveries in gene science have given strength to the former group, but the dispute is certainly not over. (See Think about 14.6.)

Social psychologists have a number of theories about how to change attitudes and these are all interesting and relevant to the public relations practitioner. Two particularly interesting theories are the theory of reasoned action and the theory of cognitive dissonance.

The theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Azjen 1980) looks at the links between attitude and behaviour and the points where change might be possible. It draws on expectancy value theory (Fishbein and Azjen 1975), which describes how attitudes are the results of having expectations met or disappointed. The theory of reasoned action suggests that individuals conduct complicated evaluations of different influences, such as the opinions of family, friends, teachers, giving them different weightings depending on how important their views are to the individual, who then compares these opinions to their own views and forms attitudes based on the results. It also suggests attitudes

can be changed by altering one of the key components in the equation.

Understanding this process can be helpful if you are a communicator seeking to influence behaviour. It suggests that you can address the attitude towards the behaviour, for example by introducing new *beliefs* about the risks of smoking or by convincing audiences to *re-evaluate* the outcome of smoking by convincing them that their own health is in danger. Alternatively a campaign might seek to change the *subjective norm* by suggesting that key groups of people think that smoking is uncool, anti-social, etc. It is also relevant for any persuasion campaign where the subjective norm plays a part in the behaviour, such as football hooligans where violence is approved by the group's leaders.

However, this theory is somewhat mechanistic and suggests a rather linear approach to persuasion and attitude change. An alternative, more intuitive approach was developed by Leon Festinger in 1957, the theory of cognitive dissonance. This proposes that thoughts generate emotional responses and that people prefer to have harmony (*consonance*) between their thoughts and feelings, rather than disharmony (*dissonance*): 'The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance' (Festinger 1957). Aronson (1968) later stressed that the dissonance needed to be psychological not merely logically inconsistent. (See Box 14.3, overleaf.)

Cognitive dissonance describes how we rationalise internal conflicts to ourselves. We are usually most reluctant to change our behaviour and prefer to alter our thinking to make our behaviour fit our ideas than vice versa. Sound familiar?

So how does this relate to persuasion? Because the theory describes not only how we avoid changing our behaviour but also suggests pressure points for undermining our rationalisations. Creating cognitive dissonance in an audience can be a powerful tool for disrupting habits of thought and consequently increasing the chances of altering their behaviour. If the tendency is to alter thoughts rather than behaviour, but a campaign is intended to alter behaviour, it is useful to know what pressure points to activate. This theory suggests that if we provide relevant

think about 14.6 Changing attitudes

If the geneticists are right, it should be impossible to change someone's attitude. And yet they can be changed – think of changing social attitudes to drink driving over the past 20 years, for example.

Have you ever changed an attitude – to education, religion or even career choices? What made you change your mind? Was it a long, slow process or a sudden flash?

**box
14.3**
Cognitive dissonance in action – making choices when what you think and what you do clash

We suggested earlier that someone who values the environment is more likely to have negative attitudes towards genetically modified (GM) foods and positive attitudes towards organic produce. If these attitudes are weakly held, the person may not find any problems with driving to the health food store for their goods. If they are held strongly, the person may feel some distress that they are burning fossil fuel and contributing to global warming. How can cognitive dissonance predict their responses? The theory suggests that if they do hold the views strongly and experience dissonance, they will have three choices:

- They can change their behaviour – for example, cycle to the shop or give up buying organic foods.
- They can alter their cognitions (thoughts) – perhaps tell themselves that there is no point worrying about one car journey when so much damage is being done by others.
- They can alter the importance of their cognitions – that is, downgrade the importance they place on the whole set of ideas and convince themselves that they had been taking it all too seriously.

thoughts (alter cognitions) and/or raise the importance of the relevant thoughts, we may leave an audience with no choice but to alter their behaviour. Campaigns that use shock tactics, such as the anti-fur ads, can jolt an audience out of a complacent attitude.

Another essential element of a persuasion campaign is that people must believe that they are capable of making the change required by the campaign, such as giving up smoking, exercising more or whatever the objective is. This is called *self-efficacy*. Campaigns that expect more of the audience than people are able to achieve will fail. For example, many people who have positive attitudes towards recycling are not sure how to divide their materials or what to do with them – and may be overwhelmed by the sense that saving the planet is down to them. So they give up and do nothing. Recent campaigns concentrate on encouraging people to do small achievable acts of recycling. This is more likely to be successful. (See Think about 14.7.)

Whatever tactics a campaign uses, there are a number of barriers they have to overcome in order for persuasion to occur. Research is continually undertaken to measure the effectiveness of persuasion campaigns and while commercial campaigns tend to keep their research findings to themselves, public health campaigns are often analysed and the findings published widely. An example of the kind of effects campaigners look for and the problems they face is covered in a feature article in the *Observer*,



PICTURE 14.3 This poster – featuring singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor and with the slogan ‘Here’s the rest of your fur coat’ – aimed to shock viewers into changing attitudes to wearing fur. Produced with kind permission of PETA. (Source: Mary McCartney/PETA.)

think about 14.7 Health campaigns

Take a look at current health campaigns, such as the UK NHS anti-smoking campaign mentioned earlier. They usually try and persuade people to change their behaviour – more exercise, less salt, give up smoking, cut down on alcohol, etc. Are they trying to identify common defences against change (my grandmother smoked 80 a day and lived to 100, etc.)? Are they trying to shock? Do they suggest that people have the skills and ability required to give up? Do you think they succeed?

**box
14.4****McGuire's input/output matrix****Input variables**

These are the choices the communicator makes when designing a persuasion campaign:

- *Sources*: who is the speaker, how credible, expert, attractive are they?
- *Messages*: what kind of appeal is made, how is information presented?
- *Channels*: mass media or mail shots, TV ads or text messages, context in which channel is consumed?
- *Receivers*: who is message aimed at, what is the age group, education level, personality structure?
- *Intent*: what is the desired aim, does it require a behaviour or attitude change?

Output variables

These describe the stages through which a message must pass to achieve a persuasive outcome:

- *Exposure*: did the intended receiver even get the message, do they watch or read the chosen channels?
- *Attention*: if they *were* exposed, were they paying attention or were they doing something else as well?
- *Liking*: did they like the message – not in the sense of finding it ‘nice’ but in appreciating the design, appearance, music, etc?
- *Comprehension*: did they understand the message – or was the stuff about polyunsaturated fats, for example, too confusing?
- *Acquiring skills*: do they need to change a behaviour, learn how to cook, put on a seatbelt – and do any of these changes require new skills?
- *Changing attitudes*: did they like the campaign but vote for the other party, have they decided that they do want to change their approach to a topic or product?
- *Remembering*: did they remember the key message at the point where it was most likely to influence their response, such as the supermarket or voting booth?
- *Deciding to act*: having seen, liked, understood and remembered the messages, having changed attitudes towards the intent of the campaign, did the audience make the next step and actually decide to do something about it – whether that’s stopping smoking, eating more fruit or going to Thailand?
- *Behaviour change*: having decided to act, did they actually make the effort and alter their behaviour in line with the desired intent, or perhaps, in a different way?
- *Reinforcing the decision*: having behaved as suggested once, will they repeat the action or forget the message?
- *Consolidating the results*: does the campaign make the most of its own successes, by telling the audience how they’d responded, perhaps through individual case studies or release of relevant statistics?

Source: based on McGuire 1989

referred to above, which commissioned four communication agencies to create health campaigns and explain their decisions. The article can be accessed at www.observer.guardian.co.uk/magazine/story/0,,1327537,00.html.

Whatever the desired effects, the key audience must actually see or hear the message, or the effort is obviously wasted. They must also understand it, and remember it and undertake more actions before their behaviour is likely to be altered. McGuire (1989) created a matrix to illustrate the barriers that a message must overcome to persuade any individual (see Box 14.4). The input section describes all the communications decisions the persuader must take; the output section describes the processes involved in having an effect on any individual, and the stages in the persuasion process where messages may need to be reinforced or repeated. (See Activity 14.6.)

activity 14.6**Case study**

Apply the McGuire input/output matrix to one of the campaigns you can find at the following websites:

www.givingupsmoking.co.uk/CNI/Current_Campaign/
www.farenet.org/
www.influenatwork.com
www.petaliterature.com/

Ethical persuasion: is it possible?

This brings us to the ethics of persuasive communication. Public relations ethics are dealt with in detail in Chapter 15, but this section looks at a couple of approaches to ethical persuasion.

Some textbooks insist that public relations is ethical because ‘through their work, public relations professionals promote mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence among individuals and institutions’ (Seib and Fitzpatrick 1995). Really? Even when two companies are fighting each other for market share or in a takeover battle? This seems a very idealistic description of what people (especially public relations people) would like public relations to be – but if it does not connect to reality, how can it be of use to practitioners facing the kind of communication dilemmas suggested in Activity 14.7?

Some people work out their ethics by looking at the results of their actions, some by referring to their duties, some depending on the situation. Baker (1999) suggests that public relations practitioners tend to use one of five ‘justifications for persuasion’, as follows:

- 1 *self-interest* (what’s in it for me?)
- 2 *entitlement* (if it’s legal, it’s ethical)
- 3 *enlightened self-interest* (ethical behaviour is good business sense)

activity 14.7

Ethical communication dilemmas

- There are problems with a new detergent you’re launching next week – with nationwide TV ads – nothing dangerous, but it might be less effective than tests first showed. Do you pull the ads and delay the launch?
- Membership of the sports club you represent has fallen drastically in the past year. The client asks you to come up with a press release that minimises the impact and blames the computer system.
- You’re on work placement and the public relations agency asks you to say you’re doing student research for the university/college rather than for the agency.
- In a beauty campaign you highlight the fact that a new product doubles the chance of reducing wrinkles. You don’t mention that the new rate is still less than 10%.
- A major tobacco company asks you to launch a fitness campaign for schools with free footballs – covered in its logo.
- A major US coffee chain that’s been getting protests over its market practices asks you to do an ethical makeover – in its communication, not its employment or trade activities.
- You organise meetings between the local authority and community groups to explain new council policies. Do you make it clear that the authority is interested in their views but unlikely to make major changes?

Feedback

Look at Chapter 15 for details about ways of working out your own ethical guidelines. Then see if you can apply those approaches or the TARES test (below) to these dilemmas.

- 4 *social responsibility* (personal practice has an impact on larger society)
- 5 *kingdom of ends* (the highest standards should be provided for and expected from all).

To help the practitioner facing dilemmas like those in Activity 14.7, Baker and Martinson (2002) have put together five principles to act as guiding principles for ethical persuasive public relations, which they call the TARES test:

- 1 **t** *truthfulness* – the commitment to honesty in communication
- 2 **a** *authenticity* – relates to personal and professional integrity
- 3 **r** *respect* – for the rights of your audience
- 4 **e** *equity* – relates to fairness, not manipulation
- 5 **s** *social responsibility* – awareness of the effects of communication on the wider society.

There are still ethical problems facing public relations as a sector: if most public relations people work for large organisations with massive resources, how ‘fair’ can exchanges with audiences be? If an organisation disagrees with the majority of the mainstream corporate-owned media, how truthful must they be with the press? Moloney (2000: 152) believes that public relations must recognise that it exists in a persuasive ‘sphere’ or culture and choose to use reason and accurate data rather than emotional manipulation as instruments of persuasion: ‘Public relations as manipulation or propaganda chooses emotion and falsehood as a persuasive mode and so degrades democracy.’

So, if public relations is to restore its reputation, it may need to accept that persuasion is central to much of its activity and find ways to persuade ethically, as suggested by Baker, Martinson and others. Their suggestions may be idealistic, but perhaps ideals are not bad things to reach for when trying to conduct ethical persuasive communication rather than propaganda. (See Think about 14.8, overleaf, and Activity 14.8.)

activity 14.8

Dissertation/research ideas

- Compare the views of Bernays to those of current public relations practitioners.
- Contrast the Hovland and McCroskey approaches to credibility, using current public relations campaigns.
- Apply the theory of reasoned action to a public health campaign.

think about 14.8 Resisting persuasion

This chapter has looked at how communicators can more effectively persuade others regarding the merits of a particular point of view or action. This knowledge can also be used to improve one's own defences against being persuaded. The following suggests how you could use the theories outlined in this chapter to increase your awareness when others are trying to persuade you:

- Know yourself – are you a high or low self-monitor (see page 278)? Are you strongly influenced by the views of those around you? Do you fit in or stand out?
- Know your own ethics – what are your core values, your moral boundaries?
- Know the source – who are they? What are their interests? Is the Sugar Information Bureau actually the sugar industry in a white coat? Does the celebrity really use/wear/believe it?
- Know the intentions of the message – what do they want you to do? Is this what you want? Is it consistent with your core values?
- Know the methods of the message – are they appealing to your reason or emotion? Are they trying to catch you in a hurry? Are they suggesting if you don't do it right now, the chance is gone?
- Take your time, check the facts, make up your own mind.

Summary

This chapter has shown that propaganda is not always easy to distinguish from persuasion or public relations, possibly due to the fact that public relations has its origins in propaganda, with many pioneers of public relations learning the craft in wartime. However, it concluded that this should not condemn all persuasive communication and that persuasion deserves further study as an aspect of public relations.

Clearly, communicators can learn from a range of social psychology theories about the processes by which people process messages and the different emphasis they place on the source of the message and its content, depending on their personality types. The chapter also described the links between attitudes and behaviour and the theories that suggest ways of influencing attitudes and, possibly, behaviour in public relations and communication campaigns.

It has also talked about the personality of the communicator and the importance of reaching beyond one's own assumptions and experience to create an effective communication between sender and receiver. Having demonstrated how persuasion can work, it emphasised the importance of applying the highest ethical standards to such work.

It can be concluded that persuasion is actually a difficult thing to achieve – there are so many different per-

sonality types and so many barriers to messages actually reaching the desired audience at the correct level, let alone the difficulties of translating altered attitudes into altered behaviour. And yet public relations and advertising and increasingly political and commercial life are all dedicated to making us rethink prior assumptions, to change our minds about butter or political parties or recycling. Wernick (1991) called this a 'promotional culture' and evidence since then confirms his description. We are bombarded with persuasive messages every day as consumers and public relations campaigns are part of the assault.

Political commentators and politicians have complained that the public reaction to blanket persuasion, or hype or spin, is increasing cynicism and distrust. They blame each other for this, but leaving that argument aside, it is clear that overuse of persuasive techniques can have a counterproductive effect and the very element that is essential to generate effective messages – a credible source – is jeopardised. Perhaps this can provide a wider lesson: persuasion has its place in communication and it is important for those using the tool to understand its mechanisms and effects. But if overused, people begin to long for genuine dialogue.

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