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The Third-Person Effect in Communication

W. PHILLIPS DAVISON

IN 1949 or 1950, while combing through cartons of U.S. Marine Corps documents from World War II, a young historian at Princeton University came across a series that piqued his curiosity. He stepped across the corridor and described his find to an even younger sociologist:

"You're supposed to know something about public opinion. What do you make of this? There was a service unit consisting of Negro troops with white officers on Iwo Jima Island in the Pacific. The Japanese learned about the location of this unit and sent planes over with propaganda leaflets. These leaflets stressed the theme that this was a white man's war and that the Japanese had no quarrel with colored peoples. They said, more or less, 'Don't risk your life for the white man. Give yourself up at the first opportunity, or just desert. Don't take chances.' The next day that unit was withdrawn."

"Why do you find this so interesting?" asked the sociologist.

"Because I can't find any evidence that the propaganda had an

Abstract A person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself. Each individual reasons: "I will not be influenced, but they (the third persons) may well be persuaded." In some cases, a communication leads to action not because of its impact on those to whom it is ostensibly directed, but because others (third persons) think that it will have an impact on its audience. Four small experiments that tend to support this hypothesis are presented, and its complementary relationship to a number of concepts in the social sciences is noted. The third-person effect may help to explain various aspects of social behavior, including the fear of heretical propaganda by religious leaders and the fear of dissent by political rulers. It appears to be related to the phenomenon of censorship in general: the censor never admits to being influenced; it is others with "more impressionable minds" who will be affected.

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effect on the troops at all. But it sure had an effect on the white officers. The leaflets seem to have caused a substantial reshuffle of personnel.”¹

The sociologist mumbled something about probable guilt feelings on the part of the white officers and a tendency of the military to prefer solutions that involve physical action. But he couldn’t escape the feeling that something else was involved.

A few years later, in the course of investigating the role of the West German press in the formation of Bonn’s foreign policy, the sociologist had occasion to ask a series of journalists how much influence they thought newspaper editorials had on the thinking of their readers (Davison, 1957). One of the replies given frequently was along the following lines: “The editorials have little effect on people like you and me, but the ordinary reader is likely to be influenced quite a lot.” Since evidence to support such a judgment could not be located, this line of inquiry was eventually abandoned, but the researcher remained impressed with the extent to which many journalists were convinced that editorials had an effect on other people’s attitudes, while discounting the effect on people like themselves.

Some time after that, the sociologist became involved in the local phase of a national election, serving as a volunteer for his preferred candidate’s organization. Two days before the election a leaflet supporting the rival candidate appeared in his mailbox. He was impressed with its quality. It would undoubtedly swing a lot of votes. Some counteraction would have to be taken. Without thinking further, he procured a pile of political literature from his own party’s local office and spent the rest of the day distributing it door to door.

Informal postelection analyses (no systematic studies were conducted at the local level) suggested that neither set of propaganda materials had exerted much influence on the voters. It was as though a page had been taken out of *The People’s Choice*.² The sociologist

¹ The historian in question, Jeter Isely, died tragically shortly thereafter. The book resulting, in part, from his research includes no direct reference to this incident; indeed, it makes no reference at all to Japanese leaflets, but it does contain the following passage: “About 200 of the enemy slipped through into the rear zones. There they were liquidated by the Fifth Pioneer Battalion and other service troops, many of them Negroes. The corps shore party commander was ‘highly gratified with the performance of these colored troops. . . . While in direct action against the enemy for the first time . . . they conducted themselves with marked coolness and courage’” (Isely and Crowl, 1951:500). It would seem probable that the leaflets were dropped following this engagement.

² It is scarcely necessary to remind readers that this study of the 1940 election campaign found that very few voters were converted by political propaganda (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

(who is identical with the writer of this article) began to ask himself why he had assumed that the rival candidate's leaflet would be so effective.

These personal experiences, and probably others that have been forgotten, led to the formation of a proposition that, for want of a better label, may be called the "third-person effect hypothesis." In its broadest formulation, this hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. And whether or not these individuals are among the *ostensible* audience for the message, the impact that they expect this communication to have on others may lead them to take some action. Any effect that the communication achieves may thus be due not to the reaction of the ostensible audience but rather to the behavior of those who anticipate, or think they perceive, some reaction on the part of others.

The phenomenon under consideration has been called the "third-person effect" because third persons are involved from two different observational standpoints. In the view of those trying to evaluate the effects of a communication, its greatest impact will not be on "me" or "you," but on "them"—the third persons. From the standpoint of a propagandist or other persuasive communicator, on the other hand, the third persons are those who are in some way concerned with the attitudes and behavior of the ostensible audience. Indeed, the propagandist may try to manipulate the behavior of these third persons by apparently seeking to influence someone else.

This second definition of the "third person" may have been in the minds of the Japanese strategists who arranged to have leaflets dropped over the black service units on Iwo Jima. They may not have expected the leaflets to have an effect on the troops themselves, but were instead trying to goad the white military command into taking the action that it apparently did take in fact—namely, to withdraw the service units.

Imputation of such reasoning to Japanese military propagandists is supported by the fact that British and American psychological warfare in Europe made use of a very similar tactic. The History of the Psychological Warfare Division, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (Bad Homburg, Germany, 1945), tells us about Operation Huguenot—a project for undermining the efficiency of the German Air Force by suggesting that German flying personnel were

deserting in their machines to the Allied side. Planting such suggestions was not difficult. It was known that Allied radio broadcasts were systematically monitored by the German government and that monitoring reports were distributed to all high political and military officials. Hints about desertions from the *Luftwaffe* could include, for example, a “slip” by an announcer indicating that a plane officially reported as being shot down had in fact landed safely in England. It could be assumed that at least some of these hints would be picked up by alert radio monitors in Berlin. The Psychological Warfare Division history tells us:

The dividends from this operation were expected not so much in the actual number of desertions as in the effect of the countermeasures which the German authorities would be induced to take against flying personnel . . . sharpening up of anti-desertion measures and instructions to field police to keep a suspicious eye on everyone—a course which would have serious effects on morale. Also, the promotion of officers on account of reliability rather than efficiency (p. 53).³

It seems probable that practical persuaders throughout the centuries have been aware of this use of the third-person effect. Lovers, certainly, have frequently tried to influence the behavior of the loved one by seeming to direct their attentions to someone else.

Four Small Experiments

During the past several years, the writer has made a series of minor efforts to test one variant of the third-person effect hypothesis: that an individual who is exposed to a persuasive communication via the mass media will see this communication as having a greater effect on other people than on himself or herself. All these tests have been conducted with small groups under informal conditions. Elegant experiments they were not. Nevertheless, care was taken to insure that the groups did not contaminate each other and that their members did not suspect that a particular hypothesis was being tested. Even though no single experiment can be regarded as particularly impressive in itself, the results all tend to confirm the hypothesis. Taken together, they are reasonably convincing, at least to this writer.

The first trial was conducted with the help of a good-natured group of 33 graduate students taking a course on mass communication at

³ According to an academic student of Allied psychological warfare in World War II, a number of desertions were claimed as a result of Operation Huguenot, even though the principal purpose of the undertaking had not been to encourage desertions (Lerner, 1949:268).

Columbia University in 1978. It was just after the New York State election of that year and also just after a strike that had shut down the three major New York City newspapers. A questionnaire included items about both the election and the strike, and was divided into two sections, one including "questions about New Yorkers in general," and the other "a few questions about your own experiences." One of the items in the first section read as follows:

As you probably know, Governor Carey repeatedly called on Mr. Duryea [the Republican challenger] to make his income tax returns public, and used Mr. Duryea's failure to do so as a major campaign theme. About how much influence do you think this had on the way New Yorkers voted in the gubernatorial election? Please indicate this by making a mark at the appropriate point on the scale below.

The scale ran from 0 (No Influence at All) to 7 (Very Great Influence).

At the end of the second section of the questionnaire, there was the following item:

And how about Governor Carey's emphasis on Mr. Duryea's failure to make his income tax returns public? If you had been a New York voter (or if you actually were a New York voter), how much influence do you think this would have had (or actually did have) on your vote in the gubernatorial election? Please indicate this by making a mark at the appropriate point on the scale below. [The same scale was used as in the first question.]

When the scores for New Yorkers in general were tabulated, it was found that they had an arithmetic mean of 3.4, falling close to the middle of the influence scale. The scores for personal influence had a mean of only 2.26, indicating that, as predicted, the respondents evaluated the persuasive communication as having a greater effect on others than on themselves. Since the standard deviations of both distributions were huge, however, the replies given by each respondent were scored so as to ascertain how many individuals did in fact see the communication as having more influence on New Yorkers in general than on themselves. The results showed that about half the respondents perceived the effect on others to be greater than on the self, and that very few evaluated the effect as being greater on self than on others:

More influence on New Yorkers in general	48%
More influence on self	6
Same influence on public and on self	36
No answer/no opinion	9

Another experiment designed to confirm or disconfirm the third-person effect hypothesis was embodied in a small poll on mass media

and socialization that was administered to 25 graduate students in the spring of 1981. This time, the effect of communications on self was asked about before an evaluation of the effect on others was requested. Respondents were asked how often their parents had read to them when they were small children, about how old they had been when they learned to distinguish television commercials from program content, and a few other personal questions. Then they were asked:

And how about attitudes toward commercial products? Did exposure to TV influence you to ask your parents to buy things you otherwise wouldn't have wanted?

The questionnaire went on to request observations about "other people, especially other people's children." One item was:

Does exposure to TV cause kids to ask their parents to buy them things they otherwise wouldn't want?

Again, the hypothesis seemed to be confirmed, although the small number of respondents and the distribution of replies, as shown in Table 1, leave adequate room for those who prefer to remain skeptical.

In discussing the results, several respondents pointed out, quite correctly, that the two questions had different wordings and that their comparability was further diminished by the fact that they dealt with different time periods. One noted that perhaps advertising techniques had improved during the past 20 years to such an extent that today's children are indeed more influenced by television commercials than those of the 1960s.

The hypothesis was tested also during the primary campaigns prior to the 1980 presidential election. A group of 25 adults, about equally divided between those under 30 and over 30, who were attending a lecture series at the Museum of Broadcasting in New York, were asked a number of questions regarding the upcoming election and the role of media in it. Again, the questions about the effects of com-

Table 1. Television's Ability to Make Children Ask Parents to Buy Commercial Products

	<i>Self Influenced by TV as Child</i>	<i>Children of Others Influenced by TV</i>
Quite a lot	32%	68%
Some	24	28
Not very much	20	4
Not at all	16	0
Didn't watch as a child	8	0

munications on self and other were widely separated in the questionnaire, and subsequent discussion showed that no respondent had become aware that a particular hypothesis was being tested. The question on self read as follows:

Let's assume that you are planning to vote in the upcoming presidential election. Would you say that your voting intention has been influenced by the results of the New Hampshire primary?

Two pages later, there were two additional questions about the effects of the New Hampshire primary on voters in general, although the phraseology made it possible, perhaps mistakenly, to interpret the questions as applying to other factors in addition to voting:

How much effect do you think the results of the New Hampshire primary will have on the political fortunes of Ronald Reagan?
And how about Jimmy Carter? How much effect will the results of the New Hampshire primary have on his political fortunes?

The results obtained for these three questions are shown in Table 2. Again, some comfort is given to supporters of the third-person effect hypothesis.

In this case, of course, the persuasive communications were not necessarily of a propagandistic nature, and more likely consisted of news reports. And the questions were not strictly comparable.

A fourth trial, again at the Museum of Broadcasting, followed the same general format but asked a different group of respondents to evaluate the effect on their own votes and the votes of people in general of charges that Ronald Reagan would pursue a "hawkish" foreign policy. About twice as many respondents felt that other people would be influenced more than they would be themselves.

Two further experiments, conducted in the fall of 1981 and the spring of 1982, showed results very similar to the ones already described.

Table 2. Effects of New Hampshire Primary on Personal Voting Intentions and on Political Fortunes of Two Major Candidates

	<i>Will Influence Own Intention</i>	<i>Will Influence Reagan's Fortunes</i>	<i>Will Influence Carter's Fortunes</i>
Quite a lot	0%	52%	32%
A little	24	24	48
Not at all	72	20	20
Not sure	4	4	0

Third-Person Effect in the Literature

Numerous scholars seem to have noted what has here been called the third-person effect, but none so far as I know has paused to comment on it. For example, the hypothesis seems to be supported by several studies of the "Roots" television series. First aired in January 1977, this eight-part dramatization of Alex Haley's story about his forebears' painful progress from Africa, through slavery, into the post-civil war period in the United States attracted over 130 million Americans to one or more episodes—the largest television audience for any program up to that time. Even before all episodes in the series had been shown, research organizations had started efforts to gauge its effects on the public. Several of these research projects were able to compare expected effects with observed effects. Most respondents predicted that the series would have substantial impact on the attitudes of both blacks and whites. The white reaction was expected to be increased tolerance and sympathy; blacks were expected to be angry and to show bitterness and hostility (Howard et al., 1978). When asked for their *own* reactions, however, substantial pluralities of both blacks and whites reported that a feeling of sadness was the principal effect of watching "Roots." Two researchers commented that, in general, the program did not have the widespread effects on racial attitudes attributed to it by observers (Hur and Robinson, 1978). An analyst who reviewed five of the "Roots" studies concluded that they provided little evidence of change in actual racial attitudes, even though these had been widely expected (Surlin, 1978).

Somewhat similar observations were made in the course of an investigation of American attitudes toward Jews during the period following World War II. It was hypothesized that the brutal persecution of European Jews by the Nazis and the strong support of the Allied cause by Jews everywhere might have caused Americans generally to look with greater favor on their Jewish fellow citizens. Two separate surveys by the Opinion Research Corporation in 1945 showed that this was not the case. Nearly four out of five respondents in both surveys said that the mass killings of Jews in Europe had caused no change in their attitudes toward Jews in the United States. When asked in one of the surveys, however, over half of the respondents said that they expected other people's attitudes to change, in either a favorable or an unfavorable direction (Stember, et al., 1966:142–43). Many influences in addition to the mass media were involved here, of course, but newspaper and radio were certainly the principal channels through which most people learned about the persecution of European Jewry.

A number of scholars have speculated that "experts" are particularly likely to overemphasize the effects of the media. A journalist

turned political scientist attributes this tendency especially to students of politics and to communication theorists, explaining that this may be because they are isolated from the actual operation of media organizations (Diamond, 1978).

Another reason for misevaluation of media effects on the part of experts is suggested by a study of the role of the press in community conflict. In connection with an interview with an expert on a locally controversial issue the authors note: "This expert's view is typical, in the sense that it includes the belief that media affect people in general but not the individual who has specialized expertise" (Tichenor et al., 1980:130).

A similar observation was made in the course of a study of perception of public opinion by decision makers in the field of nuclear power. Many of these experts expressed the belief that the public was being misled by biased coverage of nuclear power in the mass media, since most people did not have access to good sources of technical information (Cohen, 1982).

In a sense, we are all experts on those subjects that matter to us, in that we have information not available to other people. This information may not be of a factual or technical nature; it may have to do with our own experiences, likes, and dislikes. Other people, we reason, do not know what we know. Therefore, they are more likely to be influenced by the media.

The literature contains fewer instances of cases in which people's behavior has been influenced by their expectations that the media would persuade others. Nevertheless, examples can be found, especially in connection with voter behavior. The third-person effect seems to have been at work in the 1978 gubernatorial primary election in Maryland, where "a reform candidate breezed by the incumbent and his principal challenger while neither of them was looking" (Hollander, 1979:405). According to repeated polls by two different organizations, only about 5 percent of the electorate expressed the intention of voting for this reform candidate, although he had an excellent reputation. Then he received the editorial endorsement of the *Baltimore Sun* and *Evening Sun*. A poll in progress when the endorsement was made showed the reform candidate as being the choice of 4 percent before the "Sunpapers" editorial stand and 11 percent afterwards. His performance in subsequent polls continued to improve and he won a narrow victory in the election. As a public opinion researcher in Baltimore put it, "The newspaper endorsement made Hughes a plausible candidate and the voters did the rest" (Hollander, 1979:407).

To interpret these data as supporting the third-person effect hypothesis one has to assume that the newspaper endorsements did not

change the attitudes of many people toward Hughes; they rather changed expectations about the support he would receive from others. Individuals may have reasoned: "I am going to vote for him because the newspapers have probably convinced other people of something I already know—namely, that he is the best candidate—and therefore he has a good chance of winning."

Such an interpretation was given by the campaign manager of former mayor Carl Stokes of Cleveland, who mentioned at a Columbia University seminar on public communication that the endorsement by the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* was one of the major reasons for Stokes' victory in the 1967 mayoralty race.

"Do you think the *Plain Dealer's* support really changed many people's opinions," he was asked.

"I don't think it changed any," was the reply. "But it convinced some individuals and organizations that he had a chance; so they started sending in campaign contributions."

A similar observation about campaign contributions was made by the press secretary of Senator Fred Harris, who ran for the Democratic nomination in the primaries prior to the 1976 presidential election:

But in order to raise that kind of money dispersed among twenty states, then you need national media exposure. You need it because people do judge by national media exposure as to whether the campaign is serious or not and, believe me, they hesitate before they give money. . . . They're going to wait until they see Fred's smiling face on national television (quoted in Arterton, 1978:9).

It is probable that advertisers and marketers are aware of the action-inducing potential of the third-person effect, although I have not noted references to this in the research literature. The frequently used appeal, "Buy yours while the supply lasts," certainly suggests that others will be persuaded by the advertising and that one had therefore better make a purchase promptly.

Relationships to Other Phenomena

Media bias is frequently perceived in situations where it is clearly absent or where it is present to a very limited extent. For example, in the 1972 presidential campaign, many of those who preferred McGovern thought their newspaper was giving more attention to Nixon; and many who were for Nixon thought McGovern was receiving more exposure in the same medium. The same judgments were made with regard to television news, although less frequently. Yet analysis of the media in question showed that they were giving

fairly evenhanded treatment to the two major candidates (Mendelsohn and O'Keefe, 1976:148, 150).

A somewhat similar observation was made in the study of perceptions of public opinion by decision makers in the nuclear energy sector that was referred to above. The decision makers frequently complained that their field of operation received negative and sensational coverage by the mass media, and that this was a major reason why many people opposed nuclear power. At the same time, opponents of nuclear power showed themselves to be equally dissatisfied with news coverage in this area, and accused the media of an establishment bias (Cohen, 1982).

One possible explanation for the fact that people on both sides of an issue can see the media as biased against their own point of view is that each observer assumes a disproportionate effect will be achieved by arguments or facts supporting the "wrong" side of the issue. Others (the third persons), the observer reasons, will be unduly impressed by these facts or arguments; they do not have the information that enables me to form a correct opinion. It is probable that, from the point of view of partisans, balanced media presentation would require a sharp tilt toward the "correct" side of the issue. This would compensate for the intellectual frailty of third persons and would, according to a partisan, ensure that the media achieved a truly balanced presentation.

But, if the third-person effect hypothesis is correct, why are not the facts and arguments on the "correct" side as well as the "wrong" side seen as having a disproportionate effect on others? Perhaps the material on the "correct" side is not seen as persuasive at all; it is merely a statement of the obvious and therefore cannot be expected to have an impact on attitudes.

Pluralistic ignorance, and the misperception of others' attitudes in general, may also involve the third-person effect, at least in some cases. If individuals assume that they are virtually alone in holding particular attitudes and expectations, not knowing that many others privately share them (Merton, 1968:431), it may be because they assume others have been brainwashed by the mass media. Indeed, the tendency to perceive the media as being biased toward the "wrong" side of an issue, combined with the tendency to impute persuasiveness to the media insofar as others are concerned, creates a strong presumption that the attitudes of other people on any controversial issue that is in the focus of public attention will be widely misperceived.

Empirical studies of pluralistic ignorance of which I am aware do *not* offer much support for the above proposition. But neither do they disconfirm it with any vigor. These studies have not treated public

communication as a major variable to be built into their research designs (for example, Schanck, 1932 and 1938; Colombotos et al., 1975; Fields and Schuman, 1976; O'Gorman and Garry, 1976). Schanck does, however, remark in connection with one controversy in Elm Hollow that "continuous advocacy of a position by a minority leads them (the majority) to a belief that this stand may be fairly universal in their group" (Schanck, 1938:93).

To test the notion that the third-person effect plays a part in the creation of pluralistic ignorance one could, for example, determine whether misperception of others' attitudes is more likely to occur on issues that have been extensively discussed in the mass media than on issues that are discussed mainly in primary groups. The data presented by Fields and Schuman suggest that this might well be the case, in that pluralistic ignorance appears to be greater in regard to issues such as race relations (discussed widely in the media) than in regard to issues involving ethics or morals (discussed more in primary groups).

It is also possible that public communication diminishes misperception of others' attitudes among people in part of the media audience while it increases misperception among some. In this connection, the concept of reference groups may prove useful in explaining the third-person effect. Are people "like me" or "different from me" seen as being more affected by persuasive messages? Or is the degree of similarity not a relevant factor? If perceived congruity of others' attitudes and values with one's own is a factor in the selection of normative reference groups (Singer, 1981:73), then one would expect there to be little exaggeration in the perceived impact of a communication on members of such groups. On the other hand, the importance of not overlooking a possible change in attitude on the part of a significant other might make one assume, conservatively, that some reference group members had indeed been affected. There is plenty of room for research and speculation.

The third-person effect is probably involved in the "spiral of silence" which, according to a recent theory about the formation of public opinion, leads those on one side of an issue to express their opinions with more and more volume and confidence, while those on the other side of the issue tend to fall silent (Noelle-Neumann, 1980). In particular, exaggerated perceptions of the effects of mass media election propaganda on others would help to explain the situations in which polls show that respondents think Party A will win an election even though a majority of the respondents retain their intention of voting for Party B. Each person may reason: I haven't been influenced by this widely publicized nonsense, but *they* probably have been.

Thus, in both the 1965 and 1972 election campaigns in West Germany, expectations as to which of the major parties would win the election changed by as much as 15 percentage points during the months prior to election day, while at the same time voting intentions remained fairly stable (Noelle-Neumann, 1980:15–17). At the last minute, again consistent with the third-person effect hypothesis, undecided voters opted disproportionately in favor of the party which seemed to be attracting the greater number of supporters. The reasoning of at least some of these late deciders was probably along the following lines: I don't find much difference between the parties, but the fact that others seem to be persuaded by the arguments or image of Party A probably means that this is the better party. A bandwagon effect was created.

As in the case of observed media bias, the question arises why the impact of Party B's propaganda is not exaggerated as much as that of Party A's propaganda. Perhaps there is simply more of the latter. This was the case with some of the West German elections that were studied. But it seems likely that other factors, presently unknown, interact with the third-person effect to produce the observed result.

The Third-Person Effect in Our Lives

Fluctuations in the stock market are not infrequently accounted for by reference to rumors or news reports—perhaps that a subcommittee of the House of Representatives is considering a tax on widgets or that the Ambassadors from Israel and an unnamed Arab state have been seen sharing a taxi from Kennedy Airport to the United Nations headquarters. The reasoning seems to be that these reports will cause others to sell (or buy) certain categories of shares; therefore I will sell (or buy) in order to anticipate their action.

In times when supplies of consumer goods are irregular, there are always some people who will rush to the stores the moment they hear reports of any possible shortage. If you ask them why, the answer is likely to be that they are concerned about the effects of these reports on other people. They want to stock up before the hoarders remove all goods from the shelves.

When news stories about the possibly dangerous effects of aerosol on the earth's atmosphere began to appear, according to an item in the *New York Times* (September 16, 1975), manufacturers of products sold in aerosol cans changed quickly to spray and squeeze containers. Of course, there could have been a number of explanations for such behavior (expectations of government regulations, the lower cost of squeeze containers, etc.), but one possibility is that manufacturers

expected stories about the dangers of fluorocarbon propellants to turn the public against aerosol cans and were thus providing another example of the third-person effect at work.

The phenomenon of censorship offers what is perhaps the most interesting field for speculation about the role of the third-person effect. Insofar as faith and morals are concerned, at least, it is difficult to find a censor who will admit to having been adversely affected by the information whose dissemination is to be prohibited. Even the censor's friends are usually safe from pollution. It is the general public that must be protected. Or else, it is youthful members of the general public, or those with impressionable minds. When Maryland's State Board of Censors, which had been filtering smut from motion pictures since 1916, was finally allowed to die in June 1981, some of its members issued dire forecasts about the future morals of Maryland and the nation (*New York Times*, June 29, 1981). Yet the censors themselves had apparently emerged unscathed. One of them stated that over the course of 21 years she had "looked at more naked bodies than 50,000 doctors," but the effect of this experience was apparently more on her diet than on her morals. "I had to stop eating a lot of food because of what they do with it in these movies," she is quoted as having told the Maryland Legislature.

Throughout history, heretical doctrines and political dissidence have aroused concern, sometimes terror, among priests and potentates. How much of this apprehension and the resulting repression was due to the third-person effect? It certainly must have played a role, and probably has accounted for a grisly percentage of the world's suffering and horror. Exaggerated expectations about the effects of dissident communications have caused countless people to be incarcerated, tortured, and killed. Even today, prisons in authoritarian and totalitarian countries contain people whose crime is alleged to be "propaganda against the state," or "spreading destructive rumors."

Why are exaggerated expectations about the effects of communications on others so common? Do they occur in response to all categories of persuasive communications, or only certain categories? Or, is it possible that we do not overestimate effects on others so much as we underestimate effects on ourselves?

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