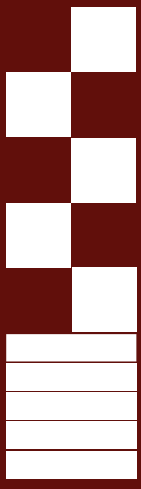
Early Media Effects Theory & the Suggestion Doctrine

Selected Readings, 1895–1935

edited by
Patrick Parsons



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Published by:
mediastudies.press
414 W. Broad St.
Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

Copy-editing: Emily Alexander

Cover design: Mark McGillivray

Landing page: mediastudies.press/early-media-effects-theory-the-suggestion-doctrine

Public Domain series - issn (*online*) 2770-2480 | issn (*print*) 2770-2472

isbn 978-1-951399-28-3 *(print)* | isbn 978-1-951399-26-9 *(pdf)*

isbn 978-1-951399-29-0 *(epub)* | isbn978-1-951399-27-6 *(html)*

doi 10.32376/3f8575cb.f1e0489e | lccn 2024931261

Edition 1 published in December 2024

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Psychology of the Audience (1935)

Harry L. Hollingworth

New York: American Book, pp. 141–58 [with elisions].

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In 1935, suggestion theory was at its zenith. It was the preferred psychological explanation for political propaganda and commercial advertising. As noted earlier, Leonard Doob's manifesto on propaganda and the first major work on the effects of radio by Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport, both published that year, rested on the psychology of suggestion.

Harry Hollingworth's book *The Psychology of the Audience* was also released in 1935 and provides a fitting close to this collection. Like Scott and Poffenberger, Hollingworth (1880–1956) was a pioneer in applied psychology, putting his research skills to work in business and industrial settings throughout his career. He received his doctorate in psychology from Columbia University in 1909 and joined the faculty at Columbia's Barnard College, where he eventually rose to head of the Psychology Department. In 1927 he was elected president of the American Psychological Association. He was said to have written nearly a book a year during his career, on topics ranging from functional neuroses, to psychology and ethics, to vocational psychology. He developed a particular interest in the psychology of advertis-

ing and wrote *Advertising and Selling* in 1913, produced as an instructional text for those in business and promotion.

Similarly, *The Psychology of the Audience* is a handbook for those in public speaking and promotion, but one informed by decades of research in social psychology. In the following passages, Hollingworth offers advice for the public speaker and salesperson, starting with an exposition on "The Laws of Suggestion." He lists seven operational principles, including the use frequency, indirect versus indirect suggestion, and the establishment of authority, noting, again, that high speaker prestige can result in the adoption of suggestions "even when they are unsupported by sufficient reason."

He separates from Le Bon in describing the typical attributes of a congregation, especially with respect to the thoughtfulness and intelligence of the gathered individuals, and, adopting an individual-based analytical lens, rejects the idea of a group mind. He cites experimental work, including his own, to examine the efficacy of the "prestige of the group" versus that of the expert, summarizing then-established findings that results will vary by topic and circumstance. He concludes with a dozen recommendations designed to aid the public speaker in "directing the acts and verdicts of the audience."—*P.P.*

References

Cantril, Hadley, and Gordon G. Allport. 1935. *The Psychology of Radio.* New York: Harper.

Doob, Leonard. 1935. *Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique.* New York: Henry Holt.

Hollingworth, Harry. 1913. *Advertising and Selling*. New York: D. Appleton.

The Psychology of the Audience (1935)

CHAPTER IX: Directing Action

DEFINING THE ACT

The principles involved in directing the action of the audience will vary considerably, no doubt, with the type of audience, the occasion for action, and the actual authority of the speaker. There is little that can be enumerated here beyond the simple rules of suggestion which apply to all human

relations. Whether the action is to take place at once, as in the case of a deliberative assembly called on to vote on an issue, or whether the action is deferred until a time subsequent to the dispersal of the audience, as in the case of a political campaign, one principle should never be forgotten. This is the principle of suggesting in specific and definite terms the nature, place, and method of the desired response.

The treasurer of a society was frequently observed to rise at periodic intervals during the year and, pointing out the urgent need for funds, in the form of regular membership dues, to request that members kindly pay their assessments. No specifications were given beyond this gentle and vague suggestion, and as a consequence few assessments were paid, in spite of the frequent requests. The treasurer should have closed the first request by indicating at which door she would stand at the close of the meeting, or by writing her name and address on the board, or by some other such specific device should have suggested definite action at definite time or place. Such an illustration is to be sure a far cry from the field of oratory, but it represents one of the real cases in which an audience must be effectively handled if it is to be won.

It is in just this spirit that the salesman always has his order book ready and requests the converted prospect immediately to "sign on the dotted line." The advertiser places a coupon in the corner of the page, or is sure to give his firm name, address, or place of business. Revival meetings which succeed provide specific altar directions—"Married men gather at the right of the platform," "All the dentists in the congregation now sing the third verse," "March up the aisle while the choir sings Onward Christian Soldiers." The climax of this specification of response is seen in the most completely polarized audience that we have described, that of the organized team or regiment or orchestra.

THE LAWS OF SUGGESTION

In much the same way, the remaining general laws of suggestion, which have been frequently formulated and illustrated, apply as fully to the winning of an audience to action as they do to the handling of individuals. We need here do no more than suggest these by a brief statement indicating the nature of each of the principles.

1. The strength of a suggestion depends in part on the degree to which it seems to be of spontaneous origin, an act of the individual's own initiative. Arrogance and domination are at once and instinctively resented and

resisted. The more indirect the suggestion, the more it can be made to be an original determination or plan or conclusion on the part of the listener, the greater its dynamic power.

2. Within the limits of the law just indicated, the dynamic power of a suggestion will be the greater, the more forcefully and vividly it is presented. This is especially true when the suggested act is in harmony with the pre-established habits and tendencies. When the suggestion violates life-long habits and instincts, attempts to be forceful and vigorous usually lapse into arrogance and thereby defeat their own purpose.

3. It is more effective to suggest the desired response directly than it is to argue against a response that is not desired. Suggestion is most active at its positive pole, and the negative suggestion tends to defeat its own purpose. The Old Covenant with its "Thou Shalt Not" was readily displaced by the New Covenant with its simple, positive "Thou Shalt."

4. The action power of a suggestion varies directly with the prestige of its source. The more we revere a speaker, for any reason whatsoever, the greater confidence we tend to place in anything he may say, and the more prone we are to imitate him and to adopt his suggestions, even when they are unsupported by sufficient reason.

5. The strength of a suggestion will be determined in part by the degree of internal resistance it encounters. That suggestion will be most effective which can call to its aid or appropriate the dynamic force of some other impulse that is already active or latent. Suggestions to violate life-long habits, firmly fixed moral feelings, and sacred relationships are impotent, even during the pronounced suggestibility of the hypnotic trance.

6. The strength of a suggestion varies with the frequency with which it is met. But mere mechanical repetition avails little unless the repeated suggestion is attended to with interest. Experiment shows that repetition of advertising appeals is twice as effective when the form, style, and expression is varied, with constant theme, as when exact duplication of previous appeals is used. Repetition accompanied by sufficient variety to lend interest but with sufficient uniformity to acquire a constant meaning, produces a genuine cumulative effect.

7. In appealing over the short circuit for a specific line of action, no interference, substitute, rival idea, or opposing action should be suggested. Such an idea merely impedes the action power of the first suggestion, by inviting comparison and thus involves deliberate choice and hesitation. There is an apparent contradiction between what we have just said concern-

ing the advantages of repetition with variety and LeBon's[1] assertion that "Affirmation has no real influence unless it be constantly repeated, and so far as possible in the same terms." Both principles, however, are valid. The apparent contradiction arises from the fact that a suggestion or affirmation may have two very distinct functions.

PSYCHOLOGY OF THE SLOGAN

For the purposes of maintaining attention and interest, of linking up the impression with the individual's background of experience, and of persuading him toward a general course of action, repetition with variation seems to be the most effective measure. But another function of the suggestion, and an important one, as we have seen, is that of specifying and giving precise definition to the act. Here the principle of repetition in the same terms, of duplication instead of variation, has its advantages. This is what is involved in the psychology of the slogan. "Swat the fly," an exhortation constantly reiterated, defines the act, and serves effectually to perpetuate the decision beyond the immediate occasion of its formation. It crystallizes the propaganda of a whole evening's program, remains with the auditor as a succinct formula of action. Becoming a slogan, it unites in a common decision audiences geographically remote from each other and readily spreads to individuals not present at the local program.

Along with the demand for a concrete symbol,—a seal, a flag, a color, a badge, trademark, battle cry, or other single device for representing and suggesting the essence of an abstract principle or a group enterprise,—goes the popular craving for a terse slogan which will take the place of careful description, conceal the lack of real understanding, identify, and rally the devotees of a leader or party, and serve as a convenient challenge to the enemy. Political leaders, as well as juvenile organizers and advertisers, have learned the practical utility of the slogan, and the individualism and partnership of enterprise and control give the practice respectable standing in spite of its dubious psychological implications.

HATE AND FEAR

Along with the power of the slogan should be mentioned the unifying effect of participation in a common punishment or deprivation. The levy of a tax at once establishes bonds of community between individuals who are

[1] LeBon, G. *The Crowd*, Macmillan. By permission.

liable to it, however dispersed they may be. Limitations and regulations imposed on the individual's personal ration of sugar, flour, or milk go far toward arousing to active belligerency a population apathetic or resistant to the progress of military operations and the plans of the chief of staff. In the fusion of heterogeneous elements of a population into an effective social group nothing is more potent than a common hatred or a common fear. Any common emotion tends to have this consolidating effect on an audience, but on the whole it is said that mobs are more easily organized for malicious than for ennobling enterprises. [...]

AUDIENCES AND MOBS

It has been popular, in the literature of group psychology, to belittle the function of intelligence in the mental processes of an audience. Thus LeBon[2] insists that:

> As soon as a few individuals are gathered together they constitute a crowd, and although they should be distinguished men of learning, they assume all the characteristics of crowds with respect to the matter outside their specialty. . . . From the moment that they form part of a crowd the learned man and the ignoramus are equally incapable of observation.

Again he refers to:

> the slight importance of the mental level of the different elements composing a crowd, so far as the decisions it comes to are concerned. . . . When a deliberative assembly is called upon to give its opinion on a question not entirely technical, intelligence stands for nothing. For instance a gathering of scientific men or artists, owing to the mere fact that they form an assemblage, will not deliver judgments on general subjects sensibly different from those rendered by a gathering of masons or grocers. . . . The decisions affecting matters of general interest come to by an assembly of men of distinction, but specialists in different walks of life, are not sensibly superior to the decisions that would be adopted by a gathering of imbeciles.

This assumed "mental inferiority of all collectivities," whatever their composition, leads LeBon to emphatic advice on the way to influence assemblies to action:

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[2] LeBon, G. *The Crowd*, Macmillan. By permission.

> Crowds are not to be influenced by reasoning and can only comprehend rough-and-ready associations of ideas. The orators who know how to make an impression on them always appeal in consequence to their sentiments and never to their reason. . . . An orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmation. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetition, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning, are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings.

LeBon attributes special potency to the seduction of the audience by images,—to "the magic force of words and formulae, independent of their real sense." "The chief concern of a good counsel," he says, "should be to work upon the feelings of the jury, and, as with all crowds, to argue but little or only to employ rudimentary modes of reasoning."

We need not concern ourselves with the naïve explanations which this writer gives for the tendencies he attributes to all assemblages. It is clear that the composition of the "average audience" usually suffices to explain such phenomena when they actually occur. There is no necessity to invoke a "mental leveling," a "collective consciousness," a "brain paralysis," or "the unconsciousness of the mob."

The truth is that men are less different from each other in their physical make-up and anatomy, and in their original instinctive and emotional reactions, than they are in intelligence and wisdom, or in their acquired skills and standards. Men who agree in their repugnance to a given odor or their fear in danger may yet differ remarkably both in intelligence and knowledge. In so far as verdicts and acts relating to what LeBon calls "matters of general interest" are based on the fundamental interests, and such common inclinations as those toward mercy, justice, revenge, jealousy, pride, there is nothing either surprising or mysterious in the agreement of "the artist and the grocer." Their difference will lie rather in the type of object or situation most likely to arouse such reactions.

But the conception of the assembly as a mob which the speaker invariably seeks to stampede to some tumultuous act or verdict, to be recalled perhaps with chagrin on the morrow or in history, is far from representing the audience or the enterprise which most speakers will confront. To present the frenzied and vociferous delivery of magical formulae, striking images, and seductive metaphors as the goal of public speaking is, to say the least, woefully to underestimate the varieties and occasions of public congregation.

MAJORITY VERSUS EXPERT OPINION

It is well known of course that individual opinion is influenced not only by strictly relevant data and personal evaluation, but also to a considerable extent by the suggestive influence of the opinions of others. The knowledge that the majority hold a given opinion inclines many individuals favorably toward the majority's decision. Similarly the verdict of an expert in the field in question gives a bias to the individual's judgment. Is the majority or the expert more potent in thus deflecting the individual opinion? Is the audience more susceptible, in general, to the statement of public opinion or to the quotation of authority?

In an experiment conducted in 1910, the writer attempted to measure the effectiveness of various types of appeal in the case of the description of marketable products. Among the thirty main interests or instincts represented were two which bear on the point just raised. Thus three appeals based their claim on the prestige of the group, thereby suggesting the desirability of the article. Two appeals, on the other hand, were based on the recommendations of prominent persons, who, in the public eye, might well represent expert opinion. If a perfect appeal, that is, one which for every member of the experimental group was the most effective of the series, be considered to have a value of 100 per cent, then, on this basis, the recommendation scores only 14 per cent whereas the Group Suggestion scores 50 per cent. The suggestion of the group is in this field apparently much more effective than is the opinion of the expert.

An experiment of H. T. Moore's[3] is directed toward a similar point. This investigator studied three types of situations; viz., speech, morals, and music.

> Ninety-five subjects were given eighteen paired comparisons for each of three types of situation. The instructions for the linguistic judgments were that the subjects check the more offensive one of each pair of expressions. . . . The ethical judgments involved the checking of the more offensive of two traits of character in each of eighteen pairs. ... The musical judgments involved an expression of preference for one of two resolutions of the dominant seventh chord, played on a reed organ. Eighteen paired resolutions were played, and the preferences recorded after each.

[3] Moore, H.T. "Comparative Influence of Majority and Expert Opinion," *American Journal of Psychology*, July 1917.

After these opinions had been recorded and a time interval of several days had elapsed, a repetition of the experiment showed the chance of reversal for such judgments, when no suggestive influence was used. On later occasions this second half of the experiment was accompanied in each case by a statement of what the majority opinion had been on the original occasion. In a third case the statement was used instead of the opinion of some expert in the field of question. The investigator now inquired whether the suggestion of group opinion and of expert opinion produced a greater number of reversals of judgment than came by chance alone, and how these two influences compared in this respect, in the three fields of speech, morals, and music. [...]

The author concludes:

> If we now take as our unit of measurement the per cent recorded as the chance of reversal, we find, as indicated . . . that the probability of reversing favorably to the majority in matters of speech and morals in approximately five times chance; whereas in matters of musical feeling the probability is only about twice chance. By majority is meant here of course only the special type of majority provided in the experiment, but if generalization is permissible on the basis of the evidence available, we may venture the statement that a man is two and a half times as individualistic in his musical likes and dislikes as in his moral and linguistic preferences. Similarly we may conclude that expert and majority opinion hold about equal sway over the individual in morals and music, but that the chances are about ten to seven in favor of majority prestige in matters pertaining to speech. [...]

THE DETERMINANTS OF BELIEF

In the long run the final test of belief is the readiness or the willingness to act. Indeed some psychologists have been convinced that the experience of belief is nothing more than the feeling of this readiness for action. However this may be, inducement to act must proceed either through relying on a belief explicitly or implicitly held, or else through the establishment of a new belief. Even the emotional appeal operates through the utilization of a native or long-acquired value, interest, preference, or conviction.

The psychology of arousing action thus involves in part the psychology of belief, and it would be useful in this connection to know what are the most effective determinants of our convictions. Such information would be of specially practical value in the endeavor to establish a new belief in the minds of one's audience, inasmuch as it would enable the speaker to take

advantage of thought habits and lines of least resistance. Very little is known quantitatively or experimentally as to the relative potency of the different determinants of conviction, and this constitutes a field in which exploration will surely be profitable. [...]

PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

1. The first principle for directing the acts and verdicts of the audience is that of indicating specifically and definitely rather than vaguely and generally the precise nature, place, time, and method of the proposed act.

2. The strength of a suggestion varies directly with its spontaneity, vividness, positive form, prestige, and frequency.

3. The strength of a suggestion varies inversely with the internal resistance it encounters and with the number of rival suggestions operating.

4. Repetition with variation promotes conviction; repetition with duplication better specifies and defines the response to be made.

5. A slogan or catch-word crystallizes a whole program and remains with the audience as a succinct formula of action.

6. If audiences are more easily aroused to malicious than to ennobling acts or verdicts, this is in part because anger, hate, and fear are emotions most easily recognized in others and propagated through their demeanor.

7. The mobilization of an audience depends no more upon the actions of the leader than upon the contributory signs afforded one another by the auditors, through their attitudes and visible expressions.

8. The traditional "mental inferiority of all congregations"eis only a result of the fact that people are more alike in the simple, primitive, concrete structural, and fundamental traits than they are in complex, more recently acquired, symbolic, functional, and derived traits.

9. The prevalent "mob conception" of the nature of an audience woefully underestimates the varieties and occasions of public congregation.

10. There is no "mind of the audience"; there are only the individual people with their individual minds; but in a congregation special stimuli and hence special behavior occur which are absent when the individuals are alone.

11. Whether the opinion of the public or the judgment of experts has higher prestige with an audience, varies with the subject matter of the discourse.

12. People prefer their acts to appear rationally determined; they suppose their own acts to be more rationally determined than the acts of others; they suppose their own acts to be more rationally determined than they actually are.