*Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*

by Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson

New York: Holt, 1992.

12

# The Credible Communicator

Picture the following scene: Your doorbell rings; when you answer it, you find a middle-aged man in a rather loud, checkered sports jacket. His tie is loose, his collar is frayed, his pants need ironing, he needs a shave, and his eyes keep looking off to the side and over your head as he talks to you. He is carrying a small can in his hand with a slot in the top, and he is trying to convince you to contribute a few dollars to a charitable organization you have never heard of. Although his actual pitch sounds fairly reasonable, what is the possibility of his succeeding in prying you loose from your money?

Now let's turn back the clock a few minutes: You open your door in response to the bell, and standing there is a middle-aged man in a conservative business suit, well tailored and well pressed. He looks you squarely in the eye, introduces himself as a vice-president of the City National Bank, and asks if you would contribute a few dollars to the same charitable organization, using exactly the same words as the fellow in the loud, checkered jacket. Would you be more likely to contribute some money?

We were struck by the likely response to such a substitution several years ago when Allen Ginsberg appeared on one of the

late-night talk shows. Ginsberg, one of the most popular poets of the "beat" generation, was at it again; his poem "Howl" had shocked and stimulated the literary establishment in the 1950s. On the talk show, having just finished boasting about his homosexuality, Ginsberg was talking about the generation gap.

The camera panned in. He was fat, bearded, and looked a trifle wild-eyed (was he stoned?); long hair grew in unruly patches from the sides of his otherwise bald head; he was wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt with a hole in it and a few strands of beads. Although he was talking earnestly—and, in the opinion of some, very sensibly—about the problems of the young, the studio audience was laughing. They seemed to be treating him like a clown. In all probability, the vast majority of the people at home, lying in bed watching the poet from between their feet, were not taking him seriously either—no matter how sensible his message, no matter how earnestly he delivered it. His appearance and his reputation were, in all probability, overdetermining the audience's reaction.

The scientist in us longed to substitute the conservative-looking banker in the neatly pressed business suit for the wild-eyed beat poet and have him move his lips while Ginsberg said the same words off-camera. Our guess is that, under these circumstances, Ginsberg's message would have been well received.

No need. Similar experiments have already been done. Indeed, speculations about the effects of character and prestige on persuasion are ancient. More than 300 years before the Christian era, Aristotle wrote:

> We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.[1]

It required some 2,300 years for Aristotle's observation to be put to a scientific test. This was accomplished by Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss.[2] What these investigators did was very simple: They presented large numbers of people with a communication



that argued a particular point of view—for example, that building atomic-powered submarines was a feasible undertaking (this experiment was performed in 1951, when harnessing atomic energy for such purposes was merely a dream).

Some of the people were informed that the argument was made by a person possessing a great deal of public credibility; for others, the same argument was attributed to a source with low credibility. Specifically, the argument that atomic-powered submarines could be built in the near future was attributed to J. Robert Oppenheimer, a highly respected and nationally known atomic physicist, or to *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist party in the Soviet Union—a publication not famous in the United States for its objectivity and truthfulness.

Before reading the arguments, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that revealed their opinions on the topic. They then read the communication. A large percentage of those people who believed the communication came from J. Robert Oppenheimer changed their opinions—they then believed more strongly in the feasibility of atomic submarines. Very few of those who read the identical communication attributed to *Pravda* shifted their opinions in the direction of the communication.

This same phenomenon has been repeatedly confirmed by several different investigators using a wide variety of topics and attributing the communications to a wide variety of communicators. Careful experiments have shown that a judge of the juvenile court is more likely than most other people to sway opinion about juvenile delinquency, that a famous poet and critic can sway opinion about the merits of a poem, and that a medical journal can sway opinion about whether or not antihistamines should be dispensed without a prescription.

What do the physicist, the judge, the poet, and the medical journal have that *Pravda* doesn't? Aristotle said we believe "good men," by which he meant people of high moral caliber. Hovland and Weiss used the term *credible*, which removes the moral connotations present in the Aristotelian definition. Oppenheimer, the juvenile court judge, the poet, and the medical journal are all credible—that is, they are not necessarily "good," but they appear to be both *expert* and *trustworthy*.

It makes sense to allow yourself to be influenced by communicators who are trustworthy and who know what they are

talking about. It makes sense for people to be influenced by an editor of *Consumer Reports* when she is voicing an opinion about consumer safety, and it makes sense for people to be influenced by someone like Dr. C. Everett Koop, the former surgeon general, when he is talking about the use of condoms to prevent AIDS or about the addictive properties of nicotine. These are expert, trustworthy people.

But not all people are equally influenced by the same communicator. Indeed, the same communicator may be regarded by some people as possessing high credibility and by others as possessing low credibility. Moreover, certain peripheral attributes of the communicator may loom large for some people; such attributes can serve to make a given communicator either remarkably effective or remarkably ineffective.

The importance of peripheral attributes in persuasion was forcefully demonstrated in an experiment we performed in collaboration with Burton Golden.[3] In this study, sixth-graders heard a speech extolling the usefulness and importance of arithmetic. The speaker was introduced either as a prize-winning engineer from a prestigious university or as someone who washed dishes for a living. As one might expect, the engineer was far more effective at influencing the youngsters' opinions than the dishwasher. This finding is consistent with previous research; in and of itself, it is obvious and of some interest.

But, in addition, we varied the race of the communicator: In some of the trials the communicator was white, and in others, black. Several weeks prior to the experiment, the children had filled out a questionnaire designed to measure the degree of their prejudice against black people. The results were striking: Among those children who were most prejudiced against blacks, the black engineer was *less* influential than the white engineer, although both delivered the same speech. Moreover, among those children who were the least prejudiced against blacks, the black engineer was *more* influential than the white engineer.

It seems unreasonable that such a peripheral attribute as skin color would affect a person's credibility. It might be argued that, in a purely rational world, a prestigious engineer should be able to influence sixth-graders about the importance of arithmetic regardless of the color of his or her skin, but apparently this is not a purely rational world. Depending upon listeners' attitudes toward



blacks, they were either *more* influenced or *less* influenced by a black communicator than by an otherwise identical white communicator. More recently, Paul White and Stephen Harkins have found that whites, in an attempt not to appear prejudiced, will often pay more attention to what a black communicator is saying.[4] This results in more persuasion if the message is strong and compelling, but less persuasion if the message is weak.

Clearly, such responses are maladaptive. If the quality of your life depends on the extent to which you allow a communication about arithmetic to influence your opinion, the expertise and trustworthiness of the communicator would seem the most reasonable factors to heed, and it would seem foolish to take into account factors irrelevant to the issue (such as skin color).

But, although such responses are maladaptive, it should not be very astonishing to anyone who has ever watched commercials on television. Indeed, advertisers bank on this maladaptive behavior and often count on irrelevant factors to increase the effectiveness of a spokesperson. For example, several years ago Bill Cosby starred in a series of commercials in which he playfully interacts with children. He tells the children how delicious a particular brand of pudding is, and together they chat, laugh, and enjoy their snacks. He also reminds the audience that the product not only "tastes good" but is "good for you," because it's made with milk. What made Cosby an expert on children and nutrition? In the 1980s, on "The Cosby Show," he had played Dr. Cliff Huxtable, a pediatrician as well as a warm, funny, and insightful father to five children.

Similarly, Karl Malden once starred in a series of commercials in which Americans traveling in a foreign country either lose all their money or have it stolen. The tourists are distraught, humiliated, traumatized, panicky. At the end of the commercial, Karl Malden appears and, in an authoritative voice, warns us not to carry money while traveling and recommends "American Express Travelers Cheques—don't leave home without them." What makes Karl Malden an expert on vacation financing? Nothing, but he is perceived as somewhat of an expert on *crime*. For many television seasons, Malden portrayed Lieutenant Mike Stone in "The Streets of San Francisco," a popular detective show.

More recently, the makers of Nicoderm—a stop-smoking patch—hired a young actress to promote their product. And who

was she? The same actress who played "Dr. Olivet," a psychologist who often evaluated the mental stability of criminals on the hit TV show "Law & Order." Apparently, pretending to be a psychologist on TV for a couple of seasons is enough to allow this actress to voice her opinion about the best way to quit smoking.

And then there is our favorite in this genre. An actor from the hit daytime soap opera "General Hospital" comes on the TV screen and announces, "I'm not a real doctor, but I play one on TV"—and then goes on to recommend a brand of painkiller.

Though Cosby, an actor from "General Hospital," "Dr. Olivet," and Malden probably do not know a great deal more about nutrition, medicine, crime, nicotine patches, or even travelers checks than the average viewer, they almost certainly gain credibility and trust when they are identified with their particular roles.

The fact that we humans often use the credibility of a communicator to guide us in the acceptance or rejection of a message opens the door once again for mindless propaganda. Although it makes sense to believe the credible source when her or his expertise and trustworthiness are directly related to the issue at hand, it is often easier to *feign* credibility than to actually *achieve* it. For example, in the 1992 presidential election, Bill Clinton was adept at creating credibility with a variety of target audiences—such as by appearing on MTV and playing a saxophone on a late night talk show to attract young voters, eating at McDonald's to appeal to working-class folks, and playing up his "Bubba" image to break the Republican stronghold in the South. In the 1996 election, Clinton abandoned the Bubba schtick and used the trappings of the White House in an attempt to establish an image of leadership.[5]

One of the important tasks of media research is to keep tabs on the "reputation and credibility" of public figures, such as movie stars, sports figures, and other public "personalities." Advertisers want to know which celebrity figures are most believable, who among the stars is most liked by the public, who has been on the cover of leading magazines, and who has been overexposed. The answers to such questions determine the celebrity's value as a spokesperson for the advertiser's product. Credibility has become a commodity not only to be feigned but also to be bought and sold on the open market.



How can we recognize when a communicator is merely feigning credibility as opposed to actually possessing it? This is a difficult question. In order to know that someone is an expert in a given domain, we have to know enough about that topic to be able to recognize who is and isn't an expert. And if we know that much, then we are probably experts ourselves. Fortunately, students of rhetoric such as Douglas Walton have provided us with a set of questions that can be used to recognize when the use of an expert to guide our acceptance of a proposition is fallacious.[6] Walton suggests that we ask these questions: Is the expert clearly identified (or is it a vague attribution such as "leading experts say")? Is the person really an expert or someone who is merely quoted because of his or her prestige, popularity, or celebrity status? Does the judgment put forward fall within the field of competence of the expert? Is there consensus among the experts as to the judgment or opinion? Could the expert cite objective evidence to support her or his claim? And is the expert trustworthy and unbiased (or does he or she have a self-interest in the cause)?

When Aristotle wrote his description of the effects of "good character" on persuasion, a debate was raging in Greece. Many people, such as Socrates and Plato, saw those engaged in persuasion, such as professional speechmakers and the Sophists, as deceitful and untrustworthy persons. Rhetoric was a worthless art practiced by worthless people. In order to justify a place for persuasion in society, Aristotle argued that not only *should* a persuader be of good character for moral reasons but also that the trustworthy source *would* be more effective than the speaker lacking in character. Modern research on persuasion has supported Aristotle's belief in the effectiveness of the trustworthy communicator—with a few notable exceptions to be discussed later. Modern propaganda practices, with their ability to manufacture credibility and buy and sell it as a commodity, raise anew the ethical concerns prominent in Aristotle's times. As the psychotherapist Erich Fromm once noted, when everything and everybody is for sale—including persons, convictions, feelings, and a smile—then fewer people can be trusted because fewer people have a character and an identity that can be depended upon.[7] Without trust, communication becomes difficult, if not impossible.