communication and interpersonal communication. Mass communication often depends on interpersonal communication to extend its reach, and research on adoption of innovations has shown that people at certain stages of the adoption process are more dependent on interpersonal communication than on mass communication. The relationship between mass communication and interpersonal communication is explored in Chapter 11.

chapter 8

Cognitive Consistency and Mass Communication

The general notion of consistency underlies all of science. It is the notion that phenomena are ordered (or consistent) that allows predictability. Predictability, in turn, allows the scientist to formulate and test hypotheses, make generalizations from them, build theory, and predict future outcomes. The purpose of the communication researcher and theorist is, to a great measure, to predict the effect or future outcomes of messages.

The concept of consistency in human behavior is an extension of the general notion from the physical world to the area of human behavior. Various theorists contend that humans strive for consistency in a number of ways—between attitudes, between behaviors, between attitudes and behaviors, in our perception of the world, and even in the development of personality. In short, we try to organize our world in ways that seem to us to be meaningful and sensible.

The concepts of human consistency are based on the notion that human beings act in rational ways. However, we also use *rationalization*—the attempt to explain irrational behavior in a rational or consistent way. Rationalization emphasizes that in our desire to appear rational or consistent to ourselves we often employ means that may seem irrational or inconsistent to others.

The notions of consistency assume that inconsistency generates "psychological tension" or discomfort within human beings, which results in internal pressure to eliminate or reduce the inconsistency and, if possible, achieve consistency.

Examples of the consistency principles in everyday affairs are widespread. A first-ranked football team in an area where football reigns supreme suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of a long-standing rival. The following day both the media and individual conversations were filled with rationalizations and justifications.

As noted, consistency theories recognize human attempts at rationality, but in achieving it we often display striking irrationality. The concept of rationalization assumes both rationality and irrationality—we often use irrational means to achieve understanding, to justify painful experiences, or to make the world fit our "frame of reference."

Mass communication research is concerned, in part, with how individuals deal with discrepant or inconsistent information, which is often presented with the purpose of bringing about attitude change. This attitude change is one of the many ways in which we can reduce or eliminate the discomfort or psychological pressure of inconsistency.

Although a number of consistency theories are of interest to behavioral scientists (Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969; Abelson et al., 1968), for the purposes of this book only four major ones will be discussed.

HEIDER'S BALANCE THEORY

Most writers usually credit Fritz Heider (1946) with the earliest articulation of a consistency theory, although the informal concept can be traced back to earlier work (see Kiesler et al., 1969, p. 157). As a psychologist, Heider was concerned with the way an individual organizes attitudes toward people and objects in relation to one another within that individual's own cognitive structure. Heider postulated that unbalanced states produce tension and generate forces to restore balance. He says that "the concept of a balanced state designates a situation in which the perceived units and the experienced sentiments co-exist without stress" (1958, p. 176).

Heider's paradigm focused on two individuals, a person (P), the object of the analysis, some other person (0), and a physical object, idea, or event (X). Heider's concern was with how relationships among these three entities are organized in the mind of one individual (P). Heider distinguished two types of relationships among these three entities, liking (L) and unit (U) relations (cause, possession, similarity, etc.). In Heider's paradigm, "a balanced state exists if all three relations are positive in all respects or if two are negative and one is positive" (1946, p. 110). All other combinations are unbalanced.

In Heider's conception, degrees of liking cannot be represented; a relation is either positive or negative (Figure 8.1). It is assumed that a balanced state is stable and resists outside influences. An unbalanced state is assumed to be unstable and is assumed to produce psychological tension within an individual. This tension "becomes relieved only when change within the situation takes place in such a way that a state of balance is achieved" (Heider, 1958, p. 180). This pinpoints the communicator's interest in the theory for it implies a model of attitude change and resistance to attitude change, Unbalanced states, being unstable states, are susceptible to change toward balance. Balanced states, being stable states, resist change. Data supporting Heider's balance theory are discussed in Zajonc (1960), Kiesler et al. (1969), and Abelson et al. (1968).

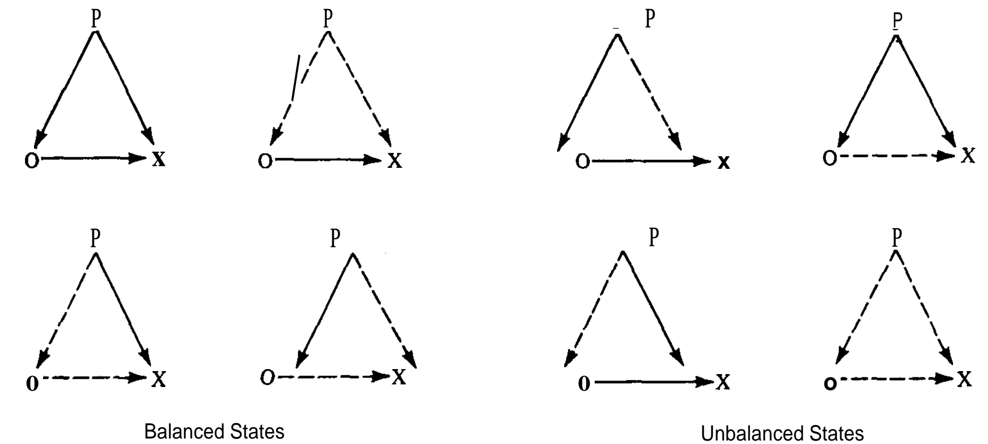

FIGURE 8.1 Examples of balanced and unbalanced states according to Heider's definition of balance. Solid lines represent positive, and broken lines negative relations.

SOURCE: From R. B. Zajonc, "The Concepts of Balance, Congruity and Dissonance," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24 (1960): 280-296. Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

NEWCOMB'S SYMMETRY THEORY

Social psychologist Theodore M. Newcomb took Heider's idea of balance out of the head of one person and applied it to communication between people. He uses the term *symmetry* to distinguish it from balance theory and contends that we attempt to influence one another to bring about symmetry (or balance or equilibrium). As discussed in some detail in Chapter 3, Newcomb postulates that attempts to influence another person are a function of the attraction that one person has for another. In this respect Newcomb's theory is more of a theory of interpersonal attraction than one of attitude change. If we fail to achieve symmetry through communication with another person about an object important to both of us, we may then change our attitude toward either the other person or the object in question in order to establish symmetry.

Because Newcomb's model (see Chapter 3) deals with two people and the communication between them, he labels them A and B (rather than Heider's P and O) and retains X to represent the object of their attitudes. As with Heider, he assumes a human need for consistency, which he calls a "persistent strain toward symmetry." If A and B disagree about X, the amount of this strain toward symmetry will depend on the intensity of A's attitude toward X and A's attraction for B. An increase in A's attraction for B and an increase in A's intensity of attitude toward X will result in (1) an increased strain toward symmetry on the part of A toward B about their attitudes toward X, (2) the likelihood that symmetry will be achieved, and (3) the probability of a communication by A to B about X. The last item, of course, is the focus of our concern.

Newcomb says, "The likelihood of a symmetry-directed A to B re X varies as a multiple function of the perceived discrepancy (i.e., inversely with perceived symmetry), with valence toward B and with valence toward X" (Newcomb, 1953, p. 398).

Newcomb, in contrast to Heider, stresses communication. The less the symmetry between A and B about X, the more probable that A will communicate with B regarding X. Symmetry predicts that people associate with or become friends of people with whom they agree. The Greek dramatist Euripides recognized this facet of human behavior more than 2,400 years ago when he said, "Every man is like the company he is wont to keep." (Today we say, "Birds of a feather flock together.")

However, for attitude change to take place, a person must come into contact with information that differs from his or her present attitudes. Newcomb's symmetry model predicts that the more A is attracted to B (a person or a group), the greater the opinion change on the part of A toward the position of B.

OSGOOD'S CONGRUITY THEORY

The congruity model is a special case of Heider's balance theory. Though similar to balance theory, it deals specifically with the attitudes persons hold toward sources of information and the objects of the source's assertions. Congruity theory has several advantages over balance theory, including the ability to make predictions about both the direction and the degree of attitude change. The congruity model assumes that "judgmental frames of reference tend toward maximal simplicity." Because extreme judgments are easier to make than refined ones (see discussion of either-or thinking and two-valued evaluation in Chapter 5), valuations tend to move toward the extremes, or there is" a continuing pressure toward polarization." In addition to this maximization of simplicity, the assumption is also made that identity is less complex than discrimination of fine differences (either-or thinking and categorization). Because of this, related "concepts" are evaluated in a similar manner.

In the congruity paradigm a person (P) receives an assertion from a source (S), toward which he or she has an attitude, about an object (0), toward which he or she also has an attitude. In Osgood's model, how much P likes S and O will determine if a state of congruity or consistency exists (Figure 8.2).

According to congruity theory, when a change occurs, it is always toward greater congruity with prevailing frames of reference. Osgood uses his semantic differential to measure the amount of liking a person may have for a source and the object of an assertion.

In essence, the definitions of balance and congruity are identical. Incongruity exists when the attitudes toward the source and the object are similar and the assertion is negative or when they are dissimilar and the assertion is positive. An unbalanced state has either one or all negative relations.

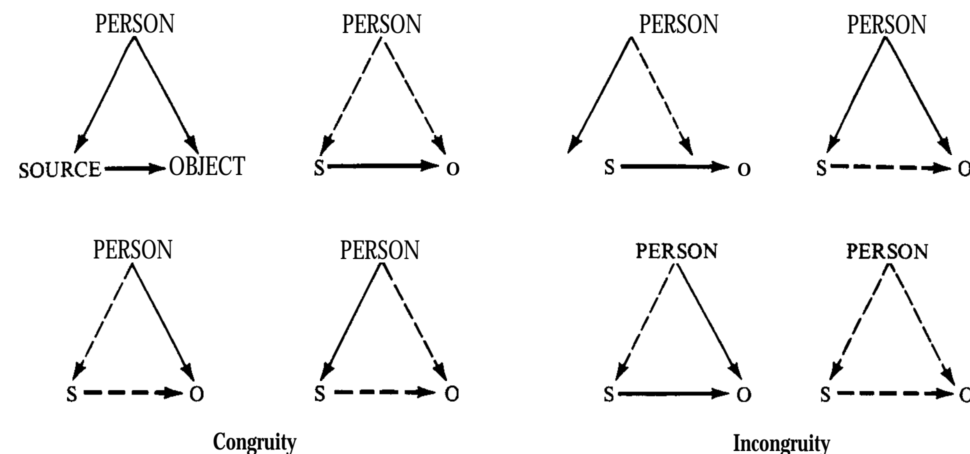

FIGURE 8.2 Examples of congruity and incongruity. Heavy lines represent assertions, light lines attitudes. Solid heavy lines represent assertions which imply a positive attitude on the part of the source, and broken heavy lines negative attitudes. Solid light lines represent positive attitudes, and broken light lines negative attitudes.

SOURCE: From R. B. Zajonc, "The Concepts of Balance, Congruity and Dissonance." *Pub/it Opinion Quarter/y 24* (1 960): 280–296. Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

Percy Tannenbaum had 405 college students evaluate three sources—labor leaders, the *Chicago Tribune,* and Senator Robert Taft—and three objects—gambling, abstract art, and accelerated college programs. Some time later the students were presented with newspaper clippings that contained assertions attributed to the sources about the objects. The entire range of predicted changes was supported by Tannenbaum's data, as summarized in Table 8.1. The direction of change is indicated by either a plus or a minus sign, while the extent of change is indicated by one or two such signs.

Incongruity and the Media

A graphic example of this phenomenon in the media world occurred when Walter Cronkite and CBS covered the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968. CBS News reported at the time what the Walker Commission later called a "police riot" on the streets of Chicago. Walter Cronkite expressed the opinion on the air that the convention floor seemed to be under the control of a "bunch of thugs" after Dan Rather was "decked" while "on camera" when he attempted to interview delegates from a southern state being removed from the convention floor. CBS News (the source) had made negative assertions about objects (Mayor Richard Daley and the Chicago police) that apparently were held in high esteem by many persons in the television audience. Feedback to CBS

TABLE 8.1 Change of attitude toward the source and the object when positive and negative assertions are made by the source

Original Attitude toward the Source	Positive Assertion about an Object toward Which the Attitude Is		Negative Assertion about an Object toward Which the Attitude Is	
	Positive	*Negative*	*Positive*	*Negative*
Change of Attitude toward the Source				
Positive	+			+
Negative	++	—	—	++
Change of Attitude toward the Object				
Positive	+	++		·
Negative		—	+	++

SOURCE: From R. B. Zajonc, "The Concepts of Balance, Congruity and Dissonance." *Public Opinion Quarter/y 24* (1960): *280-296,* Reprinted with permission of the University of Chicago Press,

News expressed considerable dissatisfaction on the part of audience members with the news coverage. Presumably their attitude toward the source, Walter Cronkite and CBS News, became more negative. If, in a democracy, we cannot behead the messenger who brings unpleasant news (that does not agree with our "prevailing frame of reference" of reality), as was the case in ancient Persia, congruity theory predicts that we come to dislike the bearer of information that does not agree with our view of the world. We have incorporated this into the folk saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts, I have already made up my mind."

Incongruity does not always produce attitude change. There is some basis for the belief that much material in the media that would produce incongruity in an individual never does so. In the process of selecting what we will pay attention to, we may avoid messages that we suspect will not agree with our concept of the world (selective exposure) or perhaps pay attention to only the parts of a message that agree with our "prevailing frame of reference" (selective attention).

If we do receive a message that causes incongruity, we may mispe the message (selective perception) to make it fit our view of reality. The Frenc painter and sculptor Degas is reported to have said, "One sees as one wishes to see." When National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" marked its 15th anniversary (October 31, 1994), Susan Stamberg reviewed '{where we all were and what w were doing when this daily program began." In her commentary, she said:

> . . . on the how-to list, two books to help our waistlines . . . and the Complete Scarsdale Medical Diet by Herman Tarnower . . . before the Scarsdale doctor had a ***run-in*** with the headmistress of the Maderia " School. (Emphasis added)

Actually the "run-in" resulted in Tarnower's death and the headmistress, Jean Harris, being sentenced to prison for having murdered him. She was parolled in early 1993, after having served 12 years. Most people would probably call murder something more than a run-in.

Statements by the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board have over the years, been notorious for varying interpretations by the mass media. The "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour" recognized such selective perception when Elizabeth Farnsworth said:

> . . . this morning the major newspapers ran very different stories about what the chairman said. While the *Washington Post* reported that Greenspan had signalled a cut in interest rates, the *Wall Street Journal* and New *York Times* reported the opposite. (June 21, 1995)

In the following discussion, Paul Volcker, a former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, recognizing the selective perception of the media, said:

> . . . You try to give a balanced statement. A reporter can pick out one side or the other of the balance that you made, and frankly, arrive at his own interpretations and there's always an insistence to make a complicated story short and brief. You arrive at some theme for the headline, two different editors arrive at two different themes, and you get contrasting stories. (June 21, 1995)

In mid-October 1995, African-Americans held a "Million Man March" in Washington, D.C. The following evening (October 17, 1995) ABC's *Nightline*, titled, "What Happened Yesterday ?," interviewed dozens of people, from many walks of life. Their responses were a good example of selective perception in action. The television anchor, Ted Koppel, introduced the program by saying:

> People see what they want to see. . . Some heard hate, others heard the need to bring the community back together again. . . . People hear what they expect to hear. . . What happened? It depends on whom you ask.

On the same day as the "Million Man March," President Clinton spoke at the University of Texas in Austin, with the theme of healing American society. Almost everyone praised the speech, but one honors program senior in American Studies, writing in the student newspaper, said (*Daily Texan,* Oct. 17, 1995):

> To begin a stream of inconsistencies, Clinton warned, "We dare not tolerate the existence of two Americas," and then proceeded to address part of his remarks "to our white audience" and another set of remarks "to our black citizens." After referring to Lincoln's house divided, "Our house" will soon be split into "the house of white America" and the

house of black America. Suddenly the idea of "e pluribus unum" gave way to housing segregation. (P. 3)

Feedback to the student paper indicated that many readers were unable to see any connotation of housing segregation.

News items that refute public opinion, which presumably cause psychological discomfort, are relatively uncommon.

A study found that in 1989 wage earners with incomes between $25,000 and $30,000 gave a larger percentage of their incomes to charity than did those with incomes of $50,000 to $75,000 (Barringer, 1992).

Another article observed (Odendahl, 1990):

> But it's time we recognized that most of the benefits of philanthropy go to the wealthy, not the needy or even the middle class. . . . (a) small group of elite nonprofit institutions—Ivy League universities, museums, symphonies, think-tanks, private hospitals, prep schools and the like—that, by best available estimates, receive more than two-thirds of private charitable giving.
>
> About half of philanthropy is donated by multimillionaires. Most of this money goes to groups that sustain the culture, education, policy positions and status of the well to do. . . . Contrary to popular belief, less than a third of nonprofit organizations serve the needy. In much of their charitable giving, in fact, the wealthy end up funding their own interests.
>
> Even more disturbingly, the philanthropic wealthy also exert control over public funds, and over money contributed in smaller amounts by the less well-off, without the accountability we expect in a government agency or publicly held corporation. (A1 5)

Two years later the *Chicago Sun-Times,* citing the national Council of Nonprofit Associations in an editorial, wrote (Sept. 28, 1992):

> In 1980, there were 4,300 millionaires in America, whose annual giving averaged $207,089. In 1989, there were 59,954 millionaires, giving an average $83,929. Things aren't much better in the corPorate sphere, where the amount donated to nonprofit organizations has declined 39 percent since the tax reform act was passed. (p. 25)

O. J. Simpson, at the end of his murder trial, called the Larry King television talk show and said, in part, that after a day in court he would go back to his cell and watch TV news and wonder if the "experts" on television had been in the same courtroom he had been in (Oct. 4, 1995).

Different people may not only see different things in a message, but they often attend a message for different reasons. Two researchers asked more than 700 adults for their reasons for watching televised sports (Gantz & Wenner, 1991). They found that men watch sports to relax, to see athletic drama, and to have something to talk about. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to watch for companionship with those already gathered around the set.

If we are unable to misperceive the message, we may attack the credibility of the communicator. Credibility is, after all, the most important thing a communicator has. A communicator in the news media who lacks credibility probably also has no audience.

The credibility of the communicator was attacked when the New York *Times Magazine* published a photo essay by Eugene Richards about drug-ridden urban America. One writer commented (Carton, 1994):

> As the bearer of an unpleasant message Richards. . . . has found himself the center of a controversy over political correctness and race: Did he focus too heavily on black cocaine addicts and hustlers? (p. 30)

Immediately after publication of the photo essay black leaders called the New *York Times* insensitive for running the photo essay and demanded an apology or face the threat of a boycott. The *Amsterdam News,* the city's oldest black newspaper, ran a front page editorial denouncing the photos (Taylor, 1993).

The photographer replied (New *York Times Magazine,* Jan. 23, 1994):

> Name calling doesn't alter the facts and nature of the drug plague choking our country. (p. 10)

And later, in a reply to a review of his book, *Cocaine True, Cocaine Blue,* he called it (New *York Times,* March 6, 1994, Book Review):

> a continuation of the ancient tradition of trying to kill the bearer of bad news . the weapon of choice here is to charge bias . (p. 31)

Denial or incredulity is another means of dealing with incongruity.

The New York City health commissioner, speaking of the AIDS epidemic, said, "The way mankind responds to crisis is first disbelief, then denial, then the third stage is mobilization, and we're at that horizon now" (New *York Times,* Feb. 14, 1988, p. 1).

If, indeed, an incongruous message does reach an individual, there is still no guarantee of attitude change. Selective retention may enter the picture, and we may well remember only points that support our "prevailing frame of reference."

In the mid- 1990s, at the height of "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, author Kenneth Davis (1995) was compelled to Write:

> Virtually absent from the discussion is any acknowledgment that when it comes to the sorts of horrors now defining the Balkan conflict, Americans have been there and done that, in a manner of speaking. To put it bluntly: The United States may not have written the book on

ethnic cleansing, but it certainly provided several of its most stunning chapters—particularly in its treatment of the American Indian in the transcontinental drive for territory justified under the quasi-religious notion of "manifest destiny."

Why do we tend to forget? There's no big surprise: Americans, as deTocqueville long ago recognized, are a future-oriented people with a short historical memory. And the accepted, widely taught versions of history are written by the victors, presented in schools as sanitized costume pageantry. This is especially true when the victory is as total as that of America's forefathers over the American Indians, who were nearly "cleansed" from an entire continent—an outcome the likes of which Bosnia's Serbs can only dream. (p. 1)

The Role of Media Gatekeepers

According to many reports, the Japanese are not taught in school about the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Some Japanese see in their nation a sort of collective amnesia (Chira, 1985, 1988a, 1988b; Lehner, 1988). When the epic film *The Last Emperor* was shown in Japan, a part showing Japanese soldiers committing atrocities in Nanjing in December 1937 and January 1938—the six-week orgy of murder, rape, and mayhem known as the "Rape of Nanjing"-was cut out (Haberman, 1988). In May 1994 Japan's new justice minister stirred up considerable anger in Asia when he was quoted as saying that the Nanjing massacre never happened (Reuter, May 3, 1994).

It has been pointed out that Americans hold a highly ethnocentric view of Columbus.

One lecturer in psychology wrote (Strong, 1989):

> Most school history texts do not tell that Columbus was the first European to bring slavery to the New World. . . . On his second voyage, in December 1494, Columbus captured 1,500 Tainos on the island of Hispaniola and herded them to Isabela, where 550 of the "best males and females" were forced aboard ships bound for the slave markets of Seville.
>
> Under Columbus's leadership, the Spanish attacked the Taino, sparing neither men, women nor children. Warfare, forced labor, starvation and disease reduced Hispaniola's Taino population (estimated at one million to two million in 1492) to extinction within 30 years.
>
> Until the European discovery of America, there was only a relatively small slave trade between Africa and Europe. Needing labor to replace the rapidly declining Taino, the Spanish introduced African slaves to Hispaniola in 1502; by 1510, the trade was important to the Caribbean economy. (p. 14)

College seniors in the United States often claim that little or nothing is said in high school or college about the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers, or Watergate, all having taken place before they were born or during their childhood and all, apparently, to be collectively forgotten.

A study done in a graduate school of education found that of seven social studies textbooks examined, four contained no coverage of Watergate, two had what was called minimal coverage, and only one was termed adequate. The writer wonders whether the lessons of Watergate have been forgotten for a generation of schoolchildren (Woodward, 1987).

On March 16, 1968, U.S. troops entered the village of My Lai in southern Vietnam and "wasted" more than 450 unarmed civilians, including old men, women, and children with automatic weapons fire. The news was suppressed for 20 months. In a later series of trials the company commander, Capt. Ernest L. Medina, was acquitted; the platoon commander, Lt. William Laws Calley, Jr., the only soldier ever convicted of premeditated murder of "not less than 22 civilians; actually served three days in a military stockade and four and a half months in prison, after legal appeals and a pardon. "A good many of the participants would later offer the explanation that they were obeying "orders, a defense explicitly prohibited by the Nuremberg Principles and the United States Army's own rules of war" (O'Brien, 1994, p. 52).

In 1970 General Samuel W. Koster resigned as superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point following accusations that he and 13 other officers suppressed information. In 1968 he had commanded the U.S. Army division whose men committed the massacre as My Lai. The charge was made that as the accusations of the mass murders moved through the division's chain of command, the number of murders was systematically reduced in number.

One veteran, who served a year in Vietnam, much of it in the My Lai area says (O'Brien, 1994):

> Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off the margins of memory. In colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance. (p. 52)

He adds:

> I know what occurred here, yes, but I also feel betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. . . . In a way, America has declared itself innocent. (p. 53)

One researcher (Ehrenhaus, 1989) points out that for more than a decade the Vietnam War was collectively forgotten. He asks, how does a society commemorate its failures? When faced with the obligation to commemorate Vietnam and its veterans the United States chose not to remember. The author says:

> The end of war brings with it the obligation to remember. . . . Remembrance entails reaffirming the legitimacy of purpose for which a community

> has issued its call for sacrifice . . . the significance of commemoration lies not in the occurrence of events; it lies in the fact that certain events are remembered while others are not. . . . (pp. 97-98)

Ehrenhaus points out that President Ford urged Americans not to reflect upon the meaning of the past. Ehrenhaus argues that such reflection might challenge the assumptions of the relationships between individuals and the state. He says that "fundamental belief in U.S. righteousness was confronted by revelations of political cowardice and lies at home . . ." (p. 104). For these and other reasons, Ehrenhaus contends the society and its leaders chose to "forget" Vietnam for more than a decade.

And, of the millions of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian civilian casualties, little or nothing is ever said in the United States, other than a few references to widespread birth defects as the result of the massive spraying of Agent Orange.

FESTINGER'S THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

The most general of all the consistency theories and, as one might expect, the one that has generated the largest body of empirical data is Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. It is also a theory that has generated considerable controversy in the field of social psychology.

Dissonance theory holds that two elements of knowledge "are in dissonant relation if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element would follow from the other" (Festinger, 1957, p. 13). As with other consistency theories, 't holds that dissonance, "being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance" and "in addition to trying to reduce it the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance" (p. 3).

In cognitive dissonance the elements in question may be (1) irrelevant to one another, (2) consistent with one another (in Festinger's terms, consonant), or (3) inconsistent with one another (dissonant in Festinger's terms). Relation ships need not be logically related for consistency or inconsistency. A relationship may be logically inconsistent to an observer while psychologically consistent to an individual who holds these obverse beliefs.

Several rather interesting consequences follow from dissonance theory, especially in the areas of decision making and role playing. The focus of this book is on how people use information, and dissonance theory is important in that respect.

Decision Making

Upon making a decision, dissonance is predicted to follow to the extent that the rejected alternative contains features that would have resulted in its acceptance and that the chosen alternative contains features that could have caused

its rejection. In other words, the more difficult a decision is to make, the greater the predicted dissonance after the decision (postdecision dissonance). It also follows that postdecision dissonance is greater for more important decisions. A number of studies report evidence to support these hypotheses.

One researcher reports that purchasers of new cars were more apt to notice and read ads about the cars they had just bought than about other cars (Ehrlich, Guttman, Schonbach, & Mills, 1957). Since ads are supposed to stress "benefits" of the products they promote, presumably the new car buyers were seeking reinforcement for their decisions by reading ads for the cars they had just purchased.

Evidence has also been cited for a change in the attractiveness of alternatives once a decision has been made. In other words, after a decision has been made between alternatives ranked as nearly equal in desirability, the chosen alternative is later seen as more desirable than it had been before the decision, and the rejected alternative is ranked as less desirable than it was before the decision was made (Brehm, 1956). The authors of one book on attitude change state, "The postdecision process involves cognitive change not unlike that of attitude change; indeed the effects of this process may legitimately be referred to as attitude change" (Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969, p. 205).

An article about computer owners resolving postdecision dissonance put it this way (Lewis, 1987):

> For some inexplicable reason, people who would not ordinarily think of criticizing your preferences in automobiles, underwear or religion, for example, feel justified in castigating you on a personal level for your choice of computer. Dr. Mark Spiegel, a psychiatrist in Manhattan, was asked to fathom the thinking of such computer zealotry. "Rational human beings don't do that," he said. Granted. So what explains all the irrational behavior of computer owners? "It could be a number of things," he suggested, "but cognitive dissonance is a psychological mechanism in which the individual, finding that his actions don't necessarily coincide with his ideas or psychological precepts, has to find some way to make them correlate, or bring them into assonance. If you spend a lot of money on a computer, you have to justify it," explained Dr. Spiegel. (p 19)

Forced Compliance

An interesting area, even if not directly related to the mass media, is attitude change following forced compliance. Dissonance theory postulates that when an individual is placed in a situation where he or she must behave publicly in a way that is contrary to that individual's privately held beliefs or attitudes, the individual experiences dissonance from knowledge of that fact. Such situations often occur as the result of a promise of a reward or the threat of punishment, but sometimes it may be simply as the result of group pressure to conform to a norm an individual does not privately agree with. Role playing is one such example.

If a person performs a public act inconsistent with his or her beliefs, it is predicted that dissonance will follow. One way of resolving this dissonance is to change the privately held beliefs to conform with the public act. The least amount of pressure necessary (promise of reward or threat of punishment) to induce an individual to act publicly in a way contrary to his or her privately held beliefs will result in the greatest dissonance. The greater the dissonance, the greater the pressure to reduce it, hence the greater the chance for attitude change in the direction of the public act or behavior. In the case of a relatively large promised reward or threatened punishment, the individual can always rationalize the public behavior that was contrary to the privately held beliefs or attitudes (e.g., "I did it for the money" or "Anybody would do the same under such a threat").

One foreign teacher at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade said in an interview that her students were given summer assignments to write essays about the student demonstrations in China in 1989. She reported that their scholarships depended on what they wrote (National Public Radio, Oct. 14, 1989).

Selective Exposure and Selective Attention

Dissonance theory is of greatest interest to us in the areas of information seeking and avoidance, often called *selective exposure* and *selective attention.* Dissonance theory predicts that individuals will avoid dissonance-producing information, and there is considerable evidence indicating that media personnel are acutely aware of this.

In recent years some attention has been given to the effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans, but almost no attention has been given to its effects on the Vietnamese people. One Vietnam combat veteran, now an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning television producer, who recently returned to Vietnam, says (Bird, 1990):

> We saw the lunarlike landscape near the Cambodian border which had been defoliated by Agent Orange. We met disabled veterans, war widows, orphans and deformed children in desperate need. . . . Isn't there a studio in Hollywood today that will buck the system and make a movie about the Vietnamese? . . We need a movie or movies in which the Vietnamese are in the forefront. We still owe them a peace. (p. 16)

Oliver Stone tried to remedy that omission in 1994 with the last of his Vietnam trilogy, *Heaven & Earth,* a film that attempted to portray the war from the Vietnamese viewpoint.

While the 2,265 Americans missing in the Vietnam War are often mentioned, we forget the missing Vietnamese, more than 300,000, or, in absolute numbers, 132 times as many, and proportionately a far greater number given the disparities in the populations of the two countries.

Some researchers have contended that individuals do not ordinarily select or reject entire messages (selective exposure) because we often cannot judge the message content beforehand. Others have observed that usually we are surrounded by people and media that agree with us on the major issues (McGuire, 1968). Some researchers argue that more typically individuals will pay attention to the parts of a message that are not contrary to their strongly held attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors (selective attention) and not pay attention to the parts of a message that are counter to strongly held positions and might cause psychological discomfort or dissonance. There is some evidence that people will pay attention to material that does not support their position if they believe it will be easy to refute, but they will avoid information that is supportive of their position if it is weak. The latter may cause them to lose confidence in their initial position (Brock & Balloun, 1967; Lowin, 1969; Kleinhesselink & Edwards, 1975).

In a summary of research, several authors concluded that there is little evidence to support the hypothesis that individuals will avoid entire messages (selective exposure) that are contrary to their beliefs (Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Freedman & Sears, 1965; Sears, 1968). Researchers have found that individuals seeking novelty will not necessarily avoid dissonance-producing information. The perceived utility of information (e.g., the learning of "implausible" counter-arguments to one's position cited in Chapter 4) may impel an individual to pay attention to dissonance-producing information. Contradictory information that is new, interesting, salient, personally relevant, or entertaining will probably not be avoided. Contradictory information that is useful in learning a skill or solving a problem will probably be attended to. In other words, if the message contains rewards that exceed the psychological discomfort or dissonance it may generate, the message will probably not be avoided. Individuals are more apt to pay attention to material that is contradictory to their beliefs, behaviors, or choices if they are ones not strongly held. With strongly held beliefs, people who are highly confident of their views will not avoid contradictory material because they believe they can easily refute it. For differing positions on this issue, see Freedman and Sears (1965), who concluded that people do not avoid dissonant information, and Mills (1968), who argued that under some circumstances they do. Both are included in Abelson et al. (1968), which provides an extended, in-depth treatment of consistency theories.

However, Cotton (1985), in an exhaustive review of research dealing with selective exposure, concluded that the earlier studies suffered from a variety of methodological flaws. He believes that earlier studies contained a variety of artifacts that may have affected their findings. Cotton concludes, "Later research on selective exposure, generally more carefully controlled, has produced more positive results. Almost every study found significant selective-exposure effects" (p. 25).

At this point we can say only that the jury is still out on the question of selective exposure and the final verdict is yet to come.

Entertainment Choices

There is some evidence that choices in entertainment are made "on impulse; or spontaneously, rather than with deliberate selective exposure (Zillmann & Bryant, 1986). However, research (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984) has shown that

people seem to select entertainment intuitively, depending upon their mood. The researchers say:

> The data revealed that exciting programs attracted bored subjects significantly more than stressed subjects and that relaxing programs attracted stressed subjects significantly more than bored subjects. . . . It was found that almost all subjects had chosen materials that helped them to escape effectively from undesirable excitatory states. In fact almost all subjects overcorrected, that is, bored subjects ended up above base levels and stressed ones below base levels of excitation. (pp. 307-308)

Other studies (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985) suggest that "all people who are down on their luck may be expected to seek, and obtain, mood lifts from comedy" (p. 309). However, "provoked, angry Persons were found to refrain from watching hostile comedy and turn to alternative offerings" (Zillmann, Hezel, & Medoff, 1980).

Crime-apprehensive people selected drama that was lower in violent victimization and higher in justice restoration than did nonapprehensive counterparts. Apprehensive persons exhibited a tendency to expose themselves to information capable of reducing their apprehensions. One researcher (Zillmann, 1980) concludes that "the main message of television crime drama—namely, that criminals are being caught and put away, which should make the streets safer—apparently holds great appeal for those who worry about crime" (p. 311).

In recent years there has been considerable discussion concerning the effects of the new communication technologies on viewing behavior. Today, besides the TV set there are VCRs, cable systems, and remote controls. One survey of 583 Florida residents found that, contrary to popular opinion, the new technologies are having little effect on viewing habits (Ferguson, 1992). Cable owners said they watched regularly about six channels, while nonsubscribers reported watching regularly four channels.

Selective Retention

Earlier, several studies were cited in support of the concept of selective retention, that people tend to remember material that agrees with their "prevailing frame of reference" or attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and forget material that disagrees with them. More recent research tended to cast some doubt on these findings. One study concluded that neither prior attitudes nor prior familiarity was related to learning of material and that novelty enhances learning of propagandistic information (Greenwald & Sakamura, 1967). Another study, which tested the hypotheses of both the Levine and Murphy study and the Jones and Kohler study (cited in Chapter 4), concluded that only under certain conditions does an attitude-memory relationship exist, if at all, and that "the specific nature of these conditions is not as yet understood" (Brigham & Cook, 1969, p. 243).

As with all scientific research, this is an area in which theory is being refined and sharpened. Recent studies are applying more rigid controls and investigating alternative explanations. At this point we can say only that the factors that influence selective retention of information are yet to be determined, and much work remains to be done concerning the selective retention of information.

CONCLUSIONS

As should be obvious by now, consistency theories have many implications for how humans perceive the world, communicate, and use, distort, ignore, or forget the contents of the mass media. In their generality and scope they apply to both media practitioners and media consumers—from the reporter at the scene of the news or the producer of an advertisement to the final destination of the message.

As we have seen, nations can selectively forget unpleasant past events and deny current problems, individuals can selectively perceive objective data, even from highly sophisticated electronic instruments, and presidents can and do selectively misperceive questions and data. People reduce postdecision dissonance with selective retention of facts and nations attempt to change attitudes through forced role playing. The media not only vary in their perceptions of an event, but often also ignore unpleasant facts about their own societies.

DISCUSSION

1. Give an example of how you have tried to achieve consistence between your attitudes; your behaviors; your attitudes and behaviors.
2. Can you remember an example of your rationalizing an inconsistency between your attitudes and/or your behaviors?
3. Was your rationalization caused by your feeling psychologically uncomfortable about your inconsistency?
4. Can you cite examples of selective exposure (avoidance of entire messages)?
   How about examples of selective attention (avoidance of parts of messages)?
5. Give an example of selective perception in the mass media.
6. Have you, or anyone you know, recently attacked the credibility of the communicator of a message you disagreed with, rather than address the contents of the message itself? Can you give an example?
7. When confronted with dissonant information have you reacted with denial or incredulity?
8. Give an example of selective retention on the part of society.
9. Have you ever made a decision of some importance and later questioned your correctness in making the decision? If so, what did you do to reduce your doubt about the correctness of your decision?

10. How do you decide what to watch on television? How many of your decisions are the result of impulse? How many are the result of selective exposure?

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