**Processing Persuasive Communications**

Kate and Ben, recently married, delightfully employed, and happy to be on their own after 4 long years of college, are embarking on a major decision—a happy one, but an important one. They’re buying a car. They have some money saved up from the wedding and have decided that, the way the stock market has been going, they’d be better off spending it than losing cash on some risky Internet investment.

Sitting in their living room one Thursday night watching TV, they find that they are tuning in more closely to the car commercials than the sitcoms. “That’s a sign we’re an old married couple,” Kate jokes. Ben nods in agreement.

The next day after work, at Kate’s request they click onto the *Consumer Reports* Web site and print out information about compact cars. On Saturday they brave the car dealerships, get the lowdown from car salesmen, and take spins in the cars. Kate, armed with her incredible memory for detail and ten 3 × 5 cards, hurls questions at the car salesmen, while Ben, shirt hanging out, eyes glazed, looks dreamily at the sports cars he knows he can’t afford.

By early the next week, they have narrowed down the choices to a Honda Accord and a Hyundai Sonata. Her desk covered with papers, printouts, and stacks of warranties and brochures from the dealerships, Kate is thinking at a feverish pace; she pauses, then shares her conclusions with her husband: “Okay, this is it. The Honda gets more miles per gallon and handles great on the highway. But *Consumer Reports* gives the new Sonata better ratings on safety on account of their anti-lock brakes and traction control, which is important. The Sonata also has a better repair record than the Accord. But the big thing is we get a stronger warranty with the Hyundai dealer and, Ben, the Sonata is a thousand bucks cheaper. Soooo . . . what do you think?”

Ben looks up. “Well, you know, I’m not into all this technical stuff like you are. I say if the Sonata gets better ratings from *Consumer Reports*, go for it. I also think the Sonata salesman made a lot of good points—real nice guy. The Honda guy basically blew us off when we told him we needed the weekend to think it over.”

“There’s also the other thing,” says Kate, sporting a grin.

“What?”
“The name.”
“It’s true,” says Ben a bit sheepishly. “The name ‘Sonata’ is cool. I like it.”
“What am I going to do with you?” Kate asks, with a smile and a deliberately exaggerated sigh.
“How about, take me to the Hyundai dealer, so we can buy our new car?” Ben says, gently running his hands through the 3 × 5 cards as he walks out the front door.

The story is fiction—but perhaps not too far from everyday experience. It is based on interviews with consumers and observations of people buying cars. The example illustrates two very different styles of processing information: careful consideration of message arguments (Kate) and superficial examination of information and a focus on simple cues (Ben). These two ways of processing information are the main elements of contemporary theories of persuasion and form the centerpiece of the present chapter.

This chapter launches the second part of the book, which examines theory and research on the effects of persuasive communication. The chapter describes guiding models of attitude and behavior change—approaches that underlie much of the research and applications that follow. The cornerstone of these theoretical approaches is a focus on process. Scholars believe that if they can understand how people cognitively process messages, they can better explicate the impact that communications have on attitudes. They believe that the better they comprehend individuals’ modes of processing information, the more accurately they can explain the diverse effects messages have on attitudes. This is what scholars mean when they say you cannot understand the effects of communications on people without knowing how people process the message.

Contemporary models evolved from earlier perspectives on persuasion—notably Hovland’s path-breaking work and research conducted in the 1960s. It is important to describe these programs of research because they contributed helpful insights and also laid the groundwork for current theorizing. The first section of the chapter provides an overview of these approaches. The second portion of the chapter describes a major cognitive processing model of persuasion, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (see p. 130), along with evidence that backs it up. Subsequent sections focus on real-life applications, fine points of the model, intellectual criticisms, and the model’s contributions to persuasion.

**HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS**

As noted in Chapter 1, Carl Hovland and colleagues at Yale University conducted the first detailed, empirical research on the effects of persuasive communications. The Yale attitude change approach was distinctive because it provided facts about the effects on attitudes of the communicator’s credibility, message appeals, and audience members’ personality traits. Convinced by theory and their generation’s experience with World War II persuasion campaigns that communications had strong effects on attitudes, the researchers set out to examine who says what to whom with what effect (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Smith, Lasswell, & Casey, 1946).
Although Hovland and colleagues’ findings were interesting, it was their theory-driven approach and commitment to testing hypotheses that proved enduring. The Yale researchers were also interested in understanding why messages changed attitudes. Working in an era dominated by reward-based learning theories and research on rats’ mastery of mazes, Hovland naturally gravitated to explanations that focused on learning and motivation. He emphasized that persuasion entailed learning message arguments and noted that attitude change occurred in a series of steps. To be persuaded, individuals had to attend to, comprehend, learn, accept, and retain the message (see Figure 5.1).

It sounds logical enough. Indeed there is considerable evidence that learning is a component of persuasion—the more people learn and comprehend message arguments, the more likely they are to accept the advocated positions (Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996). However, the thesis misses the mark in an important respect. It assumes that people are sponge-like creatures who passively take in information they receive. In fact, as Leon Festinger and Nathan Maccoby noted, an audience member:

> does not sit there listening and absorbing what is said without any counteraction on his part. Indeed, it is more likely that under such circumstances, while he is listening to the persuasive communication, he is very actively, inside his own mind, counter-arguing, derogating the points the communicator makes and derogating the communicator himself.  

(1964, p. 360)

Think of how you react to a persuasive message. Do you sit there, taking in everything the speaker says? Are you so mesmerized by the communicator that you stifle any thoughts or mental arguments? Hardly. You actively think about the speaker, message, or persuasion context. You may remember message arguments, yet probably recall with greater accuracy your own criticisms of the speaker’s point of view. This view of
persuasion developed in the years that followed the publication of Hovland’s research and is known as the cognitive response approach to persuasion. The approach asserts that people’s own mental reactions to a message play a critical role in the persuasion process, typically a more important role than the message itself (Brock, 1967; Greenwald, 1968; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981b). Cognitive responses include thoughts that are favorable to the position advocated in the message (proarguments) and those that criticize the message (counterarguments). Persuasion occurs if the communicator induces the audience member to generate favorable cognitive responses regarding the communicator or message.

The cognitive response view says that people play an active role in the persuasion process. It emphasizes that people’s own thoughts about a message are more important factors in persuasion than memory of message arguments (Perloff & Brock, 1980; see Figure 5.2). There is a good deal of evidence to substantiate this view. In fact, it may seem obvious that thoughts matter in persuasion. But remember that what is obvious at one point in time is not always apparent in an earlier era. During the 1950s and early 1960s, animal learning models of human behavior dominated psychology, and, on a broader level, Americans were assumed to follow lock, stock, and barrel the dictates of government and free-enterprise capitalism. It only seemed natural to theorize that persuasion was primarily a passive process of learning and reinforcement.

With the advent of the 1960s, all this changed. Cognitive models emphasizing active thought processes gained adherents. It became clear that older views, while useful, needed to be supplemented by approaches that afforded more respect to the individual and assigned more emphasis to dynamics of the gray matter inside the brain.

“Feed your head,” the rock group Jefferson Airplane belted out during this decade. The cognitive response approach echoed the refrain. It stimulated research, bottled old scholarly wine in new explanations, and helped pave the way for new theories of attitude change. By calling attention to the role thoughts play in persuasion, the cognitive response approach illuminated scholarly understanding of persuasion. Consider the following examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Cognitive Responses</th>
<th>Attitude Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Proarguments
| 2. Counterarguments
| 3. Thoughts that
  (a) originate with the message
  (b) creatively elaborate on the message, or are
  (c) irrelevant to the message

**FIGURE 5.2** The cognitive response model of persuasion.
The first involves *forewarning*, which occurs when a persuader warns people that they will soon be exposed to a persuasive communication. This is a common occurrence in life, and research has explored what happens when people are warned that they are going to receive a message with which they will staunchly disagree. Cognitive response studies have clarified just what happens inside people’s minds when this occurs. Individuals generate a large number of counterarguments, strengthening their opposition to the advocated position (Petty & Cacioppo, 1977). An old expression, “Forewarned is forearmed,” describes this phenomenon, but sheds no light on why it occurs. Cognitive response analysis helps us understand it better. When a close friend marches out of the house in the middle of an argument, vowing, “We’ll talk about this when I get home,” you are likely to intensify your resolve not to give in. Generating arguments on your behalf and persuading yourself that you are right, you arm yourself with a battering ram of justifications that you invoke when your friend returns. In fact, as cognitive response research predicts, forewarning someone in this general fashion significantly reduces the likelihood that a subsequent persuasive communication will succeed. “Forewarning an audience to expect a persuasive message tends to make that message less persuasive,” William L. Benoit concludes after studying this issue (1998, p. 146).

Another way of saying this is that forewarnings stiffen resistance to persuasion. Arming individuals to resist harmful communications is important, given that people are frequently tempted to yield to peers’ requests that they smoke, drink when they drive, or take drugs (Quinn & Wood, 2004). Forewarnings can instill resistance, provided they get people to think long and hard about the issue and the arguments contained in the message.

Cognitive responses also help explain an off-beat persuasion effect called *distraction*. Sometimes people are distracted from paying attention to a communication with which they disagree. Other people may be talking, or music may be blaring at a party at precisely the moment when someone chooses to explain why she disagrees with a position one holds on an issue. In other cases, communicators intentionally distract receivers from paying attention to a message. Advertisers do this all the time, using humor, music, and sex to take people’s attention away from the message. In such circumstances, people can be highly susceptible to persuasion. The distraction hypothesis holds that distraction facilitates persuasion by blocking the dominant cognitive response to a message (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). If I listen to a message with which I disagree, my normal response is probably to counterargue with the communicator in my head. But if my mind is elsewhere—I’m grooving to the music or am laughing at a joke—I am not able to formulate arguments against the message. I, therefore, have fewer mental objections to the advocated position. As a result, I end up moving somewhat closer to the communicator’s point of view than I would have if I had not been distracted in this way.

Notice what is going on here. It’s not the distraction from the message that counts; rather, it’s the distraction from our own arguments regarding the message (Osterhouse & Brock, 1970). Recognizing that people are primed to contest advertisements in their own minds, advertisers resort to all sorts of clever distractions (see Chapter 11). Sometimes they even seem to be aware that we mentally take issue with ads that appear on television, as they try to tease us into not taking the ad so seriously. This too can be
distracting and can facilitate persuasion. Mind you—distraction does not always succeed, and it does not always work by inhibiting counterargument production. Indeed, David B. Buller and John R. Hall (1998) present an array of evidence that challenges the counterargument disruption thesis. However, the distraction research caught researchers’ eyes by raising the possibility that cognitive responses could influence attitude change. This in turn stimulated scholarship and suggested new ideas for everyday persuasion (see, for example, Boxes 5.1 and 5.2).

ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL

There is little doubt that the cognitive response approach advanced knowledge of persuasion. It also provided a method to measure cognitive aspects of attitudes creatively. After a time, though, researchers realized that the approach had two limitations. First, it assumed that people think carefully about messages. Yet there are many times when people turn their minds off to persuasive communications, making decisions based on mental shortcuts. Second, the cognitive response approach failed to shed much light on the ways that messages influence people. It did not explain how we can utilize cognitive responses to devise messages to change attitudes or behavior. In order to rectify these problems, scholars proceeded to develop process-based models of persuasion.

Two models currently dominate the field. The first, devised by Shelly Chaiken and Alice H. Eagly, is called the Heuristic–Systematic Model (HSM) (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002). The second, formulated by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty & Wegener, 1999; Petty, Wheeler, & Tormala, 2003). Both approaches emphasize that you cannot understand communication effects without appreciating the underlying processes by which messages influence attitudes. Both are dual-process models in that they claim that there are two different mechanisms by which communications affect attitudes. This chapter focuses on the ELM because it has generated more research on persuasive communication and offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding communication effects.

Main Principles

The first question students may have when reading about an ELM of persuasion is: “Just what does the term ‘Elaboration Likelihood’ mean?” This is a reasonable question. Elaboration refers to the extent to which the individual thinks about or mentally modifies arguments contained in the communication. Likelihood, referring to the probability that an event will occur, is used to point out the fact that elaboration can be either likely or unlikely. Elaboration is assumed to fall along a continuum, with one end characterized by considerable rumination on the central merits of an issue and the other by relatively little mental activity. The model tells us when people should be particularly likely to elaborate, or not elaborate, on persuasive messages.
The ELM stipulates that there are two distinct ways people process communications. These are called routes, suggesting that two different highways crisscross the mind, transporting thoughts and reactions to messages. The term route is a metaphor: we do not know for sure that these routes exist (any more than we know with absolute certainty that any mental construct exists in precisely the way theorists use it). Social scientists employ terms like “processing route” (or attitude) to describe complex cognitive and behavioral phenomena. As with attitude, the term “processing route” makes eminent sense and is supported by a great deal of empirical evidence. The ELM refers to the two routes to persuasion as the central and peripheral routes, or central and peripheral processes.

The central route is characterized by considerable cognitive elaboration. It occurs when individuals focus in depth on the central features of the issue, person, or message. When people process information centrally, they carefully evaluate message arguments, ponder implications of the communicator’s ideas, and relate information to their own knowledge and values. This is the thinking person’s route to persuasion.

The peripheral route is entirely different. Rather than examining issue-relevant arguments, people examine the message quickly or focus on simple cues to help them decide whether to accept the position advocated in the message. Factors that are peripheral to message arguments carry the day. These can include a communicator’s physical appeal, glib speaking style, or pleasant association between the message and music playing in the background. When processing peripherally, people invariably rely on simple decision-making rules or heuristics. For example, an individual may invoke the heuristic that “experts are to be believed” and, for this reason (and this reason only), accept the speaker’s recommendation. In a similar fashion, people employ a “bandwagon heuristic,” illustrated by the belief that “if other people think this is good, then it probably is.” You see this all the time on social networking sites, as when one infers an individual’s popularity from the number of friends she has on Facebook, judges a song to be desirable based on song download rankings, or decides to purchase a book based on consumer ratings on Amazon (Schmierbach, Xu, Bellur-Thandaveshwara, Ash, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Kegerise, 2009).

Thus, the ELM says that people can be simple information processors—“cognitive misers” as they are sometimes called (Taylor, 1981)—or deep, detailed thinkers. Under
some conditions (when processing superperipherally), they are susceptible to slick persuaders—and can be thus characterized by the saying attributed to P. T. Barnum: “There’s a sucker born every minute!” In other circumstances (when processing centrally), individuals are akin to Plato’s ideal students—seeking truth and dutifully considering logical arguments—or to Aristotelian thinkers, persuaded only by cogent arguments (logos). The model says people are neither suckers nor deep thinkers. Complex creatures that we are, we are both peripheral and central, heuristic and systematic, processors. The critical questions are when people process centrally, when they prefer the peripheral pathway, and the implications for persuasion. The nifty thing about the ELM is that it answers these questions, laying out conditions under which central or peripheral processing is most likely, and the effects of such processing on attitude change.

The key factors that determine processing strategy are motivation and ability. When people are motivated to consider the message seriously, they process centrally. They also pursue the central route when they are cognitively able to ponder message arguments. Situations can limit or enhance people’s ability to process centrally and so too can personal characteristics. On the other hand, when people lack the motivation or ability to process a message carefully, they opt for a simpler strategy. They process superficially.

It is frequently neither possible nor functional to process every message carefully. “Just imagine if you thought carefully about every television or radio commercial you heard or ad you came across in newspapers or magazines,” note Richard Petty and colleagues. “If you ever made it out of the house in the morning, you probably would be too mentally exhausted to do anything else!” (Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 1994, p. 118). Contemporary society, with its multiple stimuli, unfathomably complex issues, and relentless social change, makes it inevitable that people will rely on mental shortcuts much of the time.

In addition to spelling out factors that make peripheral processing most likely, the ELM contains hypotheses about the impact that such processing exerts on persuasion. Different persuasive appeals are effective, depending on the processing route. These appeals also differ in their long-term effects on attitudes (see Figure 5.3).

**Motivation to Process**

**Involvement.** Can you think of an issue that has important implications for your own life? Perhaps it is a university proposal to raise tuition, a plan to change requirements in your major, or even a proposal to ban cell phoning while driving. Now think of an issue that has little impact on your day-to-day routines. This could be a proposal to strengthen the graduation requirements at local high schools or a plan to use a different weed spray in farming communities. You will certainly process the first issues differently than the second. Different persuasive appeals are likely to be effective in these two circumstances as well.

The topics just cited differ in their level of personal involvement, or the degree to which they are perceived to be personally relevant to individuals. **Individuals are high in involvement when they perceive that an issue is personally relevant or bears directly on their own lives. They are low in involvement when they believe that an issue has little or no impact on their own lives.**
Changing Attitudes and Behavior

FIGURE 5.3 | The Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion.
The ELM stipulates that when individuals are high in involvement, they will be motivated to engage in issue-relevant thinking. They will recognize that it is in their best interest to consider the arguments in the message carefully. Even if they oppose the position advocated in the message, they may change their attitudes if the arguments are sufficiently compelling to persuade them that they will benefit by adopting the advocated position. Under high involvement, people should process messages through the central route, systematically scrutinizing message arguments.

By contrast, under low involvement, people have little motivation to focus on message arguments. The issue is of little personal consequence; therefore, it doesn’t pay to spend much time thinking about the message. As a result, people look for mental shortcuts to help them decide whether to accept the communicator’s position. They process the message peripherally, unconcerned with the substance of the communication.

These predictions are intriguing, but how do we know if they hold water in the real world? In order to discover if hypotheses are correct, researchers test them empirically. Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981) examined these hypotheses in a now-classic study. To help you appreciate the procedures, I ask that you imagine that the experiment was being conducted again today using equivalent methods and materials. Here is how it would work:

You first enter a small room in a university building, take a seat, and wait for the experimenter. When the experimenter arrives, she tells you that the university is currently reevaluating its academic programs and is soliciting feedback about possible changes in policy. One proposal concerns a requirement that seniors take a comprehensive exam in their major area of study.

If randomly assigned to the high-involvement condition, you would be told that the comprehensive exam requirement could begin next year. That’s clearly involving as it bears directly on your educational plans. How would you feel if you learned that you might have to take a big exam in your major—communication, psychology, marketing, or whatever it happened to be? You would probably feel nervous, angry, worried, or curious. Whichever emotion you felt, you clearly would be concerned about the issue.

If, on the other hand, you had been assigned to the low-involvement condition, you would be told that the exam requirement would not take effect for 10 years. That clearly is low involvement. Even if you’re on the laid-back, two-classes-a-semester plan, you do not envision being in college 10 years from now! Realizing the message is of little personal consequence, you would gently switch gears from high energy to autopilot.

Regardless of involvement level, you would be asked now to listen to one of two messages delivered by one of two communicators. The particular message and source would be determined by lot, or random assignment.

You would listen to either strong or weak arguments on behalf of the exam. Strong arguments employ statistics and evidence (“Institution of the exams had led to a reversal in the declining scores on standardized achievement tests at other universities”). They offer cogent arguments on behalf of the exam requirement. Weak arguments are shoddy and unpersuasive (for example, “A friend of the author’s had to take a comprehensive exam and now has a prestigious academic position”).

Processing Persuasive Communications
Lastly, you would be led to believe that the comprehensive exam proposal had been prepared by either a communicator high or low in expertise. If assigned to the high-expertise group, you would be told that the report had been developed by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, which had been chaired by an education professor at Princeton University. If randomly assigned to the low-expertise communicator, you would be informed that the proposal had been prepared by a class at a local high school. You would then indicate your overall evaluation of the exam.

This constituted the basic design of the study. In formal terms, there were three conditions: involvement (high or low), argument quality (strong or weak), and expertise (high or low). Petty and colleagues found that the impact of arguments and expertise depended to a considerable degree on level of involvement.

Under high involvement, argument quality exerted a significant impact on attitudes toward the comprehensive exam. Regardless of whether a high school class or Princeton professor was the source of the message, strong arguments led to more attitude change than did weak arguments. Under low involvement, the opposite pattern of results emerged. A highly expert source induced more attitude change than did a low-expert source, regardless of whether the arguments were strong or weak (see Figure 5.4).

The ELM provides a parsimonious explanation of the findings. Under high involvement, students believed that the senior exam would affect them directly. This heightened motivation to pay careful attention to the quality of the arguments. Processing the arguments carefully through the central route, students naturally were more swayed by strong than by weak arguments.

Imagine how you would react if you had been in this condition. Although you would hardly be overjoyed at the prospect of an exam in your major area of study, the idea would grab your attention, and you would think carefully about the arguments. After reading them, you would not be 100 percent in favor of the comprehensive exam—but having thought through the ideas and noted the benefits the exam provided, you might be more sympathetic to the idea than you would have been at the outset and certainly more favorable than if you had listened to weak arguments on behalf of the exam.

Now imagine you had been assigned to the low-involvement–high expertise group. You’d be on autopilot because the exam would not take place until long after you graduated. Blasé about the whole thing, feeling little motivation to think carefully about the issue, you would understandably have little incentive to pay close attention to the quality of arguments.

You would focus on one salient cue—a factor that might help you decide what to do about this issue so that you could complete the assignment and get on with your day. The fact that the communicator was from Princeton might capture your attention and offer a compelling reason to go along with the message. “If this Princeton prof. thinks it’s a good idea, it’s fine with me,” you might think. Click-whirr—just like that, you would go along with the message (Cialdini, 2001).

As we will see, these findings have intriguing implications for everyday persuasion.

Looking back on the study findings, it may seem as if the main principle is that under high involvement, “what is said” is most important, and under low involvement, “who says it” is the key. There is some truth to this, but it greatly oversimplifies matters.
FIGURE 5.4 | Effects of involvement, source expertise, and argument quality on attitudes.
The key point is not that message appeals are more effective under high involvement and communicator appeals are more compelling under low involvement. Instead, the core issue is that people engage in issue-relevant thinking under high involvement, but under low involvement, they focus on simple cues that are peripheral to the main issues. In fact, there are times when a peripheral aspect of the message can carry the day under low involvement.

Case in point: number of message arguments. This attribute is absolutely irrelevant, or peripheral, to the quality of the message. A speaker can have nine shoddy arguments or one extremely cogent appeal. However, the number of arguments can signify quality of argumentation in the minds of perceivers. If people would rather not think too deeply about an issue, they may fall into the trap of assuming that the more arguments a message has, the more convincing it is. This is exactly what Petty and Cacioppo (1984) discovered. When students were evaluating a proposal to institute senior comprehensive exams at their own school 10 years in the future, they were more influenced by a message that had nine arguments. It didn’t matter if all of them were weak. However, when contemplating a senior exam policy that would take place next year, they were naturally more motivated to devote energy to thinking about the issue. They processed arguments centrally, seeing through the shoddy ones and accepting the message only if arguments were strong.

Other motivational factors. Critical as it is, personal involvement is not the only factor that influences message processing. If you expect to deliver a message to an audience, you should be highly motivated to expend cognitive effort processing the message (Boninger, Brock, Cook, Gruder, & Romer, 1990). If you are concerned with making a good impression on others when giving your pitch, you should also be motivated to systematically scrutinize the arguments you are going to discuss (see Leippe & Elkin, 1987; Nienhuis, Manstead, & Spears, 2001).

There is one other motivational factor that influences processing, and it is a particularly interesting one. It is a personality characteristic: the need for cognition—a need to understand the world and to employ thinking to accomplish this goal. People who score high in need for cognition “prefer complex to simple problems” and “enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982, pp. 120–121). These individuals tend to prefer central to peripheral processing. The types of persuasive appeals that work on people high in need for cognition are different from those that work on people low in cognitive needs. These issues are taken up in Chapter 8.

Ability

A second determinant of processing strategy (besides motivation) is the person’s ability to process the message. Situations can enhance or hamper individuals’ ability to process a message. For example, people are less able to process a message when they are distracted, resulting in persuasive effects discussed earlier. More interestingly, we centrally or peripherally process messages depending on our cognitive ability, or knowledge.
Knowledge is a particularly important factor. When people know a lot about an issue, they process information carefully and skillfully. They are better able to separate the rhetorical wheat from the chaff than those with little knowledge of the issue. They are more capable of evaluating the cogency of information and are adept at identifying shortcomings in message arguments. It doesn’t matter what the issue is: it could be nuclear physics, baseball, or roof repair. Knowledgeable people process information centrally and are ordinarily tough nuts for persuaders to crack (Wood, Rhodes, & Biek, 1995). By contrast, people with minimal knowledge on a topic lack the background to differentiate strong from weak arguments. They also may lack confidence in their opinions. They are the peripheral processors, more susceptible to persuasion in most situations.

As an example, think of an issue you know a lot about—let’s say, contemporary movies. Now conjure up a topic about which you know little—let’s say, computer scanners. The ELM says that you will process persuasive messages on these topics very differently and that persuaders should use different techniques to change your mind on these topics. Given your expertise on modern films (you know all about different film techniques and the strengths and weaknesses of famous directors), there is every reason to believe you would centrally process a message that claims 1960s movies are superior to those of today. The message would grab your attention and could change your attitudes—provided it contained strong, compelling arguments.

A “rational” approach like this would be stunningly ineffective on the subject of scanners that digitize photos and convert words on a printed page into word-processing files. Given your ignorance of scanners, you would have difficulty processing technical arguments about optical character recognition, driver software, or high-resolution scans. On the other hand, the salesperson who used a peripheral approach might be highly effective. A salesperson who said she had been in the business 10 years or who furnished 10 arguments why Canon was superior to Epson might easily connect with you, perhaps changing your attitude or inducing you to buy a Canon scanner. Consistent with this logic, Wood, Kallgren, and Preisler (1985) found that argument quality had a stronger impact on attitudes among individuals with a great deal of knowledge on an issue, but message length exerted a stronger influence on those with little knowledge of the issue.

PERIPHERAL PROCESSING IN REAL LIFE

There is nothing as practical as a good theory, Kurt Lewin famously said. This is abundantly apparent in the case of the ELM. Once you appreciate the model, you begin to find all sorts of examples of how it is employed in everyday life. Four examples of peripheral processing follow, and in the next section implications of central processes are discussed.

The Oprah Book Club Effect

Over the years, tens of millions of Americans have watched “Oprah’s Book Club,” a monthly segment of The Oprah Winfrey Show that featured engaging discussions of recently published novels. Book club shows involved a discussion among Winfrey,
the author, and several viewers, who discuss the book and its relationship to their own lives. “The show receives as many as 10,000 letters each month from people eager to participate,” a reporter related.

By the time the segment appears, 500,000 viewers have read at least part of the novel. Nearly as many buy the book in the weeks that follow . . . Oprah’s Book Club has been responsible for 28 consecutive best sellers. It has sold more than 20 million books and made many of its authors millionaires. (Max, 1999, pp. 36–37)

“Oprah’s Book Club” has been a great thing for books and publishing. It is also an example of peripheral processing in action. What convinces hundreds of thousands of people to buy these novels? What persuades them to purchase Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone*, the story of an intelligent, overweight woman who overcomes problems stemming from sexual abuse, rather than an equally compelling novel about abuse and redemption? The answer, in a word, is Oprah. Her credibility, warmth, and celebrity status suggest to viewers that the book is worth a try. It’s not that audience members are meticulously comparing one book to another and integrate Oprah’s advice with their literary assessments of the plot and character development. They lack motivation and perhaps ability. So, they rely on Oprah’s advice and purchase the book, much to the delight of the publishing house and struggling novelist.

Oprah as peripheral cue can also work to the detriment of an author. When she criticizes an author, as she did after discovering that James Frey had fabricated much of *A Million Little Pieces*—a book once touted on her book club—sales of the book plummet. As one critic put it, “Fool millions, make millions. Fool Oprah, lord help you” (Carr, 2006, p. C1). With Winfrey's decision to end her nationally syndicated program in September, 2011, the publishing industry appears to have lost a powerful brand, one that has served as a powerful peripheral cue over the years. But it is likely that her impact on audiences will not end, but will simply move to a new platform as she launches a new cable television network.

**The Electoral Road Show**

To many Americans, politics is like a traveling road show, a circus that the media cover every 4 years, complete with clowns, midgets, and daredevils who will do just about anything to win the crowd’s approval. Politics does not affect them personally—or so many believe. About half of the electorate votes in presidential elections, and many are cynical about the political process (Doppelt & Shearer, 1999). “We have no control over what’s going on,” one disconnected citizen told researchers Jack Doppelt and Ellen Shearer (1999). Another said, “I don’t really think any of the candidates are interested in the issues that I am [interested in]” (p. 16).

Feeling cynical about politics and blasé about their participation, large numbers of voters put little mental energy into the vote decision. Instead, they process politics peripherally, if at all. When it comes time to cast their vote, low-involved voters consider such peripheral cues as:
Candidate appearance. Although people hate to admit it, they are influenced by candidates’ physical appeal (Budesheim & DePaola, 1994; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987). Voters look at a physically attractive candidate, feel positively, and connect their positive affect with the candidate when it comes time to cast their vote.

Endorsements. Political ads frequently contain long lists of endorsements. Names of well-known groups—for example, the American Bar Association, Fraternal Order of Police, and National Organization for Women—as well as not-so-famous organizations appear on a television screen, while the voice-over praises the candidate. The list serves as a peripheral cue, inviting the inference that “if all these groups endorse that candidate, he’s got to be qualified.”

Names. In low-involving elections, the name of the candidate can make a difference. Voters prefer candidates whose names they have heard many times, in part because such names have positive associations (Grush, McKeough, & Ahlering, 1978). In an Illinois primary election, two candidates with relatively smooth-sounding names (Fairchild and Hart) defeated candidates with less euphonious names (Sangmeister and Pucinski). Many voters were probably shocked to discover that Mark Fairchild and Janice Hart were followers of the extremist and unconventional political candidate Lyndon LaRouche (O’Sullivan, Chen, Mohapatra, Sigelman, & Lewis, 1988)!

Candidates are not exactly oblivious to these points. They appreciate the psychology of low-involvement voting, and they develop persuasive messages to reach these voters. They hire image consultants, who advise them on what to wear and how to present themselves positively in public.

Some years back, during the 2000 election, Al Gore was counseled to take on a more macho appearance by releasing his “inner-alphamale” (Bellaﬁante, 2000). In one political debate, he showed up wearing a three-button suit, a French blue shirt, and a horizontally striped tie. Although he looked more like a movie producer than a candidate, he hoped this would resonate with Democrats dissatisﬁed with his personae.

At other times, candidates rely on slogans. Candidates who use catchwords that resonate with voters—“social justice” for Democrats, “family values” for Republicans—can elicit positive perceptions from individuals who lack motivation to consider issue positions (Garst & Bodenhausen, 1996). Hearing the “right” words may be all it takes to convince these individuals to cast their vote for the candidate.

What do attractiveness, slogans, endorsements, and name sound have to do with a candidate’s qualifications for ofﬁce? Not too much: they are peripheral to the main issues of the campaign. Yet low-involved voters often rely on these cues and can be swayed by superficial appeals. This in turn raises troubling questions about the role communications play in contemporary democracy.

Jargon

Has this ever happened to you? Your car engine is on the blink; you take the auto to the mechanic; he (they’re usually guys) looks at you with an expression that says, “You’re clueless about cars, aren’t you?” and then puts his hands to his hips and begins to talk in
tongues—in invoking the most complicated car jargon you have ever heard. Impressed by
the verbiage and afraid to admit you don’t know much about cars, you acquiesce to his
appeal.

Tom and Ray Magliozzi, hosts of the National Public Radio show “Car Talk,”
echoed this point in a humorous, but telling, article. Asked by an interviewer how
someone could fake being a car mechanic, they recommend a heavy use of jargon (Nitze,
2001). Use words like “the torque wrench and torquing,” Tom says. Ray replies,
“Torquing always sounds good.” Tom adds, “I’ll bet you, you could walk into some party
and mention the expression ‘negative torque,’ there would be nobody who would have
the guts to ask you what that meant. A pro included” (p. 38).

This fits right in with the ELM. Individuals with little knowledge about car mechanics
have trouble following explanations involving torque or car computer systems. When a
mechanic begins using the jargon, they invoke the heuristic, “Mechanics who talk this
way know their stuff; if they say this, it must be so.” And, just like that, the mechanic
persuades these customers to make the purchase. (A similar example comes from the
movie My Cousin Vinny, when the character played by Marisa Tomei wows a judge and
jury, using jargon comprehensible only to car experts to prove that a getaway car could
not possibly have been driven by the two men accused of the crime.)

Seduced by a Quick Fix

How were countless Americans lured into purchasing mortgages they could not afford?
Over the course of a decade—from about 1998 to 2008—home buyers across the country
signed their names on legally binding documents, committing themselves to purchase
homes at prices that were too good to be true. With details complicated and technical
terms (like variable rate loans and adjustable rate mortgages) reeling in their minds, many
buyers put their trust in lenders. Big mistake.

The ELM reminds us that when individuals lack ability on an issue, they resort to
the peripheral route, accepting a message because a credible source recommends it.
Unfortunately, some credible bank loan officers were all too eager to pitch crooked
messages. Under pressure from their bosses to approve mortgages so that the bank could
amass huge profits, the lending agents frequently pulled out all stops, offering loans to
buyers who they knew could not afford the monthly payments. Executives at one bank,
Washington Mutual, were particularly eager to exploit (they would say “convince”)
borrowers who lacked adequate credit.

Washington Mutual relied heavily on adjustable rate mortgages that functioned as
the financial equivalent of smoke and mirrors. Unschooled in the fine points of adjustable
mortgages, home buyers were enticed by the promise that they could decide how much
their house payment would cost each month. There was a catch: borrowers who chose
to make small monthly payments were underpaying interest due on the loan, while
adding to the principal—the actual amount of money lent by the bank. In the long run,
this caused loan payments to skyrocket (Goodman & Morgenson, 2008, p. A21). One
elderly couple found their housing costs rose from about $1,000 to $3,000 a month,
leading them to fall behind in their monthly payments.
On the other hand, no one put a gun to borrowers’ heads. They freely chose to accept the terms of the loan, relying on peripheral credibility cues, while discounting their responsibility to study payment arrangements. Yet bank executives knew they were making shaky loans and encouraged loan officers to ignore their fiduciary responsibilities. “If you were alive, they would give you a loan. Actually, I think if you were dead, they would still give you a loan,” one banking expert said (Goodman & Morgenson, 2008).

**CENTRAL PROCESSING**

Peripheral processing is a persuader’s paradise. It allows communicators to devise simplistic—sometimes deceptive—appeals to influence individuals. Tempting as it is to conclude that this is the basis for all contemporary persuasion, the fact is that much persuasion also involves careful, thoughtful consideration of message arguments. As discussed earlier, when people are motivated or able to process messages, they don’t rely exclusively on peripheral cues or necessarily fall for a persuader’s ploys. Instead, they attend closely to the communicator’s arguments. In these situations, persuasion flows through the central route, and appeals are necessarily crafted at a higher intellectual level.

Thus, when people typically buy big-ticket items like stereo systems, computers, and, of course, houses, they respond to cogent arguments in support of the particular product in question. In politics, when voters are out of work or concerned about the economy, they listen closely to candidates’ plans to revitalize the nation’s finances. For example, in 1980, with the country reeling from double-digit inflation, Ronald Reagan made the economy a centerpiece of his campaign against then-president Jimmy Carter. “Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?” he asked Americans in a presidential debate. Reagan went on to suggest that many folks were worse off than they had been prior to Carter taking office. In posing the question this way, Reagan induced people to think seriously about their own economic situations and at the same time to give his challenge to an incumbent president dutiful consideration. His appeals apparently worked, for Reagan handily defeated Carter in the November election (Ritter & Henry, 1994).

Arguments, however, do not always carry the day in persuasion. Cogent arguments can fall on deaf ears when they run counter to an individual’s strong attitudes or values. Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 of how passionate supporters and opponents of the death penalty reacted to evidence that questioned their position. They did not alter their attitudes. On the contrary, they criticized data that disputed their point of view, praised evidence that supported their position, and emerged with renewed confidence that their view on capital punishment was correct. How could this be, one wonders, if people are supposed to consider arguments rationally when they are interested in the issue in question?

The answer points to a complexity in the ELM. All central-route processing is not rational and free of bias. Human beings are not objective thinkers. The key is the degree to which the issue touches on an individual’s strong attitudes, values, or ego-entrenched positions. It is useful to distinguish between issues that are of interest because they bear
on important outcomes in the individual’s life—comprehensive exams, tuition increases, the economy—and those that bear on values or deep-seated attitudes. When the message focuses on a personally relevant outcome, people process arguments rationally, putting aside their biases as best they can, focusing on the merits of issue arguments. However, when the issue touches on core values or ego-involved schema, individuals can be extremely biased and selective in how they approach the issue.

Make no mistake: in both cases, they process centrally, engaging in considerable thinking and evaluating the basic ideas contained in the message. However, when thinking about outcomes (a comprehensive exam), they are open to cogent arguments. When considering a message that touches on core values (capital punishment, abortion), they attend to the opponent’s arguments, but usually reject them (Johnson & Eagly, 1989; Wood et al., 1985, though see Park, Levine, Kingsley Westerman, Orfgen, & Foregger, 2007). Highly knowledgeable people with strong attitudes will muster all sorts of sophisticated reasons why the opponent’s plan is a bad one. They will impress you with their ability to remember the other side’s arguments, but in the end they will prove to be just as biased as anyone else.

In these situations, people behave like ostriches, stubbornly rejecting ideas that are inconsistent with their attitude and sticking only with communications that fall into the latitude of acceptance. How do communicators persuade people in such situations? With great difficulty and care, to be sure. Social judgment theory (see Chapter 2) suggests that when trying to persuade people about issues that touch on core values, persuaders must strive to do two things. First, they should encourage individuals to assimilate the issue, or candidate, to their position. That is, they want people—or voters, applying this to a political context—to perceive that the candidate shares their position on the issue. The goal is not to change the voter’s position on abortion, defense spending, the environment, or affirmative action. Instead, the idea is to convince voters that the candidate shares their positions on the issue and is sympathetic with their concerns (Schwartz, 1973).

At the same time, a communicator wants to make sure that people do not come away from the persuasive encounter perceiving that they are in sharp disagreement with the communicator on the issue (Kaplowitz & Fink, 1997). If voters contrast their position from a politician’s and assume that the politician takes a very different position on a key issue, the candidate is in deep do-do, as former president George H. W. Bush liked to say. For these reasons, candidates are frequently careful not to take strong positions on hot-button issues like abortion, gun control, capital punishment, and racial quotas. They are fearful of alienating undecided voters—of pushing voters’ contrast effect buttons. If this happens, these folks may vote for the opposing candidate or stay home. Thus, there is a practical reason why candidates take “fuzzy” positions on hot-button issues. Yet this points up a troubling ethical issue. Candidates must camouflage or moderate their positions to get elected (Granberg & Seidel, 1976). However, in so doing they risk compromising their integrity or turning off voters who suspect the worst in politicians. Yet if they admirably stick to their guns and take strong positions, they alienate middle-of-the-roaders and end up being right—not president.

Senator John McCain faced this quandary when he ran for president in 2008. The long-time Republican senator from Arizona had run as a maverick reformist in the 2000
Republican primaries, promising “straight talk” and keeping his distance from the party’s religious conservatives. McCain lost the 2000 Republican nomination after a bruising South Carolina primary, in which underground political groups smeared his character and family. Chastened by his loss and recognizing that he needed the support of evangelical Christians, he broke bread with religious conservatives, hoping to gain their support in 2008. Already unpopular with conservatives for taking a liberal position on immigration and opposing a federal ban on same-sex marriage, he switched gears, emphasizing his pro-life stance and endorsing the Bush tax cuts he had once opposed.

McCain seemed to recognize that, in the realm of strong attitudes, a candidate cannot risk taking positions that are in voters’ latitudes of rejection. Instead, candidates must make statements that fall squarely in voters’ latitudes of acceptance, encouraging them to assimilate the candidate’s positions to their own. McCain hoped voters would centrally process his positions, perceiving them as consonant with their own attitudes.

In politics, central processing frequently leads to reinforcement or strengthening of existing attitudes. However, central processing can also produce profound changes in attitudes, alterations that extend beyond hardening of preexisting sentiments. Americans radically changed their attitudes toward smoking, health, and exercise, in part due to central processing. In this way, the ELM explains how people modify their attitudes under high-involvement conditions. Individuals reconsider earlier positions, gradually alter their assessments of the issue, think deeply about the matter (sometimes through painful reassessment of themselves and their values), and over time link up the new attitude with other aspects of themselves. This leads to the attitude becoming a more permanent fixture of individuals’ self-systems.

Attitudes changed through deep, central route thinking are more likely to persist over time than those formed through short-circuited thinking or peripheral cues (Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995). The hopeful side of this is that prejudice and dysfunctional attitudes can be changed. Once modified, such changes can also persist and lead to improvements in the person’s overall mental state.

**COMPLICATIONS AND CRITICISMS**

In the many years that have elapsed since the ELM was first introduced, the theory has been discussed, criticized, clarified, extended, and, yes, elaborated on in a variety of ways. In this section, I review these intellectual developments, hoping to illuminate the fine points of cognitive theorizing about persuasion.

A key issue involves the ability of a particular variable to do different things or serve diverse functions. Consider physical attractiveness. If you had to describe the role physical attractiveness plays in persuasion based on the earlier discussion, you might suggest that it serves as a peripheral cue. You might speculate that when people do not care much about an issue or lack ability to process the message, they fall back on the physical appeal of the speaker. Opting not to process the message carefully, they let themselves get carried away a bit by the speaker’s good looks. The pleasant association of the communicator with the communication pushes individuals toward accepting the