Argument Quality, Peripheral Cues and the Elaboration Likelihood Model

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

This TREO Talk Presentation will discuss issues with the use of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) developed by Petty and Cacioppo in information systems research. Concerns regarding how to measure argument quality and peripheral cues will be discussed. Issues regarding the use of ELM in both experimental settings (researchers changing the treatment options) and survey research are explored.

ELM provides a model for understanding and evaluating attitude change. The model provides two potential paths to change a person's attitude about a message: a central route and a peripheral route. The central route is taken when the message recipient is motivated and has the ability to process an argument. An individual may be motivated to process through personal relevance, the need for recognition, personal responsibility, etc. An individual may have the ability to process if they receive the message without distraction and have prior knowledge about the subject through repetition, message comprehensibility, etc. The peripheral route will be taken if the message recipient does not take the central route (i.e. the receiver is not motivated or does not have the ability to process a message).

A message receiver who proceeds down the central route will cognitively process the argument presented and two factors, initial attitude and argument quality, may influence the receiver's attitude. Petty and Cacioppo categorize arguments as either strong or weak. They state, "In the ELM, arguments are viewed as bits of information contained in a communication that are relevant to a person's subjective determination of the true merits of an advocated position." Strong arguments generate generally favorable thoughts when the receiver is instructed to think about the message, and weak arguments were found to generate generally unfavorable thoughts. Arguments must also be believable, and have comprehensibility, low complexity, and familiarity. Alternatively, a message receiver who proceeds down the peripheral route processes the message via peripheral cues such as the number of arguments presented and the attractiveness of the source. These peripheral cues do not reveal why (or by what mechanism) a cue is effective/persuasive or eliminate the possibility that a more thoughtful process was involved.

There are many approaches to measure argument quality in the central route and peripheral cues in the peripheral route. However, these options often lead to confusion for researchers. Argument quality can be measured through: developed frameworks (Toulmin's method, Rogerian rhetoric, Aristotelian rhetoric, etc.), subjective measures by subject matter experts or self-perceptions of the message receiver (non-expert). Another approach is to consider argument classification such as pretesting messages, participant ratings, and unsystematic message variations. Prior research has found these to be unsatisfactory and recommend a more formal approach to argument quality based on dialectical and pragmatic approaches and informal logic. Beyond the classification issues, it is often difficult to determine what constitutes a peripheral cue. Media richness may be a consideration as the number of peripheral cues may be greatly increased through video compared to text (e.g. YouTube reviews & social media). However, a peripheral cue may act like a strong argument in some subjects as the cue may trigger thoughtful deliberation. This TREO Talk Presentation will discuss these concerns for both experimental settings and survey research.

References:

Petty, R. E., and Cacioppo, J. 1986 "The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion." *Advances in experimental social psychology* (19), pp. 123-205.