Effects of Forwarning of Persuasive Intent and Involvement on Cognitive Responses and Persuasion

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Abstract. College undergraduates were either warned or not warned of the persuasive intent of a communication which was either of direct or only indirect personal relevance to them. Consistent with the hypothesis based on reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), the inhibiting effect of the forewarning (i.e., reduced persuasion, increased counterargumentation, and reduced favorable thoughts) was greater under high than low involvement conditions.

Persuasion researchers have distinguished between two different types of foreknowledge that a person may have before a persuasive communication is received (Papageorgis, 1968). Persons may be forewarned of a) the topic and position of an impending communication, or b) the communicator's persuasive intent. Recent research has focused on forewarnings of *topic and position* and has demonstrated that on highly involving topics, resistance is produced, but on topics of low involvement, susceptibility typically results (cf. Cialdini & Petty, in press). Regarding *persuasive intent*, Papageorgis (1968) noted in an early review that again, the attitudinal effects of the forewarning appeared to depend on the amount of issue involvement. Experiments employing involving issues demonstrated an inhibiting effect of persuasive intent, while those employing issues of low involvement did not. One goal of the present experiment was to provide the first direct test of this formulation.[2] In the current study, subjects were either warned or not warned of the persuasive intent of a communication which they were led to believe was either of direct or only indirect personal relevance to them.

We hypothesized that the *reactance* aroused by a forewarning of persuasive intent (Hass & Grady, 1975), would affect the manner in which the communication was processed. Without a forewarning, a communication would be accepted on the basis of its merits; but with a forewarning, subjects would be motivated to counterargue the message in order to reassert their freedom. Since greater reactance should be aroused the greater the personal relevance of the attitude under attack (Brehm, 1966), we expected that a forewarning of persuasive intent would produce greater inhibition of persuasion when the communication was on a topic of high than low personal relevance. This reasoning, of course, provides a theoretical rationale for Papageorgis' previous empirical observation.[3]

Although past investigators have not explicitly noted this, the available data on forewarning of persuasive intent is quite consistent with the notion that "persuasion contexts" inhibit attitude change by eliciting counterarguments during message receipt. For example, Kiesler & Kiesler (1964) found that a statement of the communicator's persuasive intent inhibited persuasion only when it preceded the message. Consistent with our interpretation, when the persuasion context came after the message, reactance could still be aroused, but it could not affect the manner in which the communication was processed. Holt & Watts (1974) found that a forewarning of persuasive intent did not inhibit persuasion if subjects were distracted while reading the communication, but it had the usual inhibiting effect when no distraction was present. The distraction may have prevented the counterarguing which otherwise would have been elicited by the persuasion context (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). Finally, in an experiment in which low involving

cultural truisms were employed as messages, McGuire & Papageorgis (1962) found that a forewarning of persuasive intent inhibited persuasion only if subjects had been given belief bolstering material prior to message exposure. When no belief bolstering material preceded the attack, the forewarning did not reduce persuasion, since presumably, the forewarning could not elicit counterarguments which were unavailable. Thus, although the existing evidence can be interpreted as supporting the view that a forewarning of persuasive intent reduces persuasion by eliciting counterarguments during message presentation, no direct evidence has been provided.[4]

Method. 116 introductory psychology students participated in a 2 (warned of persuasive intent or not) x 3 (involvement level) factorial design for extra course credit. Subjects were run in 11 group sessions in a language laboratory constructed so that no subject could have visual or verbal contact with any other subject. In any one session, both warned and unwarned groups were run, although only one level of involvement was used.

After all subjects for any one session had arrived, the Experimenter instructed them to read the front page of a booklet which had been placed on their desks (and contained the warning manipulation). The booklet stated that the psychology department was "cooperating with the School of Journalism in an attempt to evaluate various radio editorials." Subjects in the *warned* conditions read further that "the tape was designed specifically to try to persuade you and other college students of the desirability of changing certain college regulations." Subjects in the *unwarned* conditions read instead: "The tape was prepared as part of a journalism class project on radio recordings."

After the warning induction, all subjects heard a 3 minute communication over headphones. The message, adapted from one employed previously by Petty & Cacioppo (1977), presented five persuasive arguments in support of the contention that university seniors be required to pass a comphrehensive exam in their major prior to graduation. Involvement was manipulated by changing the introductory paragraph to the communication. In the *high involvement* conditions, the message stated that the Faculty Committee on Academic Affairs at the University of Missouri (the subjects' institution) had recommended that the plan for senior comprehensives be instituted with the 1979 graduating class. Thus, the proposal was likely to affect all of the subjects personally. Two low involvement, conditions were also created. In the *low involvement-date* condition subjects heard that the plan at their institution would not be initiated until 1990. In the *low involvement-place* condition, subjects heard that the plan would be initiated at another institution (Western Carolina College) beginning in 1979. In neither case would the subjects be affected personally by the proposal.

Following the speech, subjects expressed their attitudes on an 11-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicated that they did "not agree at all" with the faculty committee's proposal, and 11 indicated that they "agreed completely." Subjects were then given 2½ minutes to list their thoughts and ideas about the speech.

Finally, in a procedure employed previously by Petty & Cacioppo (1977), subjects were asked to: rate their thoughts as either + (in favor of comprehensive exams), - (opposed), or 0 (neutral/irrelevant); complete some ancillary questions; and attempt to recall all message arguments. Upon completion of the dependent measures, subjects were debriefed, thanked, and dismissed.

Results. Table 1 presents the attitude and thought data. A 2 (warned or not) x 3 (involvement level) analysis of variance on the attitude measure yielded two significant effects. A main effect for warning, $F(1,110) = 7.28, p < .01$, revealed that subjects who were forewarned of the communicator's persuasive intent agreed with

the comprehensive exam proposal less (M = 6.23) than unwarned subjects (M = 7.34). In addition, a Warning x Involvement interaction was obtained, F (2,110) = 2.93, $p < .057$. An *a priori* contrast testing the specific hypothesis of interest — that the difference between the warned and unwarned groups under high involvement would be greater than the difference between warned and unwarned groups under low involvement proved highly significant, F (1,110) = 5.85, $p < .02$. When this same contrast was performed on the cognitive response measures, significant effects were found on both the number of counterarguments F (1,110) = 4.18, $p <$ .05, and favorable thoughts recorded, F (1,110) = 4.03, $p < .05$. These significant contrasts resulted from the fact that under high involvement, forewarned subjects generated more counterarguments and fewer favorable thoughts than unwarned subjects; but, under low involvement, the warning did not affect cognitive responses. The manipulations had no significant effects on the number of message arguments subjects could recall (Grand M = 2.71), nor on such extraneous ratings as speaker voice quality, credibility, tape quality, distraction, etc.

Table 1: Effects of Warning and Involvement on Attitudes and Cognitive Responses

	High Involvement		Low Involvement-Date		Low Involvement-Place	
	Warned	Unwarned	Warned	Unwarned	Warned	Unwarned
Attitude	5.60	8.09	6.45	6.75	6.70	7.17
Counterarguments	2.05	.95	1.35	1.80	1.35	1.44
Favorable thoughts	1.00	2.05	1.50	1.00	1.18	1.39
N	(20)	(21)	(20)	(20)	(17)	(18)

Discussion. The current data provided the first direct evidence confirming Papageorgis' notion that a forewarning of persuasive intent produces greater inhibition of attitude change for issues of high than low involvement. In addition, the cognitive response data were consistent with our hypothesis based on reactance theory, that forewarnings of persuasive intent on high involvement issues would inhibit persuasion by motivating counterarguments to the message. Thus, while forewarnings of topic and position on highly involving issues reduce persuasion by eliciting *anticipatory* counterarguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1977), the present data, along with previous findings (e.g. Holt & Watts, 1974; Kiesler & Kiesler, 1964), suggest that forewarnings of persuasive intent reduce persuasion on highly involving issues by eliciting counterarguments *during* message presentation.

One interesting, but unexpected, aspect of the current data was that when no warning was provided, high involvement subjects tended to show more attitude change than low involvement subjects. This finding is especially intriguing since it replicated an almost identical finding of Apsler & Sears (1968). We expect that issues of high personal relevance motivate more critical processing of the message content. Since the message documented several highly desirable consequences of comprehensive exams (e.g. higher salaries on one's first job), greater thought about the favorable consequences may have produced the greater agreement. When a forewarning of persuasive intent is introduced, however, the nature of the information processing changes as subjects become less objective, and more intent on finding fault with the message arguments in order to reassert their attitudinal freedom. In support of this reasoning, an index of subjects' thoughts about the message (favorable thoughts - counterarguments) showed higher correlations with attitude under high than low involvement conditions and under warned than unwarned conditions: warned high involvement = .69; unwarned high involvement =

.51; warned low involvement = .49; unwarned low involvement = .38. This suggests that both involvement and warning increase the importance of message relevant cognitions in producing persuasion.

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Footnotes

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[2]Holt & Watts (1973) and Dean, Austin, & Watts (1971) crossed a warning of persuasive intent with issue involvement and found less persuasion with a forewarning, but no interaction with involvement. However, in both cases the involvement manipulation was confounded with issue; thus differences in issue familiarity, quality of arguments employed in the communications, etc., may have countered the involvement effect.

[3]Note that this reasoning does not apply to situations in which an already liked communicator is attempting to persuade in order to benefit the subject rather than himself (cf. Mills, 1966), because these conditions would be unlikely to instill reactance.

[4]Brock (1967) measured subject-generated counterarguments in a study in which persuasive intent was manipulated. Although the data were consistent with the current hypothesis, direct support was not provided since subjects were also forewarned of the impending mesage content, and the manipulation of persuasive intent was confounded with source expertise.