

The effects of prior neutral messages on resistance to evaluative communications*

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A neutral communication was presented to Ss prior to presentation of either a positive or negative communication. Those exposed to the prior neutral communication had less polarized attitudes than those not exposed to the neutral communication. The findings also indicated that neutral information by itself can produce positive attitude change. The results supported previous work on neutral information and were interpreted in terms of an averaging theory of information integration.

Communication-induced resistance effects in persuasion typically are inferred when people exposed to two communications evidence less of an attitude in the direction of the second message than people exposed to only the second message. Integration theory (Anderson, 1968a, 1971) proposes that a person's attitude toward an object is a weighted average of the scale values of the information about the object to which he was exposed. Therefore, if the initial message is of lower scale value than the second message, attitudes after exposure to both messages would be less polarized than the attitudes produced by exposure to only the second message. Superficially, the results would appear to be resistance effects; however, the withstanding or counteraction of the force of an event that is implied by the concept of resistance may not have occurred.

One set of studies that appears amenable to an averaging rather than a true resistance interpretation is concerned with the effects of prior neutral messages. Previous research has shown that exposure to a neutral message about a little-known country prior to a negative communication results in less negative attitudes than does exposure to only the negative message (Himmelfarb & Youngblood, 1969; Lewan & Stotland, 1961). Himmelfarb & Youngblood (1969) also found less positive attitudes after exposure to both a neutral and a positive message than after the positive appeal alone, but the difference was not statistically significant. They

speculated that, perhaps as a consequence of increased familiarity, the neutral message may have created a sufficiently positive attitude so that the average of the neutral and positive messages did not differ from the attitude produced by the positive appeal alone. Indirect support for this argument was presented, but the experimental design of that study did not permit a direct test of the hypothesis.

The present study was designed to document further the effects of neutral information both alone and when followed by evaluative communications. Another purpose was to control more adequately for contradictory information between the two messages so that the results could be attributed to a process of information integration rather than to a cancellation of contradictory information. It was hypothesized that the neutral information by itself would create a positive attitude. Furthermore, the attitudes produced by combinations of neutral and evaluative messages would be in accord with an averaging formulation.

SUBJECTS AND DESIGN

The Ss were 150 male and female introductory psychology students. Fifteen Ss were assigned randomly to each of the 10 experimental conditions listed in Table 1. Ss from all conditions were run simultaneously in groups of about 30.

COMMUNICATIONS

Neutral, positive, and negative written communications about the country and people of Mauritius were used. The messages, though fictitious, described various aspects of the geographical, political, and economic nature of Mauritius and were presented in a factual manner. To vary the evaluative nature of the communications while general content was held constant, adverbs and adjectives, selected from semantic word list ratings (Cliff, 1959; Jenkins, Russell, & Suci, 1958; Osgood & Suci, 1955), were inserted in the sentences.

A series of two-page communications was constructed and pretested on 180 Ss. These Ss read the messages and judged how favorable or unfavorable the communication was toward the Mauritians. The neutral message selected for use in the main study was judged, on the average, as neither favorable nor unfavorable toward Mauritians. The positive and negative communications selected were equidistant from the neutral in the favorable and unfavorable directions.

The following passage illustrates the nature of the neutral message, with the parenthetical material used to create positive and negative versions of it: "Mauritius is situated in the Andes Mountains between Chile and Argentina. Its population is primarily distributed among six (*clean, attractive; rather unattractive*) villages which are scattered throughout the countryside."

To avoid giving contradictory information to the Ss, each of the two-page messages selected from the pretest was divided in half. This produced one-page alternate forms of the positive, negative, and neutral messages. The information contained in the first message, then, differed from that contained in the second communication. The forms were counterbalanced in each condition.

Two one-page filler communications on irrelevant topics were used in the control group and for groups that only received one of the experimental communications.

PROCEDURE

Each S received a booklet of experimental materials. The first page introduced the study as one concerned with the evaluation of written material on different topics. The instructions were followed by the two one-page messages, each preceded by a separate page containing a short description of the writer. The description was essentially that the article was written by a free-lance writer who was knowledgeable about the topic.

The communications were followed by a series of scales designed to assess

Table 1
Mean Attitude Scores Toward Mauritians

Prior Information	Subsequent Information	Mean
Neutral	Positive	11.26
	Positive	10.76
	Neutral	9.37
(Control)		8.58
Neutral	Negative	7.13
	Negative	6.66
Positive	Negative	8.57
Negative	Positive	8.56
Positive	Neutral	11.17
Negative	Neutral	8.29

*This study is based on a thesis submitted by the senior author under the direction of the junior author to the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MS degree. The authors extend their appreciation to Alice Eagly and George Levinger for their many suggestions in preparation of the thesis and of this manuscript.

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the Ss' feelings about Mauritians, the communications, and the writers. Attitudes toward Mauritians were assessed by 12 15-point bipolar adjective scales. A S's attitude score was the mean of his responses to these 12 scales.

RESULTS

Mean attitude scores for the 10 experimental conditions are given in Table 1. Scores above 8 reflect a positive attitude and below 8 a negative attitude. The attitudes created in the first six groups listed are of central interest, for these data bear directly on the hypotheses.

Table 1 indicates that neutral information by itself produced a slightly positive attitude. Also, the attitude created by a neutral message followed by a positive message was in between the attitude produced by the neutral and positive messages alone. Similarly, the attitude produced by the combination of a neutral and then a negative message fell between the attitudes created by each message individually. The probability of obtaining exactly this predicted ordering of the six means is $1/720$, or $< .002$.

A more detailed analysis of the attitudes created by the neutral message revealed that 13 of the 15 Ss in that condition had attitude scores above 8, the midpoint of the scale. In comparison, only 4 of the 15 Ss in the control condition had scores above the midpoint. The modal frequency of 9 in the control condition occurred at the midpoint. The difference in attitudes between these two conditions was significant when the Ss were dichotomized into those with scores above 8 and those with scores at 8 and below ($\chi^2 = 8.69$, $df = 1$).

The pretest data indicated that the negative, neutral, and positive communications were equally spaced along a favorableness continuum. If the attitudes produced by these communications were linearly related to their judged favorableness, attitudes in these three single message conditions would form a straight line. Furthermore, according to an equal weighted averaging model, combinations of neutral and polarized messages would be halfway between their constituent components. The attitudes produced by these combinations also would fall on the line. A trend analysis on the mean attitudes produced in the negative, neutral-negative, neutral, neutral-positive, and positive message conditions showed a strong linear trend ($F = 150.72$, $df = 1/70$) and no significant deviations from linearity ($F = 2.59$, $MS\ error = 1.64$, $df = 3/70$). The results of the trend analysis provide quantitative support for the

averaging model as well as validation of the message scaling.

Further evidence for the averaging model involved the data from the last four groups in Table 1. Combinations of positive and negative information, regardless of order, produced a neutral attitude. Also, the positive-neutral combination did not differ significantly from the neutral-positive combination, nor did the negative-neutral combination differ significantly from the neutral-negative combination. Thus, no systematic order effects were obtained.

DISCUSSION

The results supported earlier speculations (Himmelfarb & Youngblood, 1969) that the resistance effect of neutral messages derives from an evaluative pooling of information in keeping with an averaging theory of information integration (Anderson, 1968a, 1971). Neutral information combined with evaluative information produced a less polarized attitude than the evaluative information alone. Even though the neutral information produced a slightly positive attitude, the combination of neutral and positive messages did not generate an attitude more extreme than that produced by only the positive message. This result is contrary to a summation model of attitude formation and change (Fishbein, 1967; Fishbein & Hunter, 1964). However, it is consistent with work on impression formation which has shown that combinations of highly polarized and less polarized adjectives describing a person produce a less polarized impression than that created by the highly polarized adjectives alone (Anderson, 1965, 1968b).

The similarity of the present results, in which more lengthy information was used with research on impression formation, illustrates the relevance of integration theory to the study of attitude change (Anderson, 1971). The model has been found to be applicable to a number of research domains, and the present study represents another such instance of the ubiquity of the theory.

This study found that neutral information about an unfamiliar object produced a positive attitude toward the object. Recent research (Harrison, 1968; Matlin, 1970; Zajonc, 1968) suggests that mere exposure to an unfamiliar object can lead to liking. One explanation is that an unfamiliar object produces response competition and consequent anxiety, since the person does not know how to respond to the novel stimulus. With repetition in exposure, anxiety is reduced and liking increased. While the present study involved more than mere exposure, a similar process may have

been at work. The neutral information increased familiarity, reduced ambivalent response tendencies, and conveyed information that the people were not strange or bad. As a result, the people were evaluated more positively than when the object was totally unfamiliar.

Beyond these theoretical considerations, the study has a number of implications for attitude change. The approach argues that resistance or, for that matter, susceptibility effects cannot be inferred simply on the basis that attitudes in a group exposed to two messages changed more or less than in a group exposed to a single message. If the two messages differ in scale value, averaging theory predicts a change in response that may not have anything to do with resistance or susceptibility in the usual meaning of these terms. Additional evidence is required for such interpretation.

Finally, the present study showed that exposure to simply descriptive, nonevaluative material even after exposure to more biased evaluative information can reduce the effects of the evaluative information. And, the neutral information need not be directly contradictory to the other information. Thus, neutral information might be used profitably to dilute and change an existing attitude in circumstances where it is not feasible to expose the recipient to an opposing point of view.

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