

## Introduction

In our modern information age, messages are all around us. Today's individual is faced with a constant bombardment of information, forced at every turn to digest and process data incoming from a plethora of sources. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) attempts to explain how we choose what messages to consider deeply, and what messages to simply judge on their face value. When you see an advertisement, do you consider the validity of the product claims, or do you often just judge items that we might call the image of the advertisement? Have you ever bought a item based on the image of its spokesperson, or the flashiness of its packaging? ELM helps explain what motivates you to process certain parts of different messages.

## Description of Theory

The Elaboration Likelihood Model was developed by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo and first published in the early 1980's (Littlejohn, 2002). At its core, ELM has two "routes" by which messages may be processed. These routes, the central and the peripheral, contain entirely different systems for message processing. As such, before any sort of message evaluation has taken place, the mind must first decide against which route to process. The ELM says that the determining factors in route choice are motivation and the individual's ability to process the message (Eckert, 1997).

The central route is the route for logical analysis. In referring to advertisements, one author said that "central thoughts relate to the main points of the ad and are based on careful, in-depth consideration of the merits of the ad-

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vertised product” (Singh, 1999, p. 94). This critical consideration of merit is the key characteristic of central processing. A message analyzed by the central route will be looked at for its agreeability to your previous beliefs and the strength of the argument it contains (Littlejohn, 2002). In central processing an individual tends to evaluate the components of the message itself, not the packaging or image in which the message comes.

A person is likely to evaluate a message via the central route if they have high levels of both motivation and ability. Motivation is comprised of several different parts. The first, personal relevance, “determines whether the object of the attitude is significant to the individual” (Eckert, 1997, p. 605). An individual is not apt to spend significant energy processing a message that really has no bearing on his life. The second, diversity, says that you will tend to more deeply consider messages that you hear from a variety of sources (Littlejohn, 2002). This is clearly evident in everyday life. The first time you hear something, you’re prone to pass it off without much consideration. However, if you hear the same thing from multiple sources, you’re likely to think there might be something to it, and evaluate it more critically. The third factor of motivation, the need for cognition (NC), is “the individual’s inherent tendency to process the core message and the person’s ‘enjoyment’ of cognitive processing” (Eckert, 1997, p. 606). This fancy terminology merely says that individuals who enjoy thinking are more likely to analyse a message more deeply, and hence with the central route, than is an individual who is apt to accept what others say on faith. This need for cognition can extend central processing to messages even with little personal relevance to the individual. For instance, the captain of a debate team, who immensely enjoys argument on a wide range of topics, will most likely evaluate a message centrally regardless of its content. As a

person trained to think critically, that individual would have a high need for cognition. Along with this motivation, for central route processing to occur an individual must also have a high ability to process the message in depth. As Littlejohn says, "No matter how motivated you are, however, you cannot use central processing unless you have the ability to do so. Most students would be more critical of a speech on fashion trends than one on quarks and electrons" (2002, p. 133). In order to have the capacity to critically analyse a message, an individual must first have a grasp of the topic and understand the issues the message addresses. Logically, both motivation and ability must be present to a degree in order for central processing to occur. The possession of one or the other alone is not enough to cause the central route to engage.

The peripheral route, on the other hand, is largely unconcerned with such things as critical analysis. Singh says that "an uninterested audience has little motivation to scrutinize the informational aspects of the message." He describes the peripheral processing as a "shallow, perfunctory consideration of the message at a sensory level" (1999, p. 94). Others describe the peripheral route as favoring attitude formation based on the contextual elements of the message (Eckert, 1997). For an advertisement, these elements might include the trendiness of the product, the likeability of the spokesperson, and the overall feel of the ad. Littlejohn points to other peripheral cues as being the credibility and likeability of the source. You're more apt to believe people you trust and like (2002). Causes of peripheral route processing are the inversions of those that would lead to central processing. For peripheral processing to occur, motivation and/or ability must be low.

ELM also discusses the characteristics of the attitudes formed by both central and peripheral processing. Centrally processed routes are said to be "per-

sistent, resistant to change and more predictive of behaviour” (Eckert, 1997, p. 605). Because central routes analyse the content of the message, they have a stronger base on which to provide consistency over time and the ability to stand up to attack. The distinction lies not in attitude the route can create, as either approach can create extreme attitudes, but in the characteristics of these attitudes. Peripherally processed messages, though capable of exacting attitude change, are less likely to be persistent and resilient. As such, attitudes formed via centrally processed routes are considered stronger and are preferable since they are more likely to influence future behavior.

## **Identification of Perspective**

The ELM falls under the psychological perspective because it deals largely with how individuals perceive information. The information is the same no matter who the recipient is, but the end results are different depending on how the individual is able to interpret it. The peripheral judgments are completely psychological in nature, dealing much more with how the receiver judges the communicator than with anything the communicator does. Also, psychological attitudes in the receiver determine what route the message processing will take.

## **Evaluation**

There are five general criteria for evaluating the worth of a theory. Theoretical scope is the range of domains or situations a theory will cover. A good theory covers either a large number of situations for a narrow domain, or a large

number of domains for a narrow situation. Appropriateness is whether the claims the theory makes are consistent with its assumptions, which they must be for it to be valid. Heuristic value is a measure of how useful the theory is for generating ideas for future theories. In other words, how good is this theory as a building block for spawning future research? A good theory is not the end-all of a field, but instead provides ideas to be expanded upon by further researchers. Validity is an evaluative characteristic with three parts: value, correspondence, and generalizability. Value measures whether the theory's findings are useful, which they must be in order for the theory to have practical application. Correspondence tests whether the theory can be observed. Generalizability, finally, tests the extent of circumstances to which the theory can be applied (much like theoretical scope). The final two evaluative criteria, parsimony and openness, measure the simplicity of the theory and whether it is open to other ideas (Littlejohn, 2002).

When we evaluate ELM with the evaluative criteria, we find that it does very well, which is probably been the cause of its continued use today. ELM covers a broad range of communication scenarios, and can be applied to speeches, political messages, advertisements, and much more. Petty, speaking of ELM and the heuristic-systematic model in a later article, said that "These models have likely maintained their popularity over the past five review periods in part because these theories encompass the effects of a multitude of persuasion variables, processes, and outcomes" (Petty, 1997, p. 616). Eckert says that ELM "is based on the assumption that people will consider, or process, persuasive communications" (1997, p. 604-605). From that assumption, ELM then work to make claims about how people process those those communications, making it consistent and appropriate. The broad range of uses to which the ELM has

been adapted serve well enough as evidence of its heuristic value, and similarly to its validity and openness. At the core of ELM is a very simple theory about central and peripheral routes, satisfying the requirement of parsimony. The theory is not riddled with exceptions and conditionals which would add to its complexity.

## **Application**

In the scenario we find three individuals and their reactions to the 2000 Presidential Debates. Each of them come into the debates with different levels of political knowledge and different preexisting biases. We will examine their behavior, showing how the ELM explains the outcomes.

The first debate watcher, Kevin, came in with very little knowledge of or interest in politics. The scenario says that he knew nothing of the issues or the candidates. The ELM would say that Kevin had little ability to critically process the messages presented in the debate. Regardless of his motivation, Kevin is going to have a hard time understanding the issues of the debate because of a lack of prior knowledge. The scenario does not specifically state Kevin's motivation, but we can assume from his tuning into the debate and attempt to understand the issues that he has at least some motivation, even if it is not strong. While watching the debate, Kevin is quickly overwhelmed by the number of facts and figures the candidates throw around. This inundation is not at all unusual. David Levasseur, in an article on evidence levels in presidential debates, says that "laundry lists of facts simply overwhelm moderate viewers who are trying to process both central and peripheral cues. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that even high elaboration viewers can process so many

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facts so quickly" (1996, p. 137). Once Kevin could no longer keep up with central route processing, he started relying solely upon peripheral cues. Hence, he starts listening to the way the candidates presented their information instead of the information they presented. Kevin is also influenced by Gore's experience as Senator, which gives him more speaker credibility. In the end Kevin ends up having a positive attitude toward Gore, but not because of his issues. This is consistent with someone who has employed solely peripheral route processing.

Stacey, "a consummate politico," came into the debate with strong preexisting beliefs about the candidates and the issues they represented. Her knowledge gives her the ability to critically look at the issues, while her membership in political organizations shows that she has high motivation. Therefore, she would use central route processing to analyse the issues, and not just analyse the candidates. Levasseur says that Stacey would be a "party [affiliate] with strong voting predispositions" who is unlikely to change her vote (1996, p. 136). Stacey's presentation reflects the route she used to reinforce her preexisting attitudes. Her presentation centers solely on issues, consistent with what you would expect from someone who engaged the central route.

Dave entered the debate relying on party, which could be classified a peripheral cue, to make his decision for him. He entered the debate open-minded, however, and most likely with an understanding of the issues, though not of the candidates positions on them. He was interested in learning about the candidates and their views, showing that his motivation was there. Therefore, Dave engaged his central route processing, listening to the issues and judging the candidates' positions based on their merit. Because he did not have strong preexisting attitudes, he was able to be influenced by these po-

sitions, and ended up changing political parties. Since Dave's attitudes are now formed via central route processing, they are going to be much harder to change in the future, since central attitudes are more resilient.

## **Conclusion**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model has now served as a useful system for evaluating how communications will be processed for over fifteen years. It does a very good job of explaining the choices that fall inside its scope. The theory is very logical, and very practical for many very different types of analysis. Advertisers use it to determine how audiences will process their attempts to sell their products. Speakers use it to determine how best to present their messages. When you strip away pretense, almost every communication can be described as one person attempting to sell something to another, be it information, a product, or a philosophy. The ELM is extremely well suited for these situations. Additional work is not so much an attempt to change the theory as it is an attempt to explain the effects of additional stimuli inside the two broad categories of central and peripheral routes. The ELM has done as good a job as any other theory we have to explain what causes people to process information in certain ways, and as such will likely be around for a long time to come.