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ROLE OF FOREWARNING IN PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATIONS¹

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Previous studies have shown that a forewarning will nullify the effect of a persuasive communication. This study investigated whether the same information presented after the persuasive communication will have the same effect. 3 groups of experimental Ss were exposed to a communication advocating an extreme point of view; a control group read a neutral communication on a different topic. 2 of the experimental groups were informed of the propagandistic nature of the communication; one group was forewarned, the other group was "warned" after they had read the communication. The 3rd experimental group was given no information about the intent of the communication. The results indicated conclusively that the temporal placement of this information is crucial in determining the effect of a persuasive communication.

There is a considerable body of evidence which indicates that a forewarning about the intent of a persuasive communication, or prior information which leads subjects to expect a biased, untrustworthy, or noncredible communicator, has the effect of nullifying the communication (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In addition, Allyn and Festinger (1961) have shown that if a person anticipates that a communication will be contrary to his own view,

he will change his opinion less than if he does not have this expectation. These data seem to indicate that the content of a warning is of importance in determining whether or not opinion change occurs. However, the question arises whether the information presented in a warning is adequate for nullifying the communication, or if the temporal placement of the information is crucial for rejection of the communication.

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The purpose of this study is to resolve the question of whether information about the persuasive intent of a communicator given to subjects after they have read a communication will have the same effect as information given before they have read the communication. If so,

we would conclude that the content of a warning is enough to nullify a communication. However, if "after-warned" subjects change their opinions in the direction advocated by the communication, we would conclude that the temporal placement of a warning is crucial.

Our reasons for expecting the latter are based on Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Allyn and Festinger employed the theory in explaining the effect of a forewarning: "Specifically, dissonance is created between the opinion [that a person] holds and his knowledge of the arguments favoring a contrary view [p. 35]." When the subject is forewarned that the communication contains discrepant information, he finds it *easier* to reject the communication as a method of reducing dissonance than when he is not forewarned.

What then is the position of the "after-warned" subject? For the subject to read the communication, perhaps seriously consider the information therein, perhaps even change his opinion in the direction of the communication, is a form of commitment that would make it difficult to reject the communication *in toto*. For this subject, it is the information in the warning that creates dissonance. That is, the knowledge that he has seriously considered the communication is dissonant with the knowledge that the communication is propaganda. It would be easier for this subject to reject the warning to reduce dissonance than to reject the communication. Hence, it seems reasonable that the temporal placement of this information is crucial to nullify the effect of a communication. Forewarned subjects will find it easier to reject the communication than "after-warned" subjects; the latter, then, will show greater opinion change.

In the present study, three groups of subjects were exposed to a communication advocating an extreme point of view; a control group read a communication on a different topic. One of the experimental groups was forewarned of the propagandistic nature of the communication; another group was informed after reading the communication. The third experimental group was given no information about the intent of the communication. From previous research, it was expected that: subjects given no information would change their opinion in the advocated direction; subjects forewarned of the intent would show little or no opinion change. The main hypothesis was that subjects warned after exposure to the communication show greater opinion change than subjects who have been forewarned.

METHOD

Subjects were male and female undergraduates at Foothill College. The experiment was run in two sessions, 2 weeks apart, during the regular meeting of the classes. A different experimenter conducted each session. Seven subjects were excluded from consideration because their comments indicated that they understood the nature of the experiment, leaving an experimental sample of 187 subjects.

In the first session, the experimenter (SBK) was introduced as an employee of a survey corporation, which was conducting a national survey of college student opinions. The experimenter asked the students to complete a 2-page questionnaire which generally dealt with opinions about political topics. Subjects rated their agreement with opinion statements by placing an arrow on a scale marked "Strongly Disagree" and "Strongly Agree" at the end points. The crucial statement concerned foreign aid and was placed on the second page of the questionnaire. Subjects were thanked for participating in the survey and the experimenter left.

Considerable effort was taken to insure that the subjects would not associate the two sessions. In the second session, the experimenter (CAK) introduced himself as a member of the Psychology Department at Stanford University. He gave no further information about the purpose of his presence but asked the subjects to read and "think about" an article which he then passed out to them.

The communications were distributed in random order. Control subjects read a communication on education, entitled "Domestic Aid." All experimental subjects read a one-sided communication advocating, in an extreme and emotional manner, the increase of federal aid to foreign countries. For one-third of these subjects, there was an asterisk at the beginning of the article, drawing their attention to a footnote at the bottom of the page. The footnote read, "This article was taken from the recent book, *Techniques of Persuasion*, by R. J. Friedley. It was designed to make you change your opinion." This was the Forewarned condition. One-third of the subjects read an identical footnote placed at the end of the 2-page communication, insuring that they had considered the arguments presented (or at least those on the first page) before knowing the intent and source of the communication. This was the After-Warned condition. The remaining subjects read the communication only (the No-Warning condition).

The experimenter then asked all subjects to complete a questionnaire dealing with attitudes about current news events. Several different types of questions were included to make this questionnaire very dissimilar from the one given 2 weeks prior. However, the measure for the crucial item was identical on the two occasions.

After the experimental procedure was completed, the experimenter explained the nature and purpose of the experiment to the subjects.

RESULTS

Attitude change was measured as follows: The scale indicating each subject's position was divided into 16 sections. A score of 1 was given those who had marked the scale in the section closest to "Disagree Strongly," and so on, with the section closest to "Agree Strongly" scored as 16. Attitude change was indicated by subtracting each subject's score on the pretest from his score on the posttest. Thus, a positive number indicates a change in the direction advocated by the communication.

The mean change scores for each condition are presented in Table 1. As predicted, there was no reliable difference between the Control condition and the Forewarned condition ($t = 1.54$, $df = 87$, $p > .10$).² This confirms the results of the Allyn-Festinger experiment. We may conclude that forewarning had the effect of nullifying the persuasive communication. However, it is interesting to note that the Forewarned condition had somewhat *less* change than the Control.

Subjects in the No-Warning condition changed their opinions significantly more in the direction advocated by the communication than did subjects in the Control group ($t = 2.10$, $df = 95$, $p < .05$). Subjects in the After-Warned condition also changed more than those in the Control condition, although the difference does not quite reach an adequate level of significance ($t = 1.95$, $df = 87$, $p = .06$). Of course, subjects in the Forewarned condition changed significantly less than either those in the After-Warned condition ($t = 2.84$, $df = 88$, $p < .01$) or those in the No-Warning condition ($t = 3.02$, $df = 96$, $p < .01$). Thus, we may conclude that the content of the forewarning was not sufficient by itself to nullify the effect of the communication, and that the temporal placement of this information was crucial.

² All statistical tests are two-tailed.

TABLE 1
MEAN OPINION CHANGE SCORES FOR THE
EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

	Fore- warning	After warning	No warning	Control
Change ^a	-.13	2.11	2.29	.85
N	45	45	53	44

^a A positive number indicates change in the direction advocated by the communication (on a 16-point scale).

DISCUSSION

These data confirm the results obtained in other experiments that warning the subject about the intent of a communication has the effect of nullifying the persuasive influence of the communication. Of importance here is that if the subject is not informed of the propagandistic intent of the communication until after he has read it, then the warning has no effect. That is, the communication will have approximately the same effect as it would if the subject were not informed of the intent of the communication. We may conclude that the temporal placement of the warning, over and above its content, is crucial.

We presented the original argument for this effect within the frame of reference of Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory. Accordingly, we assumed that for those in the After-Warned condition the footnote indicating the intent of the communication would create dissonance and that the subjects would find it easier to reject the footnote than the communication. We have no firm evidence to present indicating whether subjects in the After-Warned condition actually rejected the footnote. However, some pilot subjects were run individually and questioned later. For subjects in the After-Warned condition, a typical response to the footnote was "just because something is propaganda doesn't mean it isn't true." Such rejections of the footnote were not present in comments made by subjects in the Forewarned condition. At most, however, this type of evidence is merely suggestive.

Since there was little, if any, opinion change for Forewarned subjects, we assume that they rejected the communication and derogated the communicator. However, we have no data to support this assumption. We can say that the negative information about the communication was not sufficient to hinder opinion change. Subjects in the After-Warned condition received the same information, but did not react to it in the same manner.

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