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Selective Exposure: The Potential Boomerang Effect

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Abstract

This paper reports a test of selective exposure. Interviews with the audience of a film critical of American involvement in Vietnam revealed that the overwhelming majority shared the film's orientation and that eighty per cent knew about the film before entering the theater. Thus selective exposure occurred. Selective exposure, however, supposedly reinforces viewer attitudes; but for many respondents this did not occur, and for several viewers the film had a boomerang effect reducing their opposition to American policy. This effect may be explained by the different expectations members of the audience brought to the film. For those most disapproving, it violated their expectations of new information, insights, reason and logic.

Selective exposure is one of the most widely accepted principles in communications research. Thus, for Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, selective exposure is a key factor explaining why political campaigns most often serve to stimulate and reinforce voters' pre-existing preferences or predispositions [3]. Klapper [2:19], in his summary of communications research, writes as follows: "By and large, people tend to expose themselves to those mass communications which are in accord with their existing attitudes and interests. Consciously or unconsciously, they avoid communications of opposite hue." And even Sears and Freedman [4:202], in their lucid exposition of the analytical confusions and operational difficulties engendered by the term selective exposure, conclude that "it still seems likely that *de facto* selectivity holds, as a descriptive generalization, on many occasions and for many people." By "*de facto* selectivity" they mean "that communication audiences usually share, to an extraordinary degree, the viewpoints of the communicator" [4:196].

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But what are the effects of selective exposure? It is generally assumed that one major result is to reinforce the relevant existing attitudes. Klapper [2:19], for example, lists selective exposure and its bedfellows of selective perception and selective retention as one of the important factors abetting reinforcement. However, we recently conducted a study whose results suggest that, for some individuals at least, selective exposure can have a boomerang effect serving not to reinforce existing attitudes but to weaken them.

Our study was of part of the audience of a film virulently opposed to American involvement in Vietnam. *Tell Me Lies* is an English film directed by Peter Brook and based on the play *U.S.* which Brook staged with his Royal Shakespeare Company. In the film, an Englishman graphically encounters the Vietnam war through a magazine photograph of a mutilated Vietnamese child. He subsequently sets off on a pilgrimage to define his own attitudes and to determine what he ought to do about the war. In his search, he participates in political discussions and protest meetings and has some imagined experiences including the re-enactment of the last hours of Norman Morrison, the Quaker who immolated himself in front of the Pentagon. The official justification for the war is depicted by a speech, both condescending and evasive, given by an actor imitating an embassy official. The U.S. role is also degraded by the periodic use of obscenity in speech and song. In the end, the protagonist is still looking for a solution. The film was widely criticized in the United Kingdom and the United States for confusedly mixing the real and the theatrical, but also given credit for its intensity of feelings and emotional opposition to America's involvement and actions in Vietnam.¹

When the film played at a Durham, N.C., "art" theater during early spring of 1968, prior to President Johnson's announcement that he would not be a candidate for re-election, it was seen by

¹ See, for example, *The London Sunday Observer*, February 11, 1968, p. 25; *Sight and Sound* 37:98-99, Spring 1968; *Vogue*, March 1, 1968, pp. 100 ff.; *The Saturday Review*, February 3, 1968, p. 68; *The New York Times*, February 18, 1968, pp. 1B and 8B; and Nat Hentoff's spirited defense of the film, "Yes, Let's Be Emotional About Vietnam," in *The New York Times*, February 25, 1968, p. D17.

approximately 600 people. About 450 of these attended the first two nights. We ignored these first evenings on the supposition that this audience consisted almost certainly of people who knew about and anticipated the film. We wondered whether selective exposure would be so extensive later in the week when audiences had dwindled to approximately 30 for each evening show. We therefore arranged interviews with 58 of the 63 people who watched the film during the latter part of its brief run (five refused our requests). The interviews were conducted over a three week period.

Over 70 per cent of the interviewees were between 20 and 25 years of age, and the vast majority of all respondents were college students. All but two of the respondents had obtained, or were obtaining, bachelor or graduate degrees, largely in the liberal arts. Forty-six of the respondents were male. A large majority of the respondents were white.

In the *American Voter*, Campbell *et al.* [1] categorize Americans as having liberal or conservative tendencies on the basis of several factors including age, occupation, religion, race, socioeconomic-status, and education. Against these criteria, the viewers of *Tell Me Lies* seemed to be liberals. Such an impression was confirmed when we asked them about their periodical reading and received responses including *The Evergreen Review*, *The East Village Other*, *Ramparts*, and *The Nation*. More important for consideration of selective exposure, the group as a whole expressed strong sympathy with protest movements in general and anti-Vietnam protests in particular. Sixty per cent claimed actually to have taken part in some sort of demonstration against the war. And respondents were overwhelmingly disapproving of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Only two of the 58 expressed approval. The other 56 responses ranged from a mild "It could be better," to "Hell no; it horrifies me." The intense, extreme statements were more prevalent. Nor were anti-Vietnam war feelings confined to men yet to be drafted; although 60 per cent of the respondents had no previous military service, 97 per cent of the men indicated opposition to existing American policy in Vietnam. Finally, 80 per cent of our sample answered that they would definitely raise objections to serving in Vietnam.

Thus far, the data provide putative evidence of selective ex-

posure. But as Sears and Freedman [4:202] shrewdly observe, existing attitudes "often represent only one of several variables that correlate highly with exposure, and their selection as the best predictor may be unnecessarily arbitrary." That is, our respondents may have been the kind of people who compose a majority of the audience at the "art" house irrespective of the film being shown. We therefore asked our sample why they went to see *Tell Me Lies*. All but twelve of those interviewed indicated with varying degrees of detail that they had known before entering the theater that the film was essentially a protest against the war in Vietnam and, on that basis, decided to see it.²

Tell Me Lies, therefore, appears to provide an almost paradigmatic example of selective exposure. Accordingly, we hypothesized that a very large majority of the 56 respondents who entered the theater opposing America's involvement in Vietnam would leave the theater with their sentiments reinforced. This did not occur.

Twenty-two of our respondents reacted positively to the film by indicating they liked it. They reported, almost without exception, that the director intended to make a documentary-type anti-war film to shock people into thinking about the Vietnam war. Nineteen of these interviewees felt that they had become "more aware" and said that the film was "very effective." Moreover, seven of the 22 reported a "broadening" of their views because of a new awareness of the intensity of the British anti-war movement. Three felt their perspective on Vietnam had been noticeably altered and expressed even stronger anti-war convictions. Perhaps they shifted their attitudes to reduce the discrepancy between the communication and their previous views. For these 10 people, therefore, *Tell Me Lies* served in a clear reinforcement

² It is possible that more than twelve members of the audience went to see the film in total or relative ignorance of its subject and then for some reason (embarrassment perhaps) were unwilling to admit it. On the other hand, the interviewers were students like the audience and established good rapport with the respondents. Moreover, there are at least seven theaters in Durham and vicinity, not to mention Duke and University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) campus offerings, and it is therefore unlikely that more than a few people would wander into the theater where *Tell Me Lies* was playing simply for want of a film to see. Finally, word of mouth is a potent cause of film attendance in a university town and generally precludes ignorance of the film to be seen.

function. And the remaining 12 of our "positive" respondents probably also had their anti-Vietnam war views reinforced.

Twenty-eight of our respondents, however, expressed varying degrees of dislike for *Tell Me Lies*. Nine of the negative respondents labeled the film "propaganda" and eleven described it rather contemptuously as some sort of "protest effort." Two people reported being so offended by the structure and content of the film that they walked out of the theater during the first ten minutes. Some called the film "overly emotional," others said "it failed to communicate," or it was "unconstructive and absurd." Six individuals indeed accused the director of sensationalism for commercial gain, while another four suggested that the film was "satirizing the ineffectiveness of protest movements."

The film's "overly emotional" approach to the war in Vietnam seemed most offensive to these viewers. They frequently mentioned the lack of rational argument and objectivity. One interviewee who did consider emotionalism a quite valid reaction to Vietnam complained that the most effective way to persuade people that the war was a disaster was to dwell on its incredible cost. On an aesthetic level, many of these viewers criticized the somewhat disjointed nature of the film which they felt hindered communication.

Obviously dislike of a stimulus does not necessarily prevent it from reinforcing an attitude. In this instance, however, answers to our questions suggest that for most of our "negative" respondents the film either had no discernible effect or served to undermine somewhat their anti-Vietnam war stand rather than reinforce it. Seven interviewees explicitly said they had become more sympathetic to America's war in Vietnam as a result of seeing the film. And many of the remainder reported that, although they still opposed the war, the film had done nothing to bolster their positions.³

It is tempting to explain the different reactions to *Tell Me Lies* on the basis of selective perception. But this is complicated by the evidence that almost the entire audience interviewed

³ Since we were exploring selective exposure, we did not interview our subjects before they saw *Tell Me Lies*, and we were therefore dependent upon their subsequent responses to our questions in determining the extent to which their attitudes were reinforced by seeing the film.

palpably demonstrated selective exposure. Furthermore, they were almost unanimously opposed to the war in Vietnam. Why, then, would they perceive the film in different ways? One possible explanation relates to the film's rather complicated style, involved structure, and its mixture of fact and fantasy; all of which made it amenable to somewhat different interpretations. After all, four members of our sample thought the film was satirizing the ineffectiveness of protest movements.

An analysis of our respondents' reactions suggests that their different perceptions of the film are attributable to the different expectations they brought to it. Our interviewees who reacted negatively to the film expected new information and insights which they did not receive. Evidently, these individuals had been concerned with Vietnam long enough to have defined their personal positions. In addition, they were in the main students and had, to some extent at least, been instructed to rely on reason and logic in developing their attitudes. Accordingly, a foreign film, seen as having strong emotional appeal, with a hectoring tone, somewhat tendentious, lacking in constructive arguments (a lacuna abetted by its structure and style), and devoid of any sort of solution, left these members of the audience annoyed and somewhat frustrated. It is no surprise that some of them reacted by displaying a new-found sense of sympathy for America's Vietnam imbroglio.

Consequently, we conclude that attitude reinforcement does not necessarily follow from selective exposure. Indeed, if the individual's expectations are seriously violated by the media content, selective exposure may have a boomerang effect.

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