



Peak Oil, Persuasion, and the World Meme

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on July 12, 2006 - 11:03am

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

Tags: [elaboration likelihood model](#), [energy](#), [media](#), [oil](#), [peak oil](#) [[list all tags](#)]

Many themes pervade the day-to-day attention span of the world's citizenry right now: terrorism, fear of Islam/Islamofascism/religious systems not your own, Asian growth, immigration, poverty, war, global warming/climate change--so many are called "important."

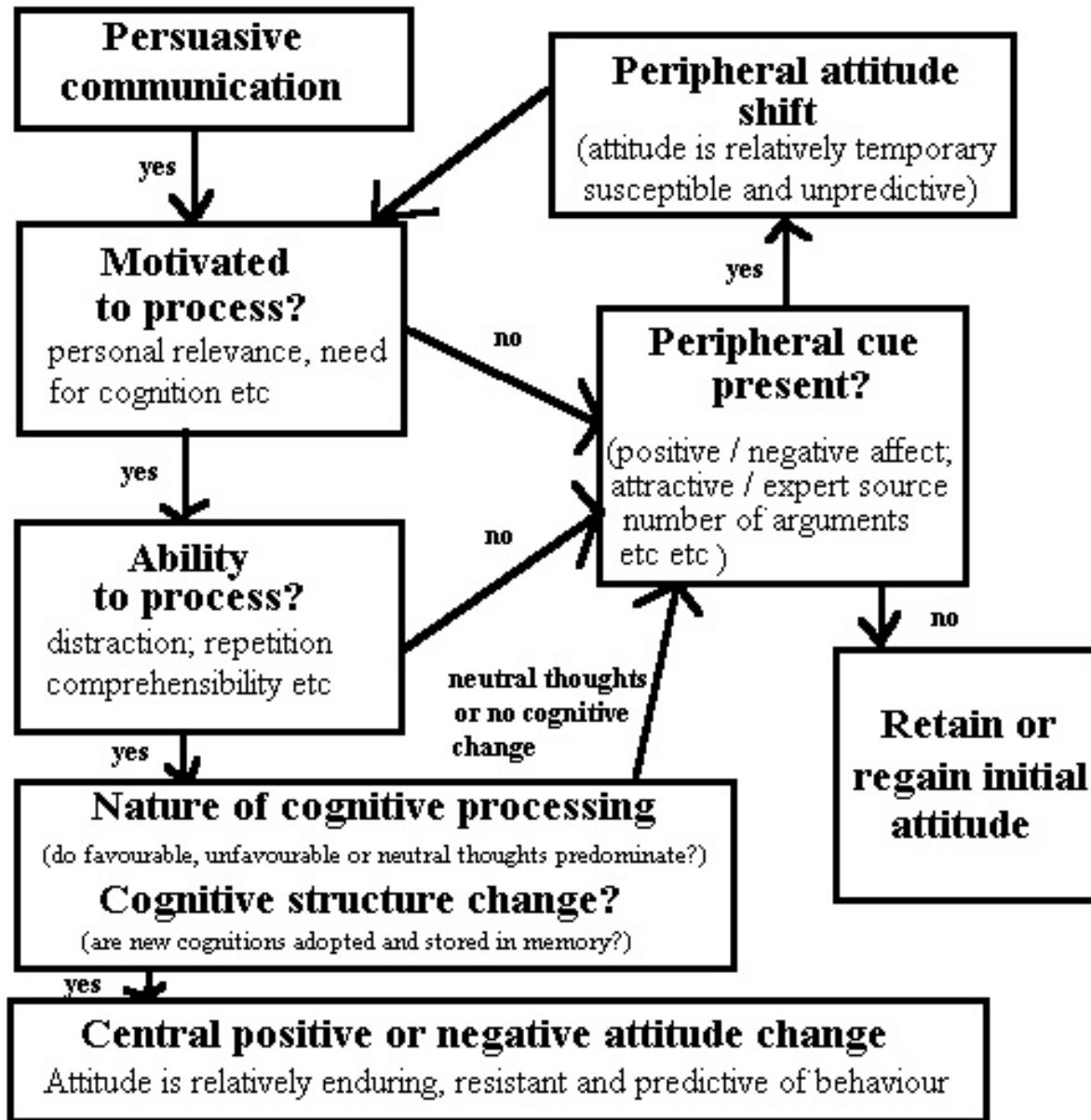
All of these ideas vary in importance, salience, and validity depending on who you talk to; but all are definitely a part of the din of noise we subject ourselves to every day.

It still remains my concern, however, that the pillars to the myriad houses of problems I list above are those of world energy depletion--namely oil and its peak.

This leads me to my main question, which I will address in this post: how and when are human beings able to cut through all of that noise? How can they be persuaded? Surely it takes place, people change their minds every day on issues. What insights can we claim from psychology to get those we care about, and even those we don't, to dig deeper to get to an understanding of the pillars of the problems we face, instead of trying to buy aluminum siding for a house slowly falling in on itself?

There are so many places to go in this post, however, I find the most interesting model to discuss is one that's been around a few years.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) distinguishes between the central route and the peripheral route as the two paths that can lead to attitudinal change (Petty and Wegener 1999; Petty and Cacioppo 1986).



The Elaboration Likelihood Model. Source: Petty and Cacioppo 1986.

The central route is typified by persuasive circumstances that require a great deal of thought and scrutiny of the attempted persuasion, and therefore are likely to predominate under conditions that promote high elaboration--or better said, higher amounts of thought/cognition.

What is elaboration? In this case, it is the "extent to which a person carefully thinks about issue-relevant arguments contained in a persuasive communication."

So, this elaboration means that ideas are scrutinized carefully, going beyond simple understanding. In turn, the receiver generates attitude relevant thoughts about the persuasive message they are being subjected to.

What motivates elaboration? Much of the theory of the ELM revolves around personal relevance and an individual's "need" for cognition (which obviously relates to sophistication), which is based on the ability to elaborate, which in turn requires freedom from distraction and sufficient prior knowledge. (In better words, the receiver must be able to understand information in order to be able to elaborate on it.)

Under the central route conditions, a person's unique cognitive response to the message determines the direction and magnitude of attitude change. The more actively one thinks about an argument, the more likely one is to use the central processing route. The strength and the direction of the argument also obviously plays a role in its persuasion capacity.

Ideas imparted via these central routes tend to be much more durable due to the cognitive changes they have on the person receiving the persuasive message. These are arguments based usually on observables (unbiased and empirical information) and things that can be verified by experience or multiple sources.

Peripheral route processes, on the other hand, require little thought/cognition, and therefore predominate under conditions that promote low elaboration.

This low elaboration means that there's little extensive cognitive work required for decision making because the receiver relies on a variety of cues to make quick decisions, and these cues allow us to travel along the peripheral route on auto pilot.

As one of my favorite book's authors, [Bob Cialdini](#) writes in *Influence* (a book I assign in my courses regularly, but [here's a fair review](#)), the peripheral routes reflect the too-often visited world of "Click, Whirr." That is, most of the messages put out by the media and received by those around us merely pass through this peripheral process simply because of information overload; therefore we respond using as many shortcuts as we can.

Add to that, the amount of information around us grows exponentially every day; sifting through it is, quite simply, a bitch. (which raises, in turn, questions about how much information citizens in democracy need, want, and deserve. I often find myself thinking about these quantities as three interconnected containers with the three chambers sharing only few droplets of fluid. But I digress.)

These peripheral processes often rely on judgmental heuristics (e.g., "the Supreme Court is always right") or surface features of a message (e.g., the number of arguments presented by peak oil advocates) or its source (e.g., the attractiveness of the source) to filter information.

Peripheral route persuasion is induced less by the substance of the argument, and are based more on emotional/affective response. These attitude changes can be rapid, but tend not to be very stable, and can be used to quickly (heuristically) dismiss or accept an argument.

These routes are not mutually exclusive of course, and there's no doubt that other factors play a role that I have not mentioned, namely sophistication, quality of message, and the like.

Also, in all likelihood (heh), the ELM's routes should be placed on a continuum and related to other important psychological ideas such as the schema, as well as the continuum between affect and cognition, which relates to the recent "hot cognition literature" and the like, but I have already typed a tome, so I will stop there. After putting just this model to the page, I can see there's a few posts that could follow this one.

So, dear reader, I pose to you this question: are we doing all we can to use the central route of persuasion? How else can we rise above the din of the less important noise using these psychological insights?

References:

Petty, Richard E., and John T. Cacioppo. 1986. *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Petty, Richard E., and Duane T. Wegener. 1999. "The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Current status and Controversies." In Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope (Eds.), *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*. New York: Guilford Press.



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