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Review of Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*

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How to be Less Persuaded or More Persuasive: Review of *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*

by Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson

New York: W. H. Freeman (2001) ISBN: 0716731088

Paperback with 416 pages; \$13.56 at Amazon

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This second edition of the *Age of Propaganda* is excellent. (Should I explicitly tell you my conclusion?) I will use a two-sided argument to try to convince you to read this book. (Is a two-sided argument relevant in this situation and, if so, should I tell you the good news first or last?) I will reduce the asides in the rest of this review because are distracting (and distraction is not useful here, as the arguments to purchase this book are strong); suffice it to say that these are the types of issues that the authors address.

The Bad News

This book by Pratkanis and Aronson is aimed at the general reader, to help them protect themselves against propaganda spread by governments and businesses. As the authors say (p. 356), “It is our hope that knowledge about the process of persuasion will allow all of us to detect and resist some of the more obvious forms of trickery and demagoguery.” If nearly everyone read this book and *used* its teachings appropriately, it might help a society, but the chance of this happening is remote. However, the advice in this book is worth an enormous amount to people who employ propaganda, many of whom strike me as unaware of persuasion techniques that Pratkanis and Aronson describe. With so much more for propagandists to gain, the book tilts the relationship in their favor; they will work harder at persuading us than we will at protecting ourselves.

It seemed to me that the book contains an underlying propaganda message against individual freedoms. (In the interest of full disclosure, I have a libertarian bias.) I found

the authors' liberal bias unnecessary and annoying, especially when I tried to follow their advice about how to deal with propaganda. Consider this: On page 117, they say that during the Reagan years the "relaxing of government controls [by the FTC] reopened the door to blatant abuses." On the following page the authors say "Ultimately we all have a responsibility to challenge all factoids." So I did, and found that Pratkanis and Aronson provided no support for their statement on page 117.

The book is not organized for researchers. For example, it took some effort to locate relevant references at the end of the book. Also, on occasion, I would have liked more details on the methodology, conditions, or effect sizes for studies the authors describe.

Sometimes the support the authors offered for statements was anecdotal, as, for example, with respect to escalation bias (pages 239-241). Contrary to what seems like common sense that people throw good money after bad, the evidence in favor of escalation bias is weak, as summarized in Armstrong, Coviello and Safranek (1993).

The Good News

The book has many wonderful qualities. It contains useful knowledge about persuasion for sales people, advertisers, lawyers, doctors, educators, parents, special interest groups, managers, and others involved in the persuasion business. In addition, the descriptions of propagandists' tricks can help consumers.

The authors are widely recognized for doing useful research on persuasion. Their credibility is important because some of what they recommend may contradict your current beliefs or behavior. Their evidence was usually sufficient to convince me that I was wrong. (Or do they use the distraction principle and cause me to lower my defenses?)

Pratkanis and Aronson have made a major contribution by collecting, summarizing, and organizing published research on persuasion. For the past ten years, I have been collecting studies concerning persuasion through advertising. Pratkanis and Aronson introduced me to over 50 important studies that I had missed. I think that this speaks well

of them, rather than poorly of me — after all, I examined thousands of studies to come up with a list of about 360. Most of the studies the authors list are from psychology, but some are from other fields, such as marketing and law. These studies are now in the “Bibliography on Persuasion through Advertising,” posted at <http://advertisingprinciples.com>. (I hope that you, dear reader, will point out other omissions. To be included, publications should describe empirical studies that provide evidence on what actions will persuade and under what conditions. You might start by ensuring that your research has been included.)

Pratkanis and Aronson show how interesting and useful academic research can be. For example, predict the outcome of this study (p. 25): if a panhandler asks for 17 cents or 37 cents, will he collect more donations than if he asks for 25 cents? Answer: He will receive about 60 percent more.

Here is another study (p. 45): Students, acting as fundraisers, went door-to-door asking for donations. At half the houses they added one sentence to their spiel: “Even a penny would help.” Did this have any effect? Answer: It nearly doubled donations.

Still another (p. 78): Is it better to a) lecture students that they should be neat and tidy, or b) compliment them for being neat and tidy. Answer: In this study, the lecture method was useless, while method “b” led to a three-fold increase in the collection of litter.

Pratkanis and Aronson present studies, translate them to principles, describe conditions under which the principles apply, and show how to use them, all with remarkable clarity. I found many of their principles useful for my advertising course.

The writing dances, and the book is laced with delightful examples. The examples cover real-life events such as the O.J. Simpson trial, where Marcia Clark erred by not providing a two-sided argument. The authors start the book with a powerful example: the case of Demetrick James Walker, who was sentenced to life in prison for killing a teenager because he wanted his pair of \$125 Nike Air Jordans, just like the ones advertised on TV. (I have used this example to start my advertising course but have dropped it as some

students informed me that it was not politically correct to do so. If you want to have happy students, do not challenge their beliefs.)

I liked the authors' historical treatments of issues and the interesting facts scattered throughout the book. For example, did you know that Abraham Lincoln was widely despised in 1863? That Aristotle was the first to develop a comprehensive theory of persuasion? That universities ran courses on "Principles of Advertising" in the 1890s?

Pratkanis and Aronson's *Age of Propaganda* compares well with my favorite book on marketing, Robert Cialdini's *Influence* (2000). It is broader in its coverage than Cialdini's book. I consider both essential reading for those in a persuasion business. Persuasion is a big business: according to Klamer and McClosky (1995), about 25 percent of the nation's economy is involved in persuasion. That includes you.

Should I provide an explicit conclusion, now? Should it be "You will gain a lot!" or "Don't lose out to your competitors who will be using these techniques!" And, as I think about it, given your interest in persuasion, you are just the type of person who can use this book effectively.

Thanks for being such a perceptive reader. Do you think it is important to provide people with feedback? Good, I thought you did. Please let me know what you thought of this review. Even a single word helps. ("Wonderful" springs to mind, but "rigorous" or "robust" are acceptable in my field.) Act now. Early replies will qualify for a special list limited to The Top Ten. My e-mail address is armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu. Meanwhile, beware of any subtle attempts at persuasion.

References

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