

# Book Reviews

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## *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*

by Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2001, 416 pp., \$16.95)

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

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

#### **The Bad News**

This book is aimed to help general readers protect themselves against propaganda spread by governments and businesses. As Pratkanis and Aronson state (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 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 the 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 people than people will at protecting themselves.

It seems to me that the book contains an underlying propaganda message against individual freedoms. 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: Pratkanis and Aronson state (p. 117) 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 state, "Ultimately we all have a responsibility to challenge all factoids."

So I did just that and found that Pratkanis and Aronson provided no support for their statement on page 117.

This 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 (pp. 239–41). 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 by Armstrong, Coviello, and Safranek (1993).

#### **The Good News**

The book has many wonderful qualities. It contains useful knowledge about persuasion for salespeople, 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.

Pratkanis and Aronson are widely recognized for their useful research on persuasion. Their credibility is important because some of what they recommend may contradict readers' current beliefs or behaviors. 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 pertaining to persuasion through advertising. Pratkanis and Aronson introduced me to more than 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 my list. Most of the studies the authors describe 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% more.

Here is another study (p. 45): Students, acting as fundraisers, went door-to-door asking for donations. With 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.

In another study (p. 78): Is it better to (1) lecture students that they should be neat and tidy or (2) compliment them for being neat and tidy? Answer: In this study, the lecture method was useless, whereas the compliment method led to a threefold increase in the collection of litter.

With remarkable clarity, Pratkanis and Aronson present studies, translate them to principles, describe conditions under which the principles apply, and show how to use them. 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, in which 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 television. (I have used this example to start my advertising course but dropped it when some students informed me that it was not politically correct to do so.)

I liked the authors' historical treatments of issues and the interesting facts scattered throughout the book. For example, who knew that Abraham Lincoln was widely despised in 1863? That Aristotle was the first to develop a comprehen-

sive 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 McClosky and Klammer (1995), approximately 25% of the nation's economy is involved in persuasion.

(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"? As I think about it, given your interest in persuasion, you are just the type of person who can use this book effectively. 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. Act now. Early replies will qualify for a special list limited to the Top Ten. My e-mail address is [armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu). Meanwhile, beware of any subtle attempts at persuasion.)

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#### REFERENCES

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- McClosky, D. and A. Klammer (1995), "One Quarter of GDP is Persuasion," *American Economic Review*, 85 (2), 191-95.