

Evaluation and Behavior: Cognitive responses to messages and signs

Anaise Aristide

MSP 4446

Bibliography

- M. (2008, August 09). 95 percent of brain activity is beyond our conscious awareness. Retrieved October 01, 2017, from <http://www.simplifyinginterfaces.com/2008/08/01/95-percent-of-brain-activity-is-beyond-our-conscious-awareness/>
- Littlejohn, S. (2017). Theories of Message Reception and Processing. In *Theories of Human Communication*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Moore, T. (1992). Subliminal Perception: Facts and Fallacies. Retrieved October 01, 2017, from https://www.csicop.org/si/show/subliminal_perception_facts_and_fallacies

In chapter seven of *Theories of Human Communication*, “Theories of Message Reception and Processing”, Stephen Littlejohn details the societal impact of media messages and signs by focusing in on how specific messages are received (and interpreted differently) by audiences. Littlejohn (2017) dissects how we begin to process information and “how we come to understand, organize and use the information contained in messages” (p. 126). He uses this chapter to unpack the way we react to different signs and symbols that stand in place of the actual “thing” it represents, the messages we attach to them and how this affects our cognitive process.

Littlejohn cites psychologist Thomas Ostrom and his broad three layered dimension of the cognitive system; codes, structures and processes, and how these interrelated systems allow us to interpret and react to messages. Littlejohn then ties Ostrom’s dimensions of the cognitive process to researcher Charles Osgood and his theories of “meaning” and the linkage between thought and behavior. He goes further into this by explaining how this linkage would then ultimately cause difference and exclusivity in how messages are perceived dependent on the individuals lived experience and their relationship with what is being presented. Littlejohn uses an example about planes to supplement Osgood’s theory and provide clarity; for some planes may signify “flight” or freedom while for others planes may cause high anxiety and fear, all which is dependent on how the environment the individual has come from that has shaped the meaning of this “thing” (pgs. 127-128).

One of the many significant points in the chapter was that in order to understand a message in its entirety there needs to be a framework set up prior that provides proper background information for people to be able to pull from, but Littlejohn mentions that because we all “operate from different contexts [and] cognitive environments” (p. 130) we are unable to

collectively agree upon universal meanings and assign importance to all of the things that we consume. The previous argument speaks to the concept of individuality and varying perspectives despite being exposed to the same content. In a separate article, *Subliminal Perception: Facts and Fallacies*, Timothy Moore (1992) talks about subjective and objective perspectives and the role media, namely advertisers, plays in steering these “individual” and “unique” perspectives to fulfill their own agendas. Moore essentially questions the extent of our ability to grasp our own awareness and how much of what we associate with specific signs and messages are strategic (on behalf of the content creators) subconscious reactions or reflections of what we are consuming.

Moore mentions the frequency of advertisers incorporating scientific data and sometimes pseudoscience to help carry their messages more effectively and persuasively due to the general acceptance and minimal negation of science as unbiased fact. In a 2008 article titled *95 Percent of Brain Activity is Beyond our Conscious Awareness*, Marc (whose last name is omitted) states that only 5% of our “cognitive activities” are done consciously. This statistic, which may actually be even less, works in favor for advertisers and allows for tactics of persuasion and subtlety within messages to be absorbed more quickly by audiences.

Our cognitive system and the smaller systems interwoven into our thought process is complex and works on many levels to help us retrieve and interpret messages. It is unclear to determine what the key player in shaping our perception is because there are a series of outside influences entwined with each individual relationship to meaning that broadens the scope. Becoming more aware of the things we consume daily and how we interact with can potentially allow us to become more introspective beings to be able to understand some of our thought processes more intimately.