

Public Abstract

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Title:Exploring the effect of news message complexity on cognitive complexity and attitude extremity

This thesis explores how the number of perspectives presented in a news story influences cognitive complexity and attitude extremity. I hypothesized that a news message featuring more than two perspectives – a complex story - would lead to an increase in cognitive complexity, defined as the number of elements a person associates with an issue (differentiation) and the strength of connections made between those elements (integration).

Additionally, I predicted that heightened levels of cognitive complexity would result in more moderate attitudes toward the subject of a news story and that cognitive complexity would mediate the relationship between story complexity and attitude extremity. The results from this 2 x 2 mixed-design experiment found that an increase in the number of perspectives in a news article leads to an increase in one component of cognitive complexity, integration, but not the other component, differentiation. The results do not support the hypothesis that cognitive complexity mediates the relationship between message complexity and attitude extremity. Aside from testing these hypotheses, a goal of this experiment was to measure integration, often thought of as cognitive cohesion, in two different ways. This paper compares these measurement techniques and how they reflect varying conceptualizations of cognitive cohesion throughout different streams of literature.