

Hecklers: Boon or Bust for Speakers?

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Prominent speakers affected by hecklers have run the gamut from Aristotle to Jesus Christ to Adolph Hitler. Modern university officials are heckled by anti-apartheid students, stockholders meetings are interrupted by corporate gadflies, and chemical company officials are outshouted by demonstrators protesting the manufacture of napalm. Our communications research into this rather common occurrence has challenged some popular concepts about the negative and positive aspects of heckling.

The most recent heckling to gain nationwide attention occurred September, 1976, in Binghamton, New York, when an angered Nelson Rockefeller returned the obscene salute of a group of hecklers by raising his middle finger and jabbing it upwards.

Some politicians like George Washington, and former Vice President Spiro Agnew, have consistently maintained that hecklers advance their cause. Others, like former President Richard Nixon, believed the opposite.

In fact, former Presidential counsel John Dean seemed to blame this nation's most heinous scandal on Mr. Nixon's concern over hecklers. In his six-hour opening statement to the Senate Watergate Committee on June 25th, 1973, Mr. Dean stated:

To one who was in the White House and became somewhat familiar with its inner workings, the Watergate matter was an inevitable outgrowth of a climate of excessive concern over the political impact of demonstrators. . . . In early February of 1972, I learned that any means—legal or illegal—were authorized by Mr. Haldeman to deal with the demonstrators when the President was traveling or appearing some place. (The Washington Post, June 26, 1973, p. A8).

It seems reasonable to ask if there is any scientific evidence to support the views that hecklers enhance or reduce a speaker's effectiveness. Psychologist John Keating of the University of Washington ("A politician's guide to success on the stump: Hire a heckler," *Psychology Today*, April, 1971) has strongly argued that hecklers advance the cause of a politician.

Mr. Keating begins his argument with a notion developed by Yale attitude researcher William McGuire, that people persist in their opinions by arguing against (counterarguing) opposing viewpoints. Mr. Keating proposes that hecklers distract the audience from counterarguing a politician's communication, and this inability to counterargue would result in the audience being more persuaded by the politician than if no hecklers were serving as a distraction.

The fact that distraction can reduce counterarguing and lead to increased persuasion has a great deal of experimental sup-

port. Psychologists have distracted college undergraduates with amusing films, Pepsi and peanuts, panels of flashing lights, classical and popular music, and other devices. In each of these instances, subjects who were distracted while listening to messages that differed from their own attitudes were more persuaded by them than those who were not distracted. Does this mean, however, that hecklers will typically aid a speaker's persuasiveness as Mr. Keating concludes? We think not.

What Mr. Keating failed to consider is that distraction can only serve to inhibit counterarguing if the audience is generating counterarguments to the speech. We can assure this in the laboratory by exposing our subjects to communications with which they are likely to disagree. Thus, in laboratory distraction research, experimenters have used such topics as doubling the university tuition, eliminating teenage driving, reducing summer vacations, etc. Outside of the laboratory, however, persons do not usually choose to attend speeches which differ from their own attitudes.

After reviewing a large number of studies by psychologists, sociologists, and political science researchers, Jonathan Freedman of Columbia and David Sears of U.C.L.A. concluded that "audiences for most mass communications are disproportionately made up of those with sympathy for the viewpoints expressed." Republican rallies are attended mainly by Republicans and Democratic rallies are attended mainly by Democrats. When Jimmy Carter addressed the Democratic National Convention, it is highly unlikely that the audience was generating counterarguments to the speeches. What would distraction theory predict for a situation in which the audience was in sympathy with the speaker?

Hecklers inhibit sympathizers

We hypothesized that distraction prevents an audience from fully considering a communication, and inhibits the main response to a message. If the predominant thoughts to a message are counterarguments, distraction will reduce this and lead to increased persuasiveness. But, if the predominant thoughts to a message are favorable (as would probably be the case if the audience agreed with the speaker), distraction would interfere with these favorable thoughts and lead to reduced persuasiveness.

To test our theory, we brought undergraduate students at The Ohio State University into a language laboratory. They were told that we were interested in their ability to do two things at once—to monitor a screen in the front of the room, and to pay attention to a message that they would hear over headphones.

We prepared two messages for this experiment. One message used arguments of poor quality and was designed to get our



Former Vice-president Nelson Rockefeller's famous response to hecklers in Binghamton, New York. [Wide World Photos]

subjects to counterargue. The other message used arguments of very good quality and was designed to get our subjects to think favorable thoughts.

While exposing some students to no distraction whatsoever, other students were asked to monitor the position of an X that flashed on the screen in the front of the room. The Xs flashed at the rate of either 4, 12, or 20 times per minute depending upon whether the student was in the low, medium, or high distraction condition. Students monitored the Xs by recording on a tally sheet the quadrant in which the X appeared.

The results supported our theory of distraction (Figure 1). As the level of distraction increased for students hearing the poor quality message, they were more persuaded by the message; but as the level of distraction increased for students hearing the good quality message, they were less persuaded by the message. When we repeated the experiment using different good and poor quality messages, we found the same results.

Thus, if hecklers serve as distractors in a typical political rally, or shareholders meeting, it seems that they are apt to distract the audience from generating favorable comments, and thus reduce the effectiveness of the speaker. Only in a case where the audience is initially antagonistic toward the speaker will distraction enhance a speaker's effectiveness by inhibiting counterarguments. If the audience likes the speaker, distraction theory predicts that favorable thoughts will be inhibited, rendering the speaker less effective.

Not always distracting

Of course, it is not necessary for hecklers to be distracting. If the speaker pauses, or waits for the interruption to subside before

continuing, the audience is not disrupted from thinking while they are hearing the speech. In this type of situation, the hecklers are not presenting a distraction because the audience can alternate its attention from speech, to hecklers, to speech and completely process both. Only when the heckling is an outside but simultaneous occurrence can it be considered distraction. We decided to study a situation in which heckling could not be considered distraction.

Although actual heckling incidents occur on the campus of Ohio State, they do not occur frequently enough to satisfy a heckling researcher. To remedy this problem, we decided to stage our own heckling incidents.

We invited undergraduate speech students to attend what we called a "speaker's workshop." The speech students were told that workshop members gave speeches on timely topics as part of the workshop course. The speech students were invited to sign up to attend one of several speeches. Over 120 speech students, all unaware of the experiment, attended our session.

At every session, one male and one female heckler attended. The hecklers, of course, were our accomplices who were instructed to introduce heckles at prearranged points in the speech. Our speaker was a female in her early 30s who was introduced as a member of The Ohio State University Task Force on Higher Education. In addition to examining the effect of heckling when it was not distracting, we were also interested in what effect a speaker's responses to heckles would have on the speaker's persuasiveness.

Our experiment included four basic conditions. In the *calm-relevant condition*, whenever one of our hecklers objected to what the speaker had to say, the speaker calmly and confidently addressed the point raised by the heckler. In the *upset-irrelevant condition*, the speaker made a response to the heckles, but did not address the point raised, and seemed upset. In the *no-response condition*, the speaker paused for, but ignored the heckles, making no response. In the *speech-only condition*, the speech was given uninterrupted. After hearing the speech under one of the above conditions, the speech students rated how much they agreed with what the speaker had to say.

Response controls hecklers

Our results (Figure 2) indicated that overall, students hearing the speech under heckled conditions agreed with the speaker significantly less than students hearing the same unheckled speech. However, if heckling *did* occur, students hearing the calm-relevant response agreed with the speaker significantly more than students hearing the upset-irrelevant response. Students hearing no response to the heckles showed agreement in between the calm-relevant and upset-irrelevant response con-

Figure 1

HIGH
AGREEMENT

LOW
AGREEMENT

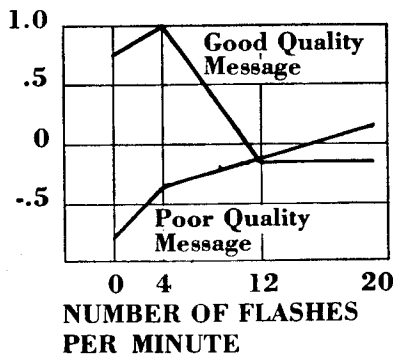
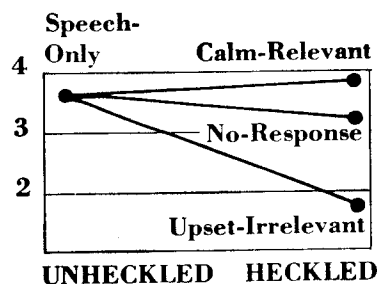


Figure 2

AGREE WITH
SPEAKER'S
RECOMMENDATIONS:

COMPLETELY

NOT AT ALL



ditions. We obtained these same results regardless of whether our speaker advocated an agreeable or disagreeable position.

In cases where heckling is not distracting, we suspect that hecklers serve the function of priming the audience to counterargue. By increasing counterargumentation on the part of the audience, the hecklers serve to decrease the persuasiveness of the speaker. What the hecklers are in effect doing is to demonstrate or give examples of counterarguments. When the speaker gives a calm-relevant reply to heckles, this probably discourages audience members from continuing their counterargumentation, while an upset-irrelevant reply probably encourages continued counterarguing.

Heckling is a fact of life in the political and business process. To date there is little empirical evidence for the view that heckling enhances support for a speaker's position. What has impressed us most is how effective heckling can be as a strategy to reduce a speaker's persuasiveness. If a speaker is giving an excellent speech (*i.e.*, one that is likely to generate many favorable thoughts on the part of audience members), hecklers can create distraction that is simultaneous with the speech and inhibit audience members from thinking those favorable thoughts about the speech. If the speaker is giving a speech that is generating counterarguments on the part of the audience, hecklers should leave well enough alone. If the speaker pauses for the heckles so they are not distracting, the speaker's persuasiveness will be hurt because the audience is probably imitating the hecklers. In our experiment, even when the speaker responded to heckles with a calm-relevant reply, she was no better

off in terms of audience agreement than when there was no heckling.

Politicians who have hired hecklers to travel around with them in an attempt to sway the audience to their side are probably in politics no longer. ■

Editor's Note: Detailed reports of the experiments reported here may be obtained in: Petty, R. E. & Brock, T. C. "Effects of responding or not responding to hecklers on audience agreement with a speaker." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1976, 6, 1-17. Petty, R. E., Wells, G. L., & Brock, T. C. "Distraction can enhance or reduce yielding to propaganda: Thought disruption or effort justification?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1976, 34, 874-884. Freedman, J. L. & Sears, D. O. "Selective Exposure." In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 2. New York: Academic Press, 1965. pp. 58-97.

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