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Upfront

The Sound of One Trap Flapping: How the vocal few can skew perceptions of public opinion

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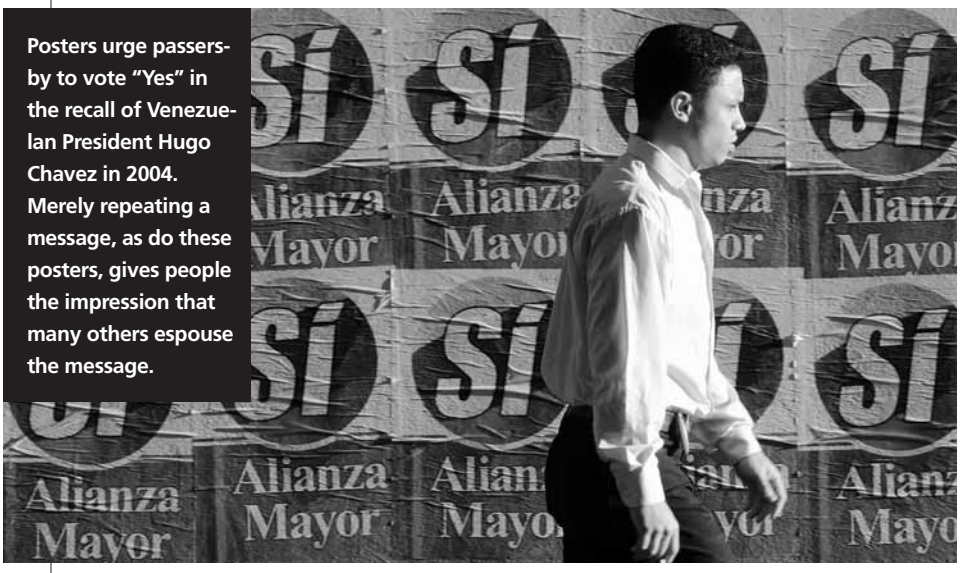
The Sound of One Trap Flapping

How the vocal few can skew perceptions of public opinion

Politicians, advertisers, and front-porch gossips know that merely repeating an opinion is one way to strengthen its grip on the public's mind. A series of studies in the May 2007 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* demonstrates why: "Repetition of the same opinion gives rise to the impression that the opinion is widely shared – even if all of the repetitions come from the same single communicator," says Kimberlee Weaver of Virginia Tech, the article's lead author. Because seemingly widespread opinions shape thoughts and feelings more than do seemingly isolated opinions, persistently vocal people can have undue influence.



Posters urge passers-by to vote "Yes" in the recall of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2004. Merely repeating a message, as do these posters, gives people the impression that many others espouse the message.

In one study, for example, undergraduate participants read about a fictitious initiative to preserve open space in New Jersey. One-third of the participants read three statements from three different people in support of the initiative. A second group read three supporting statements from *one* person. The final third of participants – the control condition – read one supporting statement from one person. All participants then estimated how many New Jersey homeowners were for the initiative. Results show that participants who read three supporting statements – even if they came from the same person – thought that more New Jerseyans wanted to preserve open space than did participants who read only one statement.

In another simple study, all participants read a politically moderate e-mail from a fictitious party called the "National Alliance Party of Belgium." Half of the participants read the e-mail three times, and the other half read it one time. Those who read the e-mail three times estimated that more people in the Belgian party hold moderate views than did participants who read the e-mail only once.

The authors argue that people misjudge collective sentiments because they let their feelings get in the way of their perceptions. The more people hear the same message, the more familiar it feels. And the more familiar it feels, the more widespread people infer it to be – even if they can clearly see that only one person said it.

Relying on feelings of familiarity to make inferences about public opinion can lead to faulty decisions, the authors write. Members of Congress, for instance, often receive many phone calls from a few voters in support of laws that the silent majority does not actually endorse. Nonprofit leaders must likewise contend with donors who loudly clamor for projects that are unpopular with other constituents. "Simply listening to multiple contacts from one individual or a vocal minority may lead decision makers to overestimate how many people hold the same opinion," Weaver says.

To override the influence of the noisy few, Weaver says, decision makers must be aware that the familiarity of a message is not a good gauge of its popularity. She also recommends that they use good focus group techniques, such as getting opinions from people who accurately represent the larger group.

The studies' other authors are Stephen M. Garcia and Norbert Schwarz of the University of Michigan, and Dale T. Miller of the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

–Alana Conner

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