



Alphachat: Robert Cialdini on persuasion

Cardiff Garcia You started your first book, *Influence*, with an admission of sorts. You describe yourself as very gullible, as something of a patsy. And I think this is probably a feeling that we've all had at some point. The idea that we're all susceptible to the tactics of really good persuaders, and advertisers, and marketers.

So my first question is, how did you come to realise that persuasion was something that could happen when you weren't paying attention? In other words, the idea that our decisions are mostly our own is something that I think all of us like to believe. And I'm wondering when, and how, you first came to realise that that wasn't the case for you?

Robert Cialdini Well, you're right to characterise me as something of a sucker, a patsy. And that had always intrigued me. That I wound up saying yes to things I didn't really want. I would contribute to causes I'd not really heard of. I'd subscribed to magazines that I didn't really want. Because of, not the merits of the thing, but the way the merits were presented to me.

And I started to think, there must be something here besides the content of what was being offered to me. It was the delivery of the content. There must be a psychological dimension and reason for me to say yes, not a material one.

This is interesting enough to start studying in a concerted and ongoing way. And so I decided to set my cap to understand the social influence process, as kind of a career direction.

Cardiff Garcia And was that a gradual realisation? Or was it that one day you realised that you had just given a lot of money to a cause that you didn't really believe in, or that you bought a specific product that you didn't really need, that led you to see that?

Robert Cialdini It was a combination of those two things. I recall standing in unwanted possession to a set of tickets to a particular event that I'd been sold. And, thinking to myself, this isn't the only instance of this. If I reflect back on my history, I can see a pattern of this. It wasn't a glitch that I could ignore.

This is something that's ongoing and characteristic of me in some way. It's chronic. There must be something here that is worth understanding, if only for reasons of self-defence.

But beyond that, there's an intriguing feature of the human condition involved here. We can be swept into decisions to acquire things, to say yes to requests (that on their merits don't really warrant yes) by the presentation of those merits.

Cardiff Garcia There's an undercurrent of sympathy for people who are persuaded that runs through both of your books. And in fact, your first book was also written explicitly for consumers, and not just for people who want to learn how to persuade.

So what do we really know about how persuasion works in the minds of the people who are being persuaded?

Because I came away from reading your books with idea fairly well entrenched that the susceptibility to be persuaded is, as I said earlier, universal. But it's also largely subconscious. There's something a little bit subtler going on here. It's a fairly deep process, and one that I don't think that everyone understands in their day-to-day lives.

Robert Cialdini Well, I think it is unconscious in the most interesting form.

There are conscious versions of it in which we calculate that this is the best deal over here, compared to this deal over there. And that is understandable – but also not interesting enough to write a book about.

But that other version, in which we seem to be swept up by facets and dimensions of influence that we don't truly recognise are instrumental in our choices – that's worth understanding. Because if indeed these things occur unconsciously, we aren't aware of them as they are occurring.

Cardiff Garcia Yes, and that by the way is an uncomfortable notion. Again, we love to believe this idea that our decisions are at least deliberate. And every once in a while, sure, we're too tired to make a good decision, and we might make a bad one.

But at least in terms of the really big decisions we make, [we like to think] that they belong to us. That's not really the case though, is it?

Robert Cialdini You know, they belong to the environment that interacts with us to push us, and pull us, and move us in particular directions.

And I'm still susceptible to them. Let me tell you about the last time I bought a television set.

I was in a department store and went to the TV section, and stopped in front of one particular set that I had read about as having good reviews. And it was on sale.

And as I was looking through some of the literature that was there, brochures and so on, a salesman approached and said, "I see you're interested in this model at this price, and I can understand why. That's a great deal. But I have to tell you, it's our last one. And I just got a call from a woman who said that she might be in today, because she's interested in that set."

Fifteen minutes later, I'm wheeling out of the store with that television set in my cart. And I write books on this stuff!

Cardiff Garcia Scarcity.

Robert Cialdini Scarcity. It was the dwindling availability of something desirable that spurred me into action. Even though I didn't know that this was the truth. It could have been a sales device that he was employing.

So what I did was to go back the next day to see if that space on the shelf was truly empty. Or whether they had filled it with another model from the back room. And, to my pleasure, it was empty. That was the last one.

Cardiff Garcia I guess in that case it was an ethical application of the tactics of persuasion. Of course, if he hadn't mentioned that [it was the last one], you might not have bought the television. But his mentioning it didn't violate any standards of integrity that might matter to us.

Robert Cialdini Yes, and if he hadn't mentioned it, I might have dilly-dallied. I might have gone home and said, you know, I should think about this before I make this investment, and gone back the next day to find it gone because that woman who had called, had snagged it.

So he did help me make an informed decision. And I feel that I was informed into assent. I wasn't deceived into assent. That's the best partnership of the communicator and the recipient in an influence exchange.

Cardiff Garcia The reason I started the conversation with these kind of philosophical issues of whether or not the decisions are ours versus, as you said, those of our interaction with the environment, is that I think we're going through a kind of an interesting cultural moment right now.

It seems that you can't pick up a magazine or go on the internet without stumbling across an article about whether or not facts matter anymore.

And some of these questions about whether or not people change their minds based on facts, or make decisions based on facts – I think these questions have been brought about in part because of the rise of Donald Trump and some other demagogic politicians, and other ideas. But it seems to me like what people are coming to terms with is not the idea necessarily that facts don't matter when it comes to persuasion. Because obviously sometimes they do and sometimes they won't.

But when you get passed the hysteria, I think people basically understand that. But actually what they're coming to terms with is the idea that facts and their use in logical arguments are not always decisive -- either personally in our lives, or in a broader societal context. Sometimes they're overridden by appeals to emotion or appeals to identity.

And I would imagine that your long-time study of persuasion would give you an interesting insight into this. What do you think?

Robert Cialdini I agree with your thesis. And it's one though that other voices have articulated in the past. There's an old saying, "You will never reason a man out of a position out of a position that he was not reasoned into in the first place".

So using facts, under certain circumstances, where it's an emotional decision or an identity based decision, is simply going to be deflected by those stronger forces that are determining the decision.

Cardiff Garcia Yes, it kind of messes with the conception of free will. And I don't mean that in a religious sense. But simply in the sense of owning our own choices and what we do. Because now it seems like there's a kind of broader reassessment going on of just how it is that everyone goes about making even the big decisions in their lives.

These choices are not always reflective. Sometimes without necessarily even knowing it, we make choices based on these kind-of-subconscious identity preferences.

Robert Cialdini I agree, but I think that there's an interesting, deeper level to those choices. And that is, if we can identify those environmental cues, or those factors that sweep us in a kind of automatic or heuristic way towards a choice, if we can identify those that actually steer us correctly most of the time, then we do get the best of both worlds.

We can make quick and accurate decisions – without having to expend a lot of cognitive energy, waste a lot of time, making those choices by having to calibrate and calculate all of the pros and cons with each decision we have to make in our decision-overloaded lives.

And what I tried to do with my first book, *Influence*, was to identify six universal cues that, if we followed those cues, we would usually be right in making automatic decisions. One of them we've already talked about, scarcity. The idea that if something of value is scarce, or rare, or dwindling in availability, it makes sense to try to secure it before it's gone.

So that's the sort of thing – provided that piece of information is authentic, that it is scarce, it is rare, it is dwindling in availability – that's a good reason to take action to acquire it.

And there are some other principles like that. The idea of authority, if a genuine expert says that this is a good strategy to undertake, or move to make, or a product to acquire. That's probably most of the time going to give us good counsel. Provided that the evidence that an authority, a genuine authority who is knowledgeable about the topic, is valid.

Cardiff Garcia Although I guess in that case, you also run into a problem when the authorities themselves disagree with each other. It tends to undermine the authority that they're known for.

I spend a lot of my time reading and writing about economics. And I can tell you that within that profession there's tremendous disagreement, even about the most important topics. And in terms of persuasion, my sense of it is that over time that has maybe eroded the extent to which they are listened to by the public. That seems to be another big question of the moment.

Robert Cialdini You're right. And the newest research suggests that people are most persuaded by a consensus of experts.

So if you were to be interested in moving people in your direction, you would be well-advised not just to find an authoritative voice and marshal that person's opinions and statements that are aligned with your position. You would be better advised to get two or three more [authoritative voices], even if they're weaker. That is, having lower levels of expertise, perceived authority. Because it's the consensus of authority that really does sweep the field.

Cardiff Garcia Let's talk about Pre-Suasion, your newest book. [Pre-suasion] is the idea that if you capture somebody's attention in a certain way, and in the moment just before you try to persuade them, that it can have a very powerful effect.

I want to start with a quote that you include in the book from Danny Kahneman, the psychologist who went on to win the Nobel Prize in economics.

And here's the quote: "Nothing in life is as important as you think it is *while you are thinking about it.*"

This is fascinating to me, and it is a foundational concept in your book as well. Because most of us think of distractions, or the places where we direct our attention when we're trying to focus on something else, as a problem because they take us away from the things that matter to us. What's interesting to me about this quote is that something else is going on, which is that when you direct your attention to something else, that very thing becomes more important [to you] in that moment.

That is an incredible thing to consider once you really internalise it, but it also seems to be something that underpins a lot of the work that you write about in this book.

Robert Cialdini Yes, and it's scary.

Because here is the basis for the truth of that statement, that nothing is as important as we think it is while we are thinking about it, that is, those things that we typically focus on, those things that we typically pay attention to, are those things in our environment that we consider important. That is how we decide what to focus on, right? What's important jumps in standing in our eyes. And consequently it makes sense to focus on those things that are important, and to be sensitive to those things that are related to that particular concept. Because this is an important feature.

What is scary about it is, a communicator can get us to pay attention to something that doesn't warrant our attention by pulling or drawing our focus to it. And to make that thing thereby seemingly important when it truly isn't. It has just been made salient, or especially visible, or in some way spectacular, to draw our attention to it.

You can do it with colours, you can do it with metaphors, you can do it with all kinds of things that shift our attention to a particular element of our environment and thereby make it more important than it deserves to be. That's worrisome.

Cardiff Garcia Do you have a favourite example, either from the book or from elsewhere?

Robert Cialdini Yes, I do. It was a study that was done of an online furniture store. The researchers arranged for half of the visitors to that store to go to a landing page that had, as its background wallpaper, fluffy clouds. The other half was sent to a landing page that had as its wallpaper pennies, small coins.

Those people who were randomly sent to the clouds landing page then rated comfort as more important in the kinds of sofas that they wanted to purchase than before. Moreover, they searched the site for comfort-related features of the various options, and ultimately preferred to purchase more comfortable furniture.

By some cue that had been put into the environment, it was a pre-suasive cue... Before they ever saw any items, any choices, any arguments for the models that were available on that site, they were made to see comfort as more important than before.

The key to this is that those who were sent to the site with pennies on the background wallpaper came to see price as most important in their purchase.

Cardiff Garcia And all without realising it.

Robert Cialdini That's exactly right. When they were asked afterwards if they thought the clouds or the coins made any difference in their decision, they laughed. They said, "I'm a freestanding entity, I make my decisions based on internal preferences." They didn't recognise that the first thing they saw changed their internal preferences, and led them to aligned choices with that first thing. Because when they were focused on it they came to see it as more important than before they were focused on it.

And some communicator arranged for them to be focused on comfortable or price before they began the process of assessing their options.

Cardiff Garcia I want to bring up another example from the book as well, and it has to do with back when you were following door to door salesmen. You were tagging along with them to see how they did what they did.

And you were tagging along with someone who seemed to be doing all the same things that everybody else had been doing, except for one difference. And it turned out that that was the difference in making him such an impressive salesman.

You would go into the home of the people that you were trying to sell the product to, and I forget what the product is. And he would say, each time, that he had left something in the car, and then he'd go outside and he'd come back in, and he'd end up making the sale.

What was it about that experience that made him such a great salesman? What was it about that tactic that worked so well?

Robert Cialdini Yes, you've described operationally exactly what he did. Conceptually what he did was to say I have to go out to the car to get some materials there, do you mind if I let myself out and back in? And everybody would say, oh sure, of course.

And when I asked him about it afterwards, he said, "Bob, who do we let out and back into our homes on their own? Only the people we trust, right? I wanted to be associated with the concept of trust in those people's minds before I began to sell." And he was selling a heat activated fire alarm system.

And this guy was the top salesperson every month. And I watched other sales people. He did everything that they did except this one thing that he did differently, before he began the sales process. He created an aura of trust by associating himself with the sort of people you let in and out of your house freely. It was brilliant.

Cardiff Garcia What's ironic about this pre-suasion tactic to gain trust is that it was part of a white lie, but a very effective one in this case.

Let's talk about another way to capture attention in the moment before trying to persuade. You have this quote in the book, "distinctiveness swings attention to the distinguishing factor". How does that work?

Robert Cialdini One thing that, again, makes sense for us to pay attention to is anything that is different or new that suddenly comes into our environment. We swing our attention to it.

It makes sense, because you want to be able to process what's going on around you, especially if there is some novel factor there, you want to be able to assess it and be sure that it is not going to cost you any resources (or your safety, for that matter). So one thing that we know leads to this effect is the entry of something new or different.

Cardiff Garcia And are there certain circumstances in which that tactic works better than other tactics?

Robert Cialdini Yes, when we're looking for change. For example, when as a communicator we're interested in getting someone to change away from where they are currently focused or the habits that they are in, if we can bring something new, something different to their consciousness, and if we pre-suade them by first getting them to think about change, to think about something novel, to think about *the concept* of novelty, then this new thing will seem most important.

Let me give you an example. There was a study done by some marketing researchers. They walked up to people and asked them if they would be interested in trying a new brand of soft drink, not even on the market yet. And if they were, they would have to give the marketing researcher their email address. That's kind of risky. First of all, something new is involved, and it's also kind of risky to give somebody your email

address who just walks up to you on the street. So only about... I think it was 29% of the people asked like this were willing to give their email address under those circumstances.

But for a second sample, if the researcher approached with a pre-suasive question: "Excuse me, do you consider yourself an adventurous person?" And then asked if they wanted to try a new brand of soft drink, now 75% of them gave their email address to this person, so they could get information about how to get this soft drink.

So if we've got something distinctive, something new, something novel, we are well-advised to first put people in touch with their adventurous side before we ask them to try something that requires a change.

Cardiff Garcia I like your point also about matching the message to just what it is that you are trying to persuade the person of. And it reminds me that, in your work, you always push past the obvious, and sometimes in ways that are unexpected, and I've got a few examples here from both Influence and Pre-suasion.

So I want to go through a few of these and then maybe just have you comment for a minute on each.

Here is my first example. Most of us know that we can have our attention directed towards imagery that uses either violence or sex, but it turns out that it really depends on what it is that you are trying to sell, and this is a lesson that a lot of marketers don't quite get. So for instance, if you prime somebody with a violent message, you should be selling a product that conveys some sense of conformity – in other words, to be a part of the crowd. And it's almost like people are frightened into safety in numbers.

And the opposite applies when you're using imagery that includes sexual appeal, because that inspires people to want to stand out, so you should be selling a product that makes them stand apart from the crowd.

Robert Cialdini Yes, you've captured that relationship precisely. So we did a study, for example, where we showed people an ad for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

To half of them we showed them that ad while they were watching a scary movie, as a break, a commercial break. Those people then were given the ad for the museum, and the form of ad that worked best for them was to say that this is a place that has been visited by a million people last year.

Why would that be so successful? It's because when you're scared, there is safety in numbers, and you are inclined toward those choices that have been made, or those places that have been gone to, by large numbers of people. When you're in a crowd you're much safer than when you're by yourself in some sort of precarious situation.

Now, the opposite was what happened when we showed that same ad to people who were watching a romantic comedy. Now, in romance, you don't want to be in a crowd, you want to stand out and be an individual. When they were watching a romantic movie, the kind of ad that worked best for them was not the one that said

millions of people have visited this museum, [but rather] the one that said “be one of the few who experience the wonders of this museum”.

So now, when your goal was to be an individual, to stand out from the crowd rather than be a part of the crowd, it was that kind of message that was most successful.

Cardiff Garcia Let me go to the next example. The principle of reciprocity was in your book *Influence*, and when I first came across that chapter I thought, oh, this will be just obvious, right? We all have sort of an innate sense of fairness. If I give you something I have essentially installed in you a feeling of obligation to give me something back.

But you also extend it to how it works when it comes to negotiating, and to the idea of making concessions.

I'd never thought about it in that context. The idea that if we start a negotiation, and let's say I'm trying to sell you something for as much money as possible, and you're obviously trying to buy it for as little money as possible. If I start with a very high price, and I have effectively anchored the conversation around that price. If I then come down a little bit, if I make the first concession and say, “fine, instead of selling this for \$100,000 I'll sell it for \$80,000”. And maybe you wanted to buy it for much less, but I have now effectively given you something.

So it's not just that this is a part of a back and forth in a negotiation – I've installed in you an obligation to come up to where I am because I've just given you something. This to me was a very interesting way of looking at negotiating.

Robert Cialdini Yes, the rule for reciprocity essentially says that we are obligated to give back to others the form of behaviour they have given to us. So if they've made a concession first, we now feel this pressure, something that we've been socialised into from childhood, to give back to those who have given to us. So that is why concessions work as well as gifts, favours, or services.

So we actually did a study where we found that if we walked up to people on the street and asked them to be a long term blood donor – to give a unit of blood every six weeks for the next two years – everybody said no. But if we said [right after they turned us down], “Well, then would you give one unit of blood tomorrow at the blood drive here in your neighbourhood?” Now we get about a 60% increase.

Here's the thing about concessions. If I make a concession to you, I have moved from no to yes. Now it's your turn. I've moved in your direction, toward yes, and now it's your turn to move toward yes.

Cardiff Garcia Here's the next example, and I really like this one because it partly applies to journalists, and in particular to people who write commentary and analysis: Consistency with prior commitments – there seems to be something very powerful about having written down a belief, or written down a commitment, that makes you want to act and think in a way that's consistent with that commitment.

So in terms of how I've thought about this, if at one point I published an article stating my beliefs, it's really hard for me to later acknowledge that I was wrong, and change my mind, and write an article that expresses a differing belief – *unless I have forced myself to also write down the fact that I was wrong*. Which itself can be quite liberating, because then I no longer have to act consistent with that earlier belief. I can now essentially act consistent both with the newly expressed opinion that I was wrong already, but also with a conception of myself as somebody who is a flexible thinker. I found this to be a really interesting idea.

Robert Cialdini I think that's actually quite inspired, that you substitute what you have made a commitment to by writing down the idea, "I was wrong here, I'm somebody flexible enough to recognise or to admit an error".

The problem is, you're very rare. There's a great book title by a couple of social psychologists, Elliot Aronson and Carol Tavris, it's called *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*. So that's the common human response to the idea of a mistake. You don't want to admit that you have been in error, you want to stay true to the ideas or the thinking that brought you to an initial choice.

Somebody once asked me, not long ago actually: "How does this [principle of consistency] apply to people who voted for Donald Trump, for example, in the face of the various sorts of missteps that the first 60 days of his administration have shown?" And it seems to me that we have to give people who've made a commitment by voting, we have to give them cover. We have to give them an excuse, a way out of that mistake. For example, we might be able to say, "Well, of course you were in a position to make that decision in November because you didn't know about X."

So you're allowed out of your commitment without having to lose face, without having to lose a sense of yourself as a good decision maker.

So if I were advising the Democratic Party – and I'm not! – that's what they would have to do in order to dislodge, efficiently and effectively, a lot of the people who have made a choice, a vote, in the face of evidence that that may have been a poor choice.

Cardiff Garcia That's an intriguing idea also, that incumbents have an advantage going into the next election cycle *precisely because* a lot of people have already voted for them. And so it's almost like you're starting from the base of all the people that already voted for you, and that was enough to win the first time. And it's just not easy to get people to go back on an earlier commitment.

Robert Cialdini Right, in fact the research backs up your analysis. That is, even when Congress has very low approval ratings, that's not true of your own representative. Because you were someone who voted that person in, he or she doesn't share in the same kind of blame, because if you asked that person to own up to the blame, then you're partially at fault for having voted for that person.

Cardiff Garcia And it's a pity that's so hard for another reason that's also included in Pre-suasion. Which is that in terms of gaining somebody's trust, it can be

very useful to start with admitting your flaws, your own problems, perhaps your own mistakes you've made.

And you give the example of Warren Buffett in his annual letter, although in that case you also write that if you're going to start by admitting your mistakes to gain somebody's trust, you had also better have a lot of advantages that you can describe immediately after to counteract and to overwhelm those mistakes that you acknowledged initially.

Robert Cialdini Right. Here's the mistake that most CEOs who write their annual reports make. They bury the mistakes, or the wrong choices that they've made, in footnotes or at the end of the report, and they begin with all the strengths.

Well, those strengths exist, and they are valuable, but people aren't ready to believe them until you've gained their trust. And the way to do that is to admit an error, something that went wrong that year, something that was a poor choice, and then say but, or however, or nonetheless, or at the same time. Now the strengths that you present are being experienced in the context of credibility.

You are seen as an honest broker of information because you're willing to talk about the mistakes. I was intrigued by this year's Warren Buffett letter to the stakeholders of Berkshire Hathaway. He did it again. But because last year was such a good year for Berkshire, they didn't have any errors. He didn't make any mistakes. So he began by describing a mistake he made in 1993, just to give people evidence that this guy is willing to admit to his errors. It's so disarming!

I've been getting these reports for over 15 years now, and he does it every year. On the first or second page he describes something that went wrong, something that went south that year. And if he doesn't have it, he finds one from another year, because it's so important for him to pre-suasively establish his credibility before he sends in the strengths of his case, because now we're going to incorporate them, we're going to process them, we're going to believe them more deeply when they come from someone else who is manifestly being honest with us.

Cardiff Garcia Sure. Well, listen, there's a lot of more examples in the book, but just in the interests of time I'm going to leave those as a kind of teaser for people who may want to pick up the book, which I do recommend doing.

I want to move on to the discussion at the end of the book about ethics. This was the one part of the book where I gathered that you were expressing a bit of annoyance. Because you are often asked the question, "Well, if all these persuasion tactics work, then aren't we essentially arming badly intentioned people with a lot of successful ideas for how they can get their way?"

And this is essentially your response to that question. And what I liked about it was that you don't just argue that acting badly and using persuasion in unethical ways might lead to a damaged reputation for a company. That tends not to work because people just don't think they'll get caught.

But [you argue also that] what ends up happening is that it's really bad for the employees within the organisation that disagree with the unethical practices, and they end up leaving.

So what you're left with is a snake pit. It's just a bunch of really terrible people working at a company, and it creates a really awful environment for somebody who does have a sense of integrity.

Robert Cialdini Yes, and it also undermines the financial performance of that company. Because in our research we found that those people who were comfortable staying in an unethical business culture, an organisation that had such a culture, were significantly more likely to cheat the organisation itself.

Because they had been selected for. They were people who were comfortable with cheating, and so they were the ones who were likely to steal equipment, were likely to pad expense accounts, were likely to run under the table deals with vendors or suppliers or customers.

The cost of employee malfeasance is in the trillions of dollars worldwide, and it's never recouped by the organisation. So it's a significant reason for people in charge who care about the financial vitality of the organisations to be scrupulous about weeding out those individuals who would use deceptive tactics, even to advance company goals.

Those are not the people we want in our culture, because – here's the best way to say it – those people who lie *for* you will lie *to* you.

Cardiff Garcia Okay, we're in the final segment of our conversation. I want to talk a little bit more about something you brought up a second ago, which is the role of persuasion in politics, this is obviously a topic of such interest right now. Not just in your two books, where you do mention in a few cases ways in which persuasion can work in politics, but also in the past I think you've been reported to have advised certain candidates, and you've usually demurred from talking about your specific role in these elections, so I won't press you too much on that.

Let me just ask you in general: What you have learned about persuasion from your participation in, and your study of, the political process?

Robert Cialdini What I've learned is that, like the business community, the political establishment is now embracing behavioural science in making their choices about how to present their candidates, how the candidate should make their cases, and so on.

I just spoke about Trump, and so I can describe a strategy that President Obama used in both of his campaigns, which was to be sure that when there were reports of how much money they had received in donations (they are required to do that every month, every quarter), that campaign didn't just describe the amount of money that they received, they also described the number of contributors, the number of people who donated to the campaign.

The message was, look at all of the people who have decided that this guy is a legitimate candidate. Obama started this, he started doing this. Trump doubled down on it when, at his events, he would instruct the television cameras to turn around and look at the size of the crowd. The multitude was the message. The fact that many people were there – or many people were contributing, in the case of the Obama campaign – that was legitimising for someone who was not a familiar face.

For Obama, he was coming from a background that had never been part of presidential politics before, and Trump was coming from outside of politics, so they needed to legitimise themselves. And the way to do that was to use what we call social proof, evidence that if a lot of other people are doing this, or believing this, it's probably valid.

Cardiff Garcia Was that your idea, by the way? Was that something you advised?

Robert Cialdini No, I observed it though.

Cardiff Garcia There is something else connecting the political landscape with Pre-suasion, which is the role of the media.

There is a famous quote that you include in the book, that the media tells people what to think about though not necessarily what to think (I'm paraphrasing the quote). And that connects directly to your thinking on what it means to capture somebody's attention. Which means that now, because the media's hold on attention is also competing with the ability of candidates to directly appeal to people through social media and other things, the landscape has become a little bit more complicated.

But it also means that candidates can more directly elevate the importance of topics that maybe in the past would not have gotten through the media filter. Do you largely agree with that?

Robert Cialdini I do, and I think that competition now is causing media representatives to see as acceptable forms of information that they wouldn't have seen as acceptable to present before. Information that is sensationalising, for example, but not yet determined to be accurate.

Because it's not an information war, it's an attention war. But the consequence of getting people to pay attention is this is one we talked about earlier – they then get to see that particular focal concept, or that idea, as more important than before. That's troubling.

Cardiff Garcia Can you share with us some of the other points you made in your recent speaking on Trump?

Robert Cialdini Well, I think one of the things that helps explain his election to the presidency is it was a change election. That is, in the last 100 years, every time a given political party has held the White House for two terms, they are 80% more likely to lose the next election. So it was a change election. And Donald Trump was a change candidate, whereas Hillary Clinton was a continuity candidate. So she had a

lot going against her just structurally in the type of election that it was, the psychology of that election.

The other thing that the media was complicit in, though, was to rise to the bait every time that Donald Trump did something outrageous, or scandalous, or unheard of. And that caused Donald Trump to get attention.

He was a master of being able to bring attention to himself, which led to the perception of his importance. If we're paying attention to something, it becomes more important in our minds than it was previously, and what he needed to do was to have this perception of his importance (as a candidate) rise to prominence.

The other thing that paying attention does is to cause us to presume that if we're paying attention to something, [then] it has causal properties. That is, typically we pay attention to the causes in our environment, those things that produce change. It makes sense, environmentally, that we would want to spend our time focusing primarily on the things that are causal, that create change.

Well, if he can get attention brought to him by the media, he becomes seen as a causal agent to a greater extent. And in a change election, that's exactly who's going to win.

Cardiff Garcia Yes, one of my questions is, though, doesn't that reflect a certain amount of instinctive talent on his part that he was able to get that kind of complicity from the media, or from other people who were projecting his message to the base of voters that he was seeking?

Robert Cialdini Right. It was that people were much too focused on the content of what he was saying compared to the fact that attention was being brought to him by this outrageous content, and the side effect of that attention was to make him seem important, and to make him seem a causal agent, which is exactly what a candidate wants, if there's doubt about his or her role in the election.

Cardiff Garcia One last question on Trump. And this might take a bit of a wind up, so I'll ask the question then I'll give you a lot of room to answer it.

One of your biggest admirers, the writer and cartoonist Scott Adams, spotted early on that Trump used a combination of persuasion tactics that were very impressive and that a lot of the other candidates just didn't seem able to deploy.

Here's a few examples. One is that he speaks in very visual terms, so when he labelled some of the other candidates, his competitors, things like Crooked Hillary or Liddle Marco or Low Energy Jeb, these were all things that you could sort of imagine in visual, physical terms. And they tended to stick, they were what Adams called "linguistic kill shots".

Another tactic was that he's very repetitive, and in a previous podcast episode the journalist Joe Weisenthal brought up one of Trump's speeches where he kept repeating that he was a leader, and things like "I like to lead", "leading is what I do", "people are led by me"... in such a way that a lot of pundits would read a transcript of the speech and think, this just looks ridiculous. But in fact most people who were

listening to the speeches don't process them that way. For them, that kind of repetition might work. Again, it just kind of sticks. They hear it a few times and then they keep the association [of Trump and leadership] in their minds.

Another thing Trump did was what Adams calls pacing and leading, where he takes a very extreme position – for instance on immigration, as when he said he's going to deport all undocumented people – so that later on he has credibility with his base of voters when he takes a more moderate position.

And a final one – there's dozens of these – but a final one is the idea of getting people to think past the sale. So when he says that he's going to get Mexico to pay for the wall, and then his opponents say, "well that's ridiculous, they'll never pay for the wall", essentially what's happened is that they've granted one of the premises of what he said, which is that there's going to be a wall in the first place. It's a way of getting them there.

There's a lot more examples, but I guess my question is, both in general and specific terms, do you agree with this idea that Trump is a "master persuader", as Scott Adams likes to say, that he has a unique skill set when it comes to persuading people, at least in the political context?

Robert Cialdini I do, and I think it comes from a long history as a dealmaker, as a business person who has been successful, but also as an entertainer. And an entertainer on television, not somebody who writes or somebody who is a speaker or an orator or something like that. No, this guy is very visual.

So in visual presentations it is the imagery, and in television especially those images are constantly sweeping past us. We don't really get time to stop the frame and think about what was said there. We're onto the next set of images, the next frame, and that stream of imagery is the sort of thing that allows people to make presentations based on appearances as opposed to the content of what they're saying. And he was always very self assured, very confident, always dressed in the classic business person attire and so on, a lot of certainty associated with what he was saying.

And so those impressions, I think, were the kinds of things that he had mastered, and that proved to be very effective in this particular kind of campaign – again, when people were looking for change, and wanted to be assured that this was somebody who was going to steer them in a good direction if that change was going to be afoot.

Cardiff Garcia We're just about out of time, but I've got one last question. In one of his final interviews, on a podcast with David Axelrod before he left office, President Obama said this – I'm just going to read the quote and then ask for your reaction to it – the quote is: "We've got to figure out, how do we show people and communicate in a way that is visceral and makes an emotional connection as opposed to just the facts, because the facts are all in dispute these days."

Robert Cialdini So my comment on that would be the way to do it – if you believe that, and I see there is some validity to it – you do it with images.

People don't counter-argue stories. They don't counter-argue imagery. They counter-argue statements, they counter-argue contentions or assertions or arguments. So if you want to be successful in a post-fact world, you do it by presenting accounts, narratives, stories and images and metaphors.

Now, if you're going to be ethical in that regard, you make sure that those accounts, stories, metaphors and so on reflect the facts. You still have to know the facts, but the idea that the facts are going to carry the day is naïve.

Cardiff Garcia This is a quick follow-on question – I said the last one was my last question, but this is, I promise, my last question, because I know we've got to go. What is an example of a potent metaphor that is ethical and fits the facts and that you believe could be persuasive [in the political context]?

Robert Cialdini What I always prefer is to try to go to some example that has evidence to support it.

There was a study done at Stanford University in which people were exposed to a news account of a rash of crime in their community. And half of them had the crime wave described as a "rampaging beast" that needed to be stopped. The other half had it described as a "rampaging virus" that needed to be stopped.

Those people who saw the account described as a beast then came politically to support capture-and-cage approaches to crime – that is, increased police presence and prosecution and jailing of criminals, because that's what you do for a beast.

Those who saw the crime described as a virus came to support education programmes and neighbourhood enhancements and jobs programmes, because what you do with a virus is you remove the conditions that produce it in the first place.

So that's the kind of way in which it's possible – if indeed there is evidence that the way to reduce crime is by reducing the conditions that make it grow, then that's the metaphor we should use – rather than that it is a rampaging beast, it's virus-like, and that allows the story to be told in a way that comports with the facts.