

Announcing the
Final Examination of
Samuel D. Bradley III
for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communications & Cognitive Science
Friday, June 17, 2005, 12:30 p.m.
Room 271, Radio/TV Center

Dissertation: Exploring the Validity and Reliability of the Acoustic Startle Probe
as a Measure of Attention and Motivation to Television Programming

This study examines the acoustic startle probe's usefulness as a tool to better understand the cognitive processing of television and mediated messages. Television is an emotionally charged medium present in most American's lives. Better understanding how people respond to television will help craft mediated messages that better achieve their goals.

This study draws upon theories of emotion that conceive of behavior being driven by two motivational systems, one appetitive and one aversive. Two experiments were conducted to test hypotheses about motivational activation, the protective function of the orienting reflex, and the interruptive function of the startle reflex. Both self-reported and physiological data were collected in addition to audio and visual recognition measures. The second experiment examined the effects of varying the time between evoked pre-attentive reflexes.

Results showed an interesting interaction between the two reflexes that accords well with a view of cognition that conceives of the perceptual system as trying to optimally perceive the world at any given moment. In addition, the presence of a narrative in a television drama appears to alter motivational responding seen with simpler stimuli. The visual recognition data were formally fit with a connectionist time-delay model, which generally support the overall account.

Outline of Studies

Majors: Mass Communication /
Telecommunications and
Cognitive Science

Educational Career

M.S., Kansas State University, 2001
B.A., New Mexico State University, 1997

Committee in Charge

Professor Annie Lang, Chairperson (812-855-5824), Telecommunications
Associate Professor Erik P. Bucy, Telecommunications
Assistant Professor Julia R. Fox, Cognitive Science and Telecommunications
Associate Professor Michael Gasser, Computer Science and Cognitive Science
Assistant Professor Robert F. Potter, Telecommunications

Approved: _____

Annie Lang, Ph.D.

Samuel D. Bradley III

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Michael Gasser, Ph.D.