



PROMOTING ECOCITIZENSHIP: IN FAVOUR OF BINDING COMMUNICATION

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The purpose of this article is to illustrate the way in which the binding communication paradigm (Joule, Girandola, Bernard, in press) can serve to promote environmentally-friendly values and behavior. This paradigm stands at the crossroad of research conducted in both the fields of communication and of commitment. We will be describing 4 recent studies carried out in the south of France. The first study was conducted in a school, the second in a town, the third study aimed at encouraging environmentally-friendly behavior along the seacoast while the purpose of the fourth study was to promote recycling on highway rest areas.

Keywords: philosophy problems, commitment, communication, behavioral change, environment



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Introduction: the limits of information and persuasion

A prevailing notion about human beings may lead to think that one merely needs to modify the ideas of others to make them behave in the desired way. Information and persuasion are hence widely used to encourage children and adults to adhere to the ideas required for proper social functioning. It seems obvious that, this being done, the proper social behavior will automatically fall into place.

Most major communication campaigns follow this assumption.

But do “good ideas” automatically lead to “proper behavior”? Most likely not. The scientific literature on this topic invites us to be wary as numerous studies have pointed to the gap between good ideas and proper behavior. One of these studies is particularly telling. Peterson, Kealey, Mann, Marek and Sarason (2000) [1] conducted an evaluation of a smoking prevention action (Hutchinson smoking prevention project). From the ages of 8 through 17 years old, the students belonging to an experimental group (about 4000) took part in prevention sessions in class while the students in the control group (also roughly 4000) did not participate in these sessions. The prevention program comprised 65 sessions adapted to each age group and aimed at making the students aware of the negative effects of smoking. As we have already indicated indirectly, the action had no effect on tobacco consumption. Indeed, at the end of the program – when the students were 17 years old – the smoking prevalence was not lower in the experimental group than in the control group despite the fact that the students were fully aware of the negative effects of smoking. Of course, this does not mean that information and persuasion are useless. There is no question that, through time, information and persuasion help to change knowledge, modify attitudes and most certainly induce genuine awareness. Information and persuasion are therefore necessary but not sufficient on their own.

Theoretical option: binding communication

For this reason we have deemed it necessary to connect certain disciplines from the fields of human and social sciences, more specifically we want to bring together researchers from social psychology and researchers from the Sciences of Information and Communication [2, 3].

For the time being, our suggestion is to bring together in a single basic paradigm, on the one hand, studies on communication in general and on persuasive communication, and studies on commitment on the other hand. We call this paradigm binding communication [4]. Studies on commitment [5, 6, 7] show that it does not take much sometimes to go from “good ideas” to “proper behavior”.

We do not intend to go over Lewin’s studies (1947) [8] and the discovery of the freezing effect, which may be regarded as the starting point of research on commitment. Lewin’s famous action-research shows the advantage of securing decisions – commitments – from the people whose behavior one seeks to change. Most of these decisions need to be prepared. A good way of preparing people is to lead them to take a small step in the right direction by making them comply with an innocuous request, which we call a “preparatory action”.

The foot-in-the-door procedure

The foot-in-the-door procedure [9] is a good illustration of this. Its principle consists in making a small request (preparatory action) prior to a more substantial one (expected behavior). Results can be spectacular. For instance, Freedman and Fraser managed to multiply by four the likelihood that a person will comply to a costly request (to install a large road sign in their backyard) if this request is preceded by a less costly one likely to be accepted by almost everyone (putting up a small sign promoting safe driving on their window). In research on the foot-in-the-door procedure, the expected behavior can be to put up a big sign in one’s backyard as in the aforementioned Freedman et Fraser experiment, but it can also be, for instance, having a person agree to take part in a lengthy survey, stop smoking, make a donation, etc. The range of behaviors obtained with this procedure can be quite wide [7].

Taken as a whole, the foot-in-the-door studies [10, 11] show that the likelihood of securing consent is higher when the points made – or the information given – are preceded by a preparatory action. However, the preparatory action must have certain characteristics for it to produce the expected outcome [12]. Ideally

- 1) it must actually be carried out (one must not be satisfied with behavioral intentions);
- 2) there must be a certain cost attached to it;
- 3) it must involve the same action identification as the final request;
- 4) no financial compensation should be attached to the action and, generally speaking, no promise of reward should be made.

In short, the preparatory action must be carried out in a context of commitment: free choice, public nature of the action, consequences of the action [6], i.e. in conditions such that subjects are able to explain the action by internal factors (their convictions, their values...), rather than by external factors (pressures inherent to the situation, promises of reward or threat of punishment).

We would like to exemplify how we recently called upon the binding communication paradigm to promote environmentally-friendly values, and more importantly, environmentally-friendly behavior.

Illustrations: four studies carried out in the south of France

Study 1.

Promoting environmentally-friendly behavior in 9-10-year-old schoolchildren and their parents

The first study [13] was carried out in 11 primary schools within the “Académie des Alpes-Maritimes” (a French regional school authority). It was conducted at the request of the Service of the Environment and Energy of the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d’Azur administrative region within the framework of the European project ALTENER. The aim of this project, which took place during the 2002-2003 school year, was to encourage 9 and 10-year-old schoolchildren and their parents to develop environmentally-friendly behavior. 700 families along with 28 teachers were involved.

Throughout the course of the weeks, the schoolchildren carried out four main preparatory actions. The first preparatory action was to determine what the environmentally-friendly and energy-saving “good practices” and “not so good practices” in their school were. In a second preparatory action the children were asked to do the same at home by taking notes of family habits that could be changed without causing much inconvenience. The third preparatory action involved parents who were asked to help their child fill in a lengthy questionnaire about energy savings at home (preparatory action for the parents). In the fourth preparatory action, the families were asked to put a sticker in favor of the preservation of the environment on the home fridge.

At the end of the school year, each child and then each family was encouraged to make a public and written commitment to change at least one or two of their habits, for example for the children: to take a shower instead of a bath and for the parents: to leave the car at home when traveling short distances or to switch off the sleep mode on the television set. These commitments were made more official through the signing of two forms: the child signed one in the classroom, and the child and the family jointly signed one at home. A big exhibition was organized at the end of the school year. The exhibition was the opportunity to show the families the projects in favor of the protection of the environment and of energy savings (posters, films, pictures, CD-ROMs...) developed by the children during the school year. A certificate signed by the President of the Region, by the Inspector of Schools and by the teacher was presented to the families during the exhibition.

The conclusions are very positive. A vast majority of children and their parents (100 % in some classes), made a written pledge to carry out specific actions likely to decrease energy consumption (for example always switch off the sleep mode on the television set, etc.). In addition, the dynamic set in motion by this approach led to specific actions such as: switching from ordinary bulbs to low energy bulbs in some schools, or installing paper recycling bins in other schools, etc. Finally, some students sent a letter to local authorities to request, for

instance, that light timers be installed in school corridors or that safety be improved along the pedestrian walks leading to the school. These initiatives enabled the school children to experience responsible citizenship first hand and to integrate the desired citizen values.

Study 2. Promoting ecocitizenship in a town

The purpose of the second study [14] was to promote ecocitizenship in the context of a whole town. It was also conducted at the request of the Service of the Environment and Energy of the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d’Azur. The study was carried out in a mid-size town (experimental town). For control purposes, a “classic” communication campaign (posters, brochures, stickers, etc.) was launched in parallel in a comparable town (control town). The same communication support tools were used in both the experimental and the control towns, but in addition, as in study 1, the local residents were asked to carry out preparatory actions and to make commitments. A collective of “relays” was set up on a voluntary basis for this purpose. This group was made up of public authorities, heads of local institutions, teachers, association activity leaders, and shop owners. Each relay was in charge of initiating a specific eco-friendly action involving as many people as possible from his or her close environment (schools, outdoor centers, youth clubs and art centers, sports clubs, tenant and landlord associations, etc.). Their actions, which were in fact preparatory actions, were made public during a Special Events Day – a significant preparatory action – so that everyone could know and see what the others had concretely done for the preservation of the environment. Different events (exhibitions, public debates with local authorities, etc) were organized on this Special Events Day, which took place on a Sunday. But first and foremost, this represented an opportunity of securing concrete commitments from the residents as young students asked them and their families to sign a commitment form. Parents and children could choose from a list of ten possible commitments (for example: take a shower instead of a bath, reduce driving speed by 10 km/h, purchase low energy light bulbs, etc.)

Each signed commitment form was symbolized by a sun icon which was immediately attached to a big net installed on Town Hall Square. A glimpse at the net enabled to follow the progression of the number of commitments made throughout the day. More than 500 commitment forms were signed in that single day. It seems that the action had a real impact on behavior. Indeed, during the year the study took place and compared to the previous year, average consumption per annum for each household increased less (6 %) than in the control town (14 %).

And there is more: other signs point to the fact that a new and – hopefully – sustainable dynamic may be in the making. The collective of “relays” wishes to pursue the operation. They perceive the work accomplished as a starting point rather than a final outcome. And even Town Hall has decided to pitch in by, on the one hand, subsidizing training modules for local artisans (in particular heating

specialists) who want to improve their professional expertise through better control of energy consumption, and on the other hand, making the collective permanent and encouraging its initiatives. Since then, the collective has been setting up events on a yearly basis to develop awareness about energy savings and the protection of the environment. It therefore seems that the operation has triggered off a dynamic most likely to sustain itself.

Study 3. Promoting ecocitizenship along the seacoast

The third study [15] was carried out along the Mediterranean seacoast (French Riviera). It was conducted at the request of the Service of the Environment and Energy of the Provence-Alpes-Côtes d'Azur administrative region and of the Environment and Energy Control Agency. This time, the aim was to promote ecocitizenship among sea users (sailors, sea professionals...). The study was carried out within the framework of a collaboration between the Laboratory of Social Psychology of the University of Provence and the "Ecogestes" collective, made up of 16 organizations practicing environment education, that is nearly 50 "sea ambassadors" going to meet users (particularly sailors) directly at sea. The study goal was precisely to improve the intervention plan used by the ambassadors to encourage sea users to modify some of their behaviors so as to preserve the Mediterranean coast.

In practical terms, when they were approached by the ambassadors, the sea users were first led to accept an immediate interview of about twenty minutes on the theme of sea preservation (first preparatory action). Within the framework of this interview, the sea users received information and advices linked to the sea preservation. Their active participation was sought during the whole interview. For example, they were asked for their opinion on the most relevant advices to give to other sea users (second preparatory action). At the end of the interview, the sea users were invited to accept the presentation of a booklet (third preparatory action). This booklet, free, comprised information about sea faun and sea flora and advices to preserve the Mediterranean Sea. As in the first two studies, the sea users were eventually invited to sign a commitment form. They could choose from a list of behaviors those they committed themselves to adopt from now on at sea, for example, to anchor their boat in the sand rather than in the Posidony seagrass bed, to use natural soaps, or to use detergents including an ecolabel. At last, the sea users could put on their boat, if they wanted it, the Ecogeste campaign pennant, so as to serve as an example in terms of environment preservation (reinforcement of commitment via the public characteristic of the action).

During summer, more than 5000 sea users were approached. The intervention procedure used was such that almost all of them accepted, at the end of the interview, to sign the commitment form, thus committing themselves to modify one or more of their behaviors.

In order to assess the intervention impact, the ambassadors got in contact again with some sea users

"committed" during the summer season. These ones were easily spotted thanks to the pennant floating on their boat. Within the framework of a new interview, the ambassadors tested their knowledge about the sea environment and about proper behaviors to adopt to work for its preservation. They also collected, by direct observation, pieces of information about actual behaviors on board (anchorage, type of soap or type of cleaning product).

What clearly emerged from this data collection is that committed sea users, compared to those who were not approached for the first interview (control condition), 1) had a better knowledge of the sea environment and the way to preserve it, and 2) had adopted more ecological behaviors on board: for example, they were significantly more numerous to use natural soap (53 % vs 39 %) or detergents including an ecolabel (56 % vs 24 %), or to anchor in the sand (75 % vs 60 %). Thus, the binding-communication plan used on the sea users enabled to result in the expected cognitive and behavioral effects.

In the three studies mentioned above, whether they were geared towards the promotion of ecocitizenship in school children and their families (study 1), in town residents (study 2) or along the seacoast (study 3), the subjects (children and adults) were led to carry out preparatory actions and to sign a commitment form. We must emphasize the fact that in all three instances, the subjects massively agreed to sign the commitment form. Indeed close to 90 % of those approached agreed to sign. There is good reason to be optimistic, bearing in mind the fact that a written commitment is generally kept [16].

The use of binding communication, as it has been conducted in studies 1, 2 and 3, does have however one "practical" drawback: ideally it entails several direct contacts with the people whose behavior one is trying to modify. Indeed it is thanks to these contacts that the canvasser(s) secure(s) preparatory actions first and commitments later on. In a broader sense, these contacts initiate social dynamics (collective ambition, shared values) and promote genuine education on environmental issues (knowledge transfer, distribution of brochures, advice and recommendations, etc.)

Study 4. Promoting litter recycling on a highway rest area

The objective of a fourth study [17] was to determine if it was at all possible to use a binding communication procedure in an efficient way without any contact whatsoever with the subjects (hence without the education phase about the environment), and without having the subject sign a commitment form. The study was carried out on a highway rest area and its purpose was to encourage motorists to recycle their litter. There was no direct interaction with motorists, a media plan (audio messages, posters, etc.) was used instead. The first major decision was to remove the traditional litter bins. The second decision entailed dividing by two the number of spots where motorists could discard their litter so as to secure from them a preparatory action (i.e. to carry their

litter on a distance of several meters) without any contact with them. As recycling was available on each of these spots, the customers who had made the effort of carrying their litter had a decision to make: either recycle (recycle containers were available) or discard without recycling (traditional bins). A sign was placed in full view just above the containers. One could read "I RECYCLE" in bold and "For the planet, for my children and for my children's children" in small print. The motorists were thus encouraged to make the expected eco-friendly choice by conveying the idea that their action has a higher overall purpose [18]. This way of doing things enabled to multiply by almost three the tons of packages recycled in a year on this particular highway rest area.

Conclusion

The four studies presented here have one thing in common: they are based on the securing of preparatory action(s). This is actually quite a feat as it entails changing the "target's" status from mere receiver – as it is often the case in more traditional communication campaigns – to actor. These preparatory actions have a twofold advantage: 1) they will increase the probability of achieving the expected eco-friendly behaviors; 2) they will make the subjects more aware of the educational or persuasive pro-environment messages they may later encounter.

We are, of course, still convinced that the main questions to be answered in the context of an action of communication remain as follows: "What is the right information to convey?", "What are the best arguments to put forth?", "What are the best channels, tools, supports, and media?", "What are the most relevant practices with regard to knowledge transfer?", etc. To these, we would add another question which we deem as important as the others: "What are the preparatory actions that we must obtain from the people whose collaboration we are seeking?" By conferring to the target the status of actor, the answer to this question will therefore separate the "binding" communication approach from a more "traditional" approach.

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