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How Audiences Evaluate Motivation in Messages: Theory and Investigation

This paper proposes a new theoretical construct of an aspect of communication that has apparently not been addressed by scholars: how, during the process of communication, the motivation of the message sender is evaluated. The authors developed a model of message processing that focuses on what they call “motivation”, or receiver interpretation of codes that suggest the motivation of the sender. Important factors are considered, such as previous attitudes, source, dimensions of motivation, verbal and nonverbal codes, sincerity, and changes throughout the process of communication interaction. One section of this methodology was applied to five Kazakhstani websites, as a pilot study to help refine and improve the concept, and the results suggest that the “motivation” approach has the potential of being useful for the study of all kinds of communication.

Keywords: motivation, message production, message interpretation, message evaluation

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Как публика (получатели) оценивает мотивацию в сообщении: теория и исследование

В данной работе предлагается новая теоретическая конструкция аспекта коммуникаций, которая, видимо, не была рассмотрена учеными: как в процессе коммуникации оценивается мотивация отправителя сообщения. Авторы разработали новую модель обработки сообщений, которая фокусируется на том, что они называют “motivation”, или трактование получателя кодов, которое предполагает мотивацию отправителя. Здесь рассматриваются такие важные факторы, как предварительные отношения, источник, размер мотивации, вербальные и невербальные коды, искренность и изменения на протяжении всего процесса коммуникативного воздействия.

Один из разделов этой методологии был применен к пяти казахстанским веб-сайтам в качестве пилотного исследования, чтобы помочь усовершенствовать и улучшить концепцию, и результаты показывают, что у подхода “motivation” есть потенциал быть полезным для изучения всех видов коммуникаций.

Ключевые слова: мотивация, создание сообщения, интерпретация сообщения, оценка сообщения.

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Жұрт (хабарлама алушылар) хабарламадағы мотивацияны қалайша бағалайды: теория мен зерттеу.

Бұл жұмыста коммуникация аспектінің жаңа теориялық құрылымы ұсынылады, алайда бұл ғалымдармен қарастырылған жоқ: коммуникация үрдісі кезінде хабарлама жіберушінің мотивациясы бағаланады. Авторлар «motivation» немесе жіберуші мотивациясын сипаттайтын кодтарды алушының түсіндірмесі деп аталатын хабарламаларды өңдеудің жаңа моделін құрастырды. Бұл бөлімде алдын ала қатынастар, көз (источник), мотивация көлемі, вербалды және вербалды емес кодтар, адалдылық және коммуникациялық әсер ету үрдісі кезіндегі өзгерістер сияқты маңызды факторлар қарастырылады.

Бұл аспектіні зерттеу жазбалары жұмысқа қосылуда. Осы методология бөлімдерінің бірі тұжырымдаманы жетілдіру және жақсарту мақсатында бес қазақстандық веб-сайттарда алғашқы зерттеу ретінде қолданылады. Нәтижелер «motivation» амалында коммуникацияның барлық түрлерін зерттеу үшін пайдалы болуының әлеуеті бар екенін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: мотивация, хабарламаны құрастыру, хабарламаны талдау, хабарламаны бағалау.

During the communication process, a key aspect of meaning reception is the perception of the motivation of the communicator. Attitudes and responses are substantially shaped by our

understanding of the purposes of the sender. A central aspect of responses to any message is receiver evaluation of the motivation of the sender. The same message, through the same medium,

from the same sender can be evaluated very differently by receivers depending on the encoded expressions of the sender's motivations to send the message. This is why, in professional communication, so much effort is put not only into the specific content of the message, but also into presenting it in any ways to ensure that the motivation of the sender is positive and therefore that it will be trusted and accepted as much as possible.

As a reminder, we can consider communication as having four main forms: unidirectional (when no response is possible or allowed), interpersonal, mediated (with the option of sequence but not true interactivity), and interactive. In each case, though in somewhat different ways, motivation is evaluated in ways that influence the receivers' attitudes and behaviors toward the message and the sender.

The examples of sender motivation as evaluated by receivers are nearly endless. Journalists in the West try to convince audiences that the purpose of their report is to benefit society, and a major reason for mistrust of journalism is the increasing assumptions that they have ulterior motives. Similarly, the ways that a citizen understands and responds to or ignores a politician's request for donations depends to a major degree on whether that person believes that

the politician's message is motivated by a desire for power, constituent service or personal gain. When someone asks us to believe them, we automatically evaluate whether this request reflects a desire to manipulate us, develop the relationship, etc.

For example, when someone on the street asks for money, we will often decide whether to give money depending on our evaluation of whether they want it for alcohol, for their children, or for some unknown purpose. Public Relations messages can only instill trust and respect if the practitioners can craft messages that convince target publics of their client's sincerity, good character, willingness to listen, and so on.

In some ways, the advent of the Internet only increases the centrality of evaluating motivation. Internet users now have access to, and communication with, a virtually limitless number of people and institutions they know very little if at all, and who ask for the most precious commodity in the Online Age: time. In this situation, receivers

of online messages need to evaluate very quickly, based on minimal information, how they feel about and respond to the messages.

This topic is interesting and significant in itself, and appropriate for academic investigation, because of the complexity of motivation and its expression in messages. In other words, since motivation can be extremely complex, its evaluation by receivers will inevitably be equally or more complex because of additional receiver factors such as attitude toward the category of sender.

If we accept that receivers evaluate the motivations of the senders-- widely acknowledged among professional communicators, at least implicitly-- it seems important to theorize and operationalize a research approach into the synthesized process the authors call "motivation." This is a separate component of the reception process because it focuses on indications within the message of the sender's state of mind, which is clearly different than the content of the message itself or the receivers' assumptions and attitudes towards the message content. Apparently, in the communication and psychology literature, this aspect of message reception has not been identified, theorized or investigated.

Goals of the research

The present paper a) posits this discrete aspect of the reception process-- evaluation of motivation-- b) suggests the dimensions and characteristics of how motivation is encoded in messages and decoded by receivers, c) proposes a research protocol to investigate this phenomenon -- both within messages and within the reception of audiences -- and d) applies this protocol in a small pilot study to test and refine the concept, theory, and method. It is somewhat unusual in linking aspects of the message with aspects of reception of that message. In other words, the approach could concurrently investigate implicit and explicit signs of motivation within the message and compare those two the interpretations of receivers.

What makes motivation and its evaluation by receivers meaningful is that they serve as a bridge between a) perceptions of character and other traits b) expectations of actions and c) possible or planned responses. As noted by some scholars, it is not enough to want something: receivers also need to know what individuals and organizations plan to do; motivation links internal and actionable

states because it demonstrates attitudes that often lead to a response.

One significance of this new approach is that it adds an important dimension of communication that has been absent in the otherwise well-developed fields of message production and audience reception. Also potentially valuable is its future practical capacity to help senders know how to identify and embed suggestions of desirable motivation within messages, and help receivers know how to better understand and interpret indicators of motivation within messages. Finally, this approach will give researchers an additional, perhaps complementary, means to investigate messages. As suggested above, it could give researchers a valuable new tool for understanding the links between the content of messages, the conclusions and interpretations of receivers, and the factors within the receivers that help shape those conclusions and interpretations.

Literature review

As noted above, the author could find no research into this aspect of the reception process. However, for the sake of context, it is valuable to note research that has been done in related aspects of communication.

A tremendous body of research has been devoted to how investigators can themselves understand the motivation of various individuals and groups. Especially important is research into how motivations are constructed by receivers, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action. Similar well-known and influential concepts are led by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid and Motivation Theory. While this is a valuable and interesting approach, it does not at all reflect the reception within ordinary people during the communication process.

Another major set of research has been devoted to effective ways to increase motivation, especially in employees and consumers, and to a lesser extent in voters. For many decades, it has been understood that motivation leads to attention which leads to behavior, making this a very important topic for those who want to influence the motivation of people. However, again this does not focus on, or even particularly recognize, how motivation is perceived by message senders. Rather, it assumes a unified meaning of motivation within a few categories, and assumes that this is directly and accurately received by employers, advertisers, etc. It also assumes one way communication in the sense

that the motivations are recognized by those who want to improve them, then acted on unilaterally to improve attitudes, etc. While very worthwhile to those in a management position, it does not at all consider the process through which the motives of the employee is understood by the employer, nor vice versa. In essence, these two perceptions are sequential rather than interactive.

Theoretical construct

In contrast to the relatively simplistic depictions of motivation of previous work, the present study attempts to fully conceptualize and usefully specify the complex yet almost instantaneous process through which a receiver makes sense of the motivations of the sender. By attempting to fully represent this psychological aspect of the process of reception, the author hopes to lay a groundwork that can, over time, the refinements that allow meaningful analysis of signs and motivation within texts, as well as the perceptions and interpretations of those signs by receivers of the texts.

A possible conceptual framework for understanding and investigating this aspect of communication was developed by the authors. It proposes that:

1. Anyone within a communication interaction constantly seeks and identifies, evaluates, and reevaluates the motivation of the sender of the message, whether that is interpersonal, mass mediated, or Internet interactive. In other words, although the sender and the message cannot be extricated, they are treated somewhat separately by receivers.

2. All messages contain "motivation codes" or indicators (whether they are honest and accurate or manipulative and deceitful) of the motivation of the sender. A code is an identifiable unit of information about the motivation of the sender, as encoded within the message. For example, the sender might both say in words and suggest in images that their product will benefit the user; this code would then be accepted, negotiated, or rejected by the receiver.

3. Communication acts are not written on a blank slate, so the foundation of motivation is the previous experience and/or knowledge of the sender. In any reception process, the receiver already has an attitude about the ways and degrees to which the sender's motivations are desirable or not. When a voter sees the political advertisement of a political campaign, he or she begins with a

number of assumptions about the motivations of the candidate, based on (for example) reports on previous statements and actions by that candidate, on comments made by friends and family members or media professionals, etc. A core concept of the theory proposed here is that motivational conclusions are not only created, but are almost always adapted, whether for better or for worse, during the course of the interaction.

4. In many cases, the source of the message itself will have some impact on motivation. When the source is unknown, and even more when it is suspicious, it is difficult or impossible for a desirable motivation to be inferred. For example, a message from a respected news organization will be evaluated very differently than one from an obvious bulk email. When the receiver has an overwhelmingly positive experience with the sender, this factor might be minimal. On the other hand, when the receiver's existing attitudes toward the sender are negative or neutral, the evaluation of motivation might depend heavily on the source with its degree of credibility and trust.

5. Meanings are projected through motivation codes that are both verbal and nonverbal. For example, in Western culture direct eye contact and a firm handshake are indicators of honesty and forthrightness. In a corporate website, the designers could use photographs of the owner with lighting that suggests naturalness, an expression that suggests relaxed concern, and words that project concern for potential or existing customers. Claims of a history of quality service are more than product endorsements; they suggest that this history proves a motivation of concern and professionalism that will be offered to any future customers who use that service.

6. The five main axes of motivation, according to this preliminary concept, are identity, dominance, sincerity, confidence and intention. "Identity" codes suggest that the message sender and receiver have similar values, activities, goals... In other words, motivations. Of course, messages can include codes that contradict identity. "Dominance" codes refer to indicators that the sender sees him or herself as dominant, submissive, or equal. Depending on the situation, and the goals of the sender, any of these three might be desirable to encode within the message. "Intention" codes are explicit or implicit references to expected action. If the receiver

concludes that the sender will do something on the basis of their motivation, the significance of the motivation becomes greater because it is likely to have greater impact on the receiver or those he or she cares about. "Sincerity" codes indicate human credibility and direct social contact between the speaker and the audience. "Confidence" codes effectively suggest credibility and certainty within the speaker; this might lead audiences to trust the motivation of the speaker.

7. A particular strength of the approach proposed here is that it includes at least the possibility of interaction. The great majority of theories about message reception assume a singular and static conclusion, however complex this might be. However, "Motivation" assumes that our view of the motives of a message sender or anything but static. Over the course of a series of communication interactions, such as emails on a particular topic, a receiver is almost certain to adjust their understanding of the motivation of the sender. However, as is increasingly true, most people – especially those online – are both senders and receivers... In the email example above, the interactors take turns being senders and receivers, and their mutual evaluations of the motivation of the other will probably change depending on the nature of the messages. This ongoing reevaluation could amount to a spiral of trust or mistrust, depending on the nature of the communication.

8. An additional, important part of the evaluation of motivation is an assessment of the sincerity of the message. Those who send messages can no longer assume that receivers will trust them simply because they are asked to; they can almost assume the opposite, except in relationships of extreme trust. An interesting example is posts on Facebook or similar sites, such as vKontakte, that require receivers to decide the degree of sincerity and factuality in each. For example, many users of such sites receive requests for money to help a sick child, and they must decide the degree to which this request is motivated by real concern for the child or by a desire for easy money. This is another example of the need for concepts of communication that accommodate the new interactivity of communication, which is conducted through new media and Internet at an increasing pace.

9. It is naturally impossible to assume that any or all receivers would "correctly" or "accurately"

discern the codes within messages, even if it were possible to assess objective accuracy (which, of course, it is not). Any researcher who has done reception studies has found the inconsistency and incompleteness of receivers' perceptions of any aspect of the message. Rather, this approach has the valuable potential of comparing message codes with receiver interpretations, finding patterns of interpretations, and perhaps assigning sources for apparent variations within these patterns. In any case,

10. For convenience, the motivalution concept can be represented in diagrammatic form (see figure 1). Although this is represented as a linear "flow", in any real communication situation the codes for each section could come at any point in the message, and the interpretation or evaluation by receivers might not follow the simplified process suggested by the diagram. Far from being a problem, it offers an additional analytical opportunity because, in a complete study of the entire motivalution process, it might be possible to identify different evaluation impacts of a different order within the communication interaction.

Pilot study

Method: The authors analyzed the motivation codes within five news websites (24KZ, BBC Global, Russia, KTK and BBC News). This pilot study tentatively assessed the functionality of the motivalution construct, as related to motivation codes within messages. In that sense, to some degree this was an inductive, empirical exploration of the construct in "real-world" conditions as part of an effort to assess and expand its reflection of reality and its viability.

1. Codes within news as presented on the station websites were first evaluated for source information. If the sites had only corporate origination, or if on the other hand outside sources were included, these codes were noted for later analysis and comparison.

2. Codes that reflect the five putative dimensions of motivation were then identified and noted, each in both verbal and nonverbal aspects. In other words, words that suggest identity, and images or sounds that also suggest identity, were first noted. Then the same procedure was followed with words and images that suggest dominance and intention.

3. At this point, both verbal and nonverbal codes that suggest sincerity were identified. These are, if possible, differentiated from codes related to

identity – although the two in practice are likely to be very similar. Sincerity codes might be, for example, self-deprecation or admission of limitations, images of a candidate listening to constituents, etc.

4. In a full study of unidirectional or mediated communication, data on the initial evaluation, conclusion, and attitude would be collected at this point for analysis. If this approach were used for interpersonal or interactive communication (i.e., a conversation or direct online interaction such as a chat or series of forum posts), the analysis would then continue throughout the sequence of response and counter response, to analyze the adjustments in motivalution throughout the interaction.

Results

After applying the analytical construct, the authors found that the five newscasts displayed, to varying and sometimes revealing degrees, motivation codes: Identity, Dominance, Intention, Sincerity, and Confidence. To summarize the findings:

A variety of Identity codes were present, with some newscasters much more concerned to project similarity to ordinary viewers in their clothing and actions, while others showed codes that displayed a lack of identity.

The range of Dominance codes was very clear, although in practice these were difficult to distinguish from those of Identity. The anchor in the KTK news displayed especially clear signs of dominance, with indications of expertise. Russian newscasters displayed far more dominance codes than the more "down to earth" BBC presenters.

Intention codes were explicit and verbal but fairly limited, in most cases restricted to formulaic mentions of news later in the program.

Sincerity codes were very strong and explicit, since the anchors showed a number of nonverbal cues, such as direct eye contact and policies to indicate naturalness.

Although many Confidence codes were observed, such as forceful speech, their variation was moderate and mostly linked to related but distinct codes such as maturity and degree of experience.

Discussion

Based on this limited pilot study, it appears that the Motivalution construct and approach has genuine value for understanding an understudied,

even neglected, aspect of the communication process. Although this study did not apply the full approach to include interactive communication, the authors believe that this would show the benefit of the approach after its modification and refinement. The results and their implications lead to as many questions as answers, such as how to distinguish related codes such as Identity and Dominance. This study does not and cannot address the degree of truthfulness and manipulation within the codes displayed, although further application of this approach could help identify “micro-expressions” that can be used to understand the honesty within expressions.

This study also brought out the related and inherent issue of conventions. In newscasts in particular, the journalists are heavily constrained by training and professional expectations, which seems to dramatically constrain their expressions of motivation. It seems clear that newscasters are especially unable to freely express motivation in the messages. Given that, the fact that a wide range of codes were observable suggests the viability of this approach in more-natural communication applications.

The centrality of receiver evaluation of motivation in messages and interactions appears

very clear and valuable for future research. This evaluation seemingly could have an impact on interpretation, and a much greater impact on attitudes that lead to intentions and responses. In a world of communication that increasingly demands selection and interpretation of masses of information in interactive formats, analyzing and understanding the role of motivation appears well worthwhile.

The approach could be applied to analysis of online communication, which is increasingly interactive, during which motivation must be very quickly assessed before the website user decides to respond and/or move on to a different site. This approach could complement current research into message production, framing and other content elements, and the interpretation of messages.

The approach might also have practical value. Those who produce messages could be trained in how to decide on a motivation profile they want to project, and make sure that codes directed toward that profile are included. Students could be trained in a “media literacy” program on how to identify and find patterns in the motivation encoded within messages. Students who take a public speaking course could learn how to include and project codes that make the evaluations of their listeners more positive.

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