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Communicating Necessary Evils: The Role of Expressive and Diffusive Capabilities

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ABSTRACT

Communicating harmful messages in order to accomplish organizational goals is an unfortunate, yet unavoidable part of organizational life. Because “necessary evil” messages are often of personal consequence to the receiver, it is important the communication process be designed in a way that will minimize harm caused to both messengers and receivers without compromising communication performance. This can be difficult to accomplish. When designing necessary evil communication, messengers may select from a variety of media with multiple features. In this paper, I distinguish between two types of media capabilities, expressive and diffusive, and explain how features of the media selected for message communication differentially affect the messenger and receiver, as well as the clarity and fidelity of the message. The objective of this paper is to explain how the psychological and physical challenges faced by the messenger and receiver affect the relationship between expressive and diffusive media capabilities and communication performance.

Keywords

Media features, expressive capabilities, diffusive capabilities, necessary evil, bad news, symbol set variety, transmission velocity, parallelism, rehearsability, reprocessability, communication

INTRODUCTION

“Parents Learn of Pupil’s Death by Text Message.” “Heroes Sacked by Email.” “Radio Shack Deletes 400 People Over the Internet.” It is not uncommon to see news headlines such as these on the front page of newspapers or on Internet news sites. The recent downturn in the economy has necessitated organizational communication of a great deal of bad news. This, in combination with the ever-increasing number of media options available, has resulted in opacity regarding what types of media are appropriate for the delivery of potentially harmful messages.

Bad news messengers often succumb to the “mum effect” or fall into a dysfunctional conversations when overcome by the psychological and physical challenges of message communication (Molinsky & Margolis, 2006; Rosen & Tesser, 1970). In order to avoid these challenges, messengers may employ collaborative technologies that create distance between communicating parties (Folger & Starlicki, 2001). While communication media can ease the challenges faced by messengers, receivers may be offended if the message is not delivered in a socially acceptable, sensitive way. When messengers fail to deliver bad news sensitively, receivers are more likely to view the message as unjust rather than simply unfortunate, resulting in an escalation of negative consequences (Timmerman & Harrison, 2005). Negative consequences to individuals may include: anger, turnover, job dissatisfaction, life dissatisfaction, work-family conflict, psychological distress, or physical ailments (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Tepper, 2000; Weiss et. al., 1999). Negative consequences for the organization may include: reduced employee satisfaction, lower normative commitment, lower affective commitment, theft, absenteeism, reduced organizational citizenship behavior, incivility spirals, or even outright sabotage (Ambrose et. al., 2002; Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Starlicki & Folger, 1997).

Attributions of justice will be highest when bad news messages are conveyed with fidelity and clarity and the communicating parties converge upon shared understanding (Timmerman & Harrison, 2005). It is of consequence, then, how media features affect message conveyance and convergence. The objective of this paper is to explain how the psychological states of the messenger and receiver affect the relationship between media capabilities and communication performance. In the sections that follow, I first set up the boundary conditions for the paper. Subsequently, I discuss informing theories and distinguish between two types of media features. Then, I discuss how these two categories of media features affect the challenges faced by the messenger and receiver. Next, I define communication performance as a function of conveyance and convergence and discuss the relationship between the challenges faced and communication performance. I conclude by elaborating on the theoretical and practical implications of this research and offering suggestions for future research directions.

NECESSARY EVIL

The “doing of harm in order to do good” in one’s professional life is called a “necessary evil” (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). Necessary evils are task/acts that inflict “physical or emotional pain on another human being in order to benefit that person, someone else, an organization, or society” (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005: 247). The three distinguishing characteristics that define necessary evils are: (1) a valued objective requires that they be done, hence making them necessary; (2) they inflict ineradicable harm, and therefore entail evil; and (3) they are integral to the role the performer occupies, thus making them mandatory (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Examples of necessary evils include: managerial layoffs (Wiesenfeld et al., 2000), teachers communicating constructive criticism to students (Palmer, 1998), doctors giving shots, police evicting tenants, and counselors demonstrating tough love (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008). When professionals must communicate bad news to further organizational objectives, they are performing a necessary evil.

Bad news is a rather vague term, which can describe a variety of messages communicated for a variety of reasons. For the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on unfortunate information that has meaningful repercussions for the intended recipient of the message. The temporal context I address is the immediate moment of message delivery. The physical context I discuss is an organizational environment in which a professional must communicate the negative effects that the accomplishment of an organizational objective will have on an individual. That individual could be an employee, a customer, or anyone else who is affected by the organization’s agenda.

MEDIA CAPABILITIES

Three important theories have shaped current understanding on communicating necessary evil messages; they are: social presence, media richness, and media synchronicity. Social presence theory focuses on the subjective feelings of personal, social, and sensitive human contact during the communication process (Short et al., 1976). Media richness theory built on social presence theory to explain feelings of social presence by categorizing technologies according to the richness of the communication experience the technology allows (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Recently, media synchronicity theory was developed to tie together existing research on media capabilities (Dennis et al., 2008). According to media synchronicity theory, the capabilities of collaborative technologies can be described as a function of five media features: symbol set variety, rehearsability, parallelism, transmission velocity, and reprocessability. By studying collaborative technologies at the feature level, researchers can extend the generalizability of their findings to appropriate technologies that have not yet been invented, rather than necessitating research replications every time a new technology emerges. See table 1 for a description of each feature.

Table 1: Media Capabilities as described in Dennis et al., 2008

| Media Capability | Description |
|--------------------|---|
| Symbol Set Variety | Symbol sets refer to nonverbal social cues exchanged between parties. These social cues can be anything from word selection to a smile. Examples of symbol sets for high synchronous media include handshakes, eye contact, and facial expressions. Examples of symbol sets for low synchronous media include email attachments of graphs, smiley faces made out of colons and parentheses, and salutation wording. |
| Rehearsability | Rehearsability refers to the capability of the media to accommodate messenger review and careful wording of the message with great attention to detail. Media that enable careful wording allow the messenger to communicate complex information in a straightforward way that will enhance the probability that the receiver will be able to clearly understand the complexities of the message. |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Parallelism | Parallelism refers to the capability of a media to accommodate a message being sent out to multiple parties at once. For example, email allows the sender to convey a message to many people at once, whereas voicemail only allows the messenger to communicate a message to one person at a time. |
| Transmission Velocity | Transmission velocity refers to the speed with which a message can be delivered and the level of interaction that can take place. High synchronous interactions, such as face-to-face, allow for speedy message delivery and interaction among parties. Lower levels of transmission velocity force corresponding parties to communicate in turn. |
| Reprocessability | Reprocessability refers to the capability of the media to accommodate decoding of the message, followed by reexamination and reprocessing of the message. Media that allow the receiver to access externally recorded memory allow the receiver of the message to return to an external document again and again, reprocessing the message multiple times. |

EXPRESSIVE AND DIFFUSIVE CAPABILITIES

Certain media features have a greater effect on messengers' ability to express complex messages (i.e. emotional, detailed, lengthy). Specifically, symbol set variety, rehearsability, and parallelism have the greatest impact on message expression. Symbol sets facilitate expression of meaning by providing a greater number and variety of interpretable cues from both messengers and receivers (Rheingold, 1993). Rehearsability enables expression because it allows messengers to carefully craft wording to communicate precise messages (Dennis & Valacich, 1999). Parallelism also enhances expression by focusing or expanding the messenger's attention to the receiver (Latane, 1996). Therefore, symbol set variety, rehearsability, and parallelism comprise a media's *expressive capability*. Similarly, I propose that certain media features have a greater effect on messengers' ability to physically diffuse messages. Specifically, transmission velocity and reprocessability have the greatest impact on message diffusion. High transmission velocity supports speedy message delivery (Dennis et al., 2008). Reprocessability allows the receiver to obtain more information than he or she can absorb at once, knowing that there is an external record to refer to for clarification (Rice, 1987). Therefore, transmission velocity and reprocessability comprise a media's *diffusive capability*. See table 2 for a mapping of expressive and diffusive capabilities to selected media.

Table 2: Mapping of Capabilities to Selected Media (adapted from Dennis et al., 2008)

| | Symbol Set Variety | Parallelism | Rehearsability | Transmission Velocity | Reprocessability | Expressive Capability | Diffusive Capability |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Face-to-Face | Few-Many | Medium | Low | High | Low | High | Low |
| Video Conference | Few-Medium | Medium | Low | High | Low | High | Medium |
| Telephone | Few | Low | Low | High | Low | Medium | Medium |
| Instant Messaging | Few-Medium | Low-Medium | Medium | Medium-High | Medium-High | Low | Medium |
| Email | Few-Medium | High | High | Low-Medium | High | Low-Medium | High |
| Voice Mail | Few | Low | Low-Medium | Low-Medium | High | Low | High |
| Fax | Few-Medium | Low | High | Low-Medium | High | Low-Medium | High |
| Written Letter | Few-Medium | High | High | Low | High | Low-Medium | High |

THE CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATING NECESSARY EVIL MESSAGES

The challenges faced by necessary evil performers who seek to act ethically by advancing organizational goals while displaying interpersonal sensitivity and protecting the receiver's dignity have been closely examined in prior research (Folger & Starlicki, 2001; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Drawing from this literature, I have identified six challenges, which can be affected by media. These challenges include: (1) the extent to which the messenger identifies with the receiver, (2) the salience of the harm caused by the message, (3) the emotional labor experienced by the messenger, (4) the intellectual strain experienced by the messenger, (5) the extent to which the performer is personally involved in delivering the message, and (6) the physical strain experienced by the messenger (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005).

Some of these challenges are psychological in nature, such as the extent to which the messenger identifies with the receiver, the salience of the harm caused by the necessary evil message, the emotional strain experienced by the messenger, and the intellectual strain experienced by the messenger. The first psychological challenge associated with communicating necessary evil messages is related to the identity of the receiver (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Whether there is a preexisting personal relationship or simply role identification, identifying with the receiver will cause the messenger to more deeply understand the negative emotions of the receiver than if the receiver is an unknown or unrelated entity (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994; Lerner, 1981; Lerner, Miller & Holmes, 1976). The second psychological challenge of communicating necessary evil messages stems from the salience of the harm caused. Salience of harm is a function of vividness and immediacy (Latane, 1981; Loewenstein, 1996). The third psychological challenge associated with communicating necessary evil messages is emotional labor. The frequency of appropriate emotional display, effort required to abide by social display rules, the range of emotions exhibited, and the emotional dissonance produced by having to express emotions not sincerely felt contribute to emotional labor (Morris & Feldman, 1996). The fourth psychological challenge associated with communicating necessary evil messages is intellectual strain. Intellectual strain refers to the cognitive burden placed on the messenger due to the number and variety of skills being used and the expertise required to deliver the message.

The remaining challenges, the extent to which the performer is personally involved in delivering the message and the physical strain experienced by the messenger, describe physical challenges associated with communicating necessary evil messages. The first physical challenge is the extent to which the messenger is personally involved in communicating the message. Personal involvement is a function of the depth and breadth of the time spent communicating the bad news as well as the level of personal interaction with the receiver that is involved in the active delivery of the message (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). The second physical challenge is the physical strain experienced by the messenger. Physical strain is a function of the physical hurdles a messenger must overcome in order to deliver the message such as coordinating physical and temporal co-location between communicating parties and making oneself heard despite noise or interruption. When the psychological and/or physical challenges of delivering a necessary evil message are increased, messengers experience an increase in internal drama in the form of guilt, sympathy, cognitive load, anxiety, and emotional distress (Folger & Starlicki, 2001; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005).

THE CHALLENGES OF RECEIVING NECESSARY EVIL MESSAGES

Receiving necessary evil messages is also challenging. Receivers may fail to acknowledge necessary evil messages if they are overcome by shock, fear, or guilt (Harvey et al., 2007). At the moment of delivery, the main challenge associated with receiving a necessary evil message is achieving a state of mental preparedness to accept the message. This is why many medical professionals deliver necessary evil messages slowly with the use of props. For example, a radiologist charged with informing a patient she has cancer will begin the conversation by showing the woman a diagnostic image to allow her to begin making assumptions and brace herself for the coming news. When receivers have a "warning shot" period to realize something is wrong, they will be better prepared to comprehend the message and accept it as true (Harvey et al., 2007). This "warning shot" period, often referred to as a "buffer," facilitates mental preparation on the part of the receiver (Limaye, 1988).

COMMUNICATION PERFORMANCE

Communication is a two-dimensional process comprised of conveyance and convergence (Dennis et al., 2008). Message conveyance is the process of relating information. Message convergence is the process in which the transmitter and receiver collaborate in order to reach shared understanding. Both conveyance and convergence are vital to communication performance. Conveying a necessary evil message with fidelity and clarity is important for a variety of reasons. A representative anecdote is given by reporter Kevin Roderick (2011), "In the internal folklore of the Los Angeles Times, one of the worst layoff stories has always been the reporter who learned he was laid-off when, on a trip to Alaska, his company American Express card suddenly didn't work anymore." The material consequences of failing to inform an employee that he

needs to find an alternative way home from Alaska are obvious, but equally important are the less obvious emotional and psychological consequences of the failure to convey necessary evil messages. When organizations fail to deliver important information, employees often suffer from excessive anxiety and insecurity, which can foster an organizational culture of suspicion and mistrust (Lewis, 1987).

Convergence is also important. For example, it does not benefit an organization to give negative feedback to employees if the employees dismiss the message as irrelevant, flawed, or untrue (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). If the receiver dismisses the necessary evil message or fails to recognize its relevance, the message will not serve its intended purpose. When necessary evil messages are communicated, it is important not only that the messenger deliver the necessary evil message, but also that the receiver understand and accept the message (Lewis et al., 2010). In order for the communication process to be considered a success, the necessary evil message must be conveyed with fidelity and clarity and the communicating parties must converge upon shared understanding as the receiver accepts the message.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND PROPOSITIONS

In this section I develop the theoretical model and discuss the relationships between the aforementioned constructs. First, I discuss the relationship between the features of the communication media and the challenges faced by the messenger. I then discuss how challenges confronting the messenger influence the messenger's desire and ability to convey the message with fidelity and clarity. Lastly, I discuss how the relationship between the features of the media employed to deliver the message and communication performance is mediated by the mental preparedness of the receiver.

Expressive Capabilities and the Challenges Faced by the Messenger

The expressive capability of a media depends on the variety of symbols it accommodates, the level of rehearsability it allows the messenger, and the level of parallelism a media accommodates. While these features may in some ways affect the physical challenges of the necessary evil communication process, the main effects of these features relate to the psychological challenges (e.g. identification with the receiver, salience of the harm, emotional labor, and intellectual strain) faced by the messenger.

Symbol Sets

In prior research, symbol variety has been viewed using the Hertzberg et al. (1953) notion of "hygiene factors" (Dennis & Valacich, 1999). This perspective notes that symbol variety is only a concern when the medium in question lacks the symbol set desired by the messenger. However, this perspective applies only to messenger satisfaction with the symbol sets he or she will use without consideration of the symbol sets a receiver will use. When studying the psychological effects of symbol sets on necessary evil messengers, it is important to consider not only symbol sets that allow expression from the messenger but also symbol sets that allow expression from the receiver. For example, low symbol set media that enable less expression from receivers reduce the likelihood of the messenger identifying with the receiver because symbol sets facilitate role identification (Taylor, 2011). If the messenger is a mother and she sees symbols, such as pictures of children on the receiver's desk, the messenger is more likely to identify with the receiver. Furthermore, when few symbol sets are available, reduced social presence can result in messengers viewing receivers as less human and more like an object (Rice, 1993; Short et al., 1976; Williams, 1977).

In addition to affecting role identification, symbol sets also affect the salience of harm caused. Symbols such as a frown, tears, or a sigh are nonverbal messages that can communicate very salient emotions (Stephens et al., 2005). Media accommodating a high number of symbol sets, such as face-to-face communication, leave the messenger much more exposed to the receiver's emotions than do media that do not accommodate many symbol sets.

Similarly, symbol sets impact emotional labor. When a medium offers many symbols for the receiver to decode, the messenger must exert effort to abide by social display rules applying to facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture. Fewer symbols enable the necessary evil messenger to hide felt emotions, or hide a lack of felt emotions. This reduces emotional labor by preventing the need for the messenger to express emotions not sincerely felt, such as calm or confidence (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Furthermore, symbol sets available for the messenger's interpretation also affect emotional labor. If symbol sets alert the messenger to the receiver's emotions, the messenger is more likely to struggle to keep emotions in check (Diener, 1980).

Finally, the level of intellectual strain experienced by the necessary evil messenger is reduced when a medium accommodates fewer symbol sets. Media featuring few symbol sets reduce intellectual strain by decreasing the need for the messenger to make decisions regarding which symbols are appropriate for a given situation (Scheibehenne et al., 2010). In addition to the

intellectual strain of selecting symbols, when many symbol sets are available, the necessary evil messenger must self-monitor the on-going use of necessary symbols, which can be intellectually draining (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996).

Rehearsability

Rehearsability impacts the psychological challenges of communicating necessary evil messages. For instance, rehearsability affects identification with the receiver because media accommodating rehearsability allow the messenger to methodically craft the necessary evil message in a removed setting, which allows the messenger to think carefully about the content and clarity of the message without having to acknowledge the identity of the intended receiver (Byron, 2008; DeTienne, 2002; Munter, 2000).

Rehearsability also reduces the salience of the harm by allowing the messenger to deliver the necessary evil message without acknowledging the emotional repercussions that the message will later have for the intended receiver. Wording a necessary evil message in a methodical manner in a removed context accommodates psychological disengagement on the part of the messenger and therefore, reduces the necessity of vividly recognizing the profundity of the harm inflicted (Milgram, 1965).

Media that facilitate rehearsal also reduce the emotional labor experienced by messengers by eliminating the need for messengers to contain emotions while shaping the necessary evil message (Morris & Feldman, 1996). If the messenger's emotions become too acute, the messenger can always walk away and return to the crafting of the message at a later time.

Lastly, the intellectual strain experienced by the necessary evil messenger is decreased by when a medium accommodates rehearsal and rewording of the message being conveyed because the messenger does not have to think carefully in order to word the message correctly the first time. Rehearsability also reduces concern that the messenger will misspeak or leave out important information (Witt & Behnke, 2006).

Parallelism

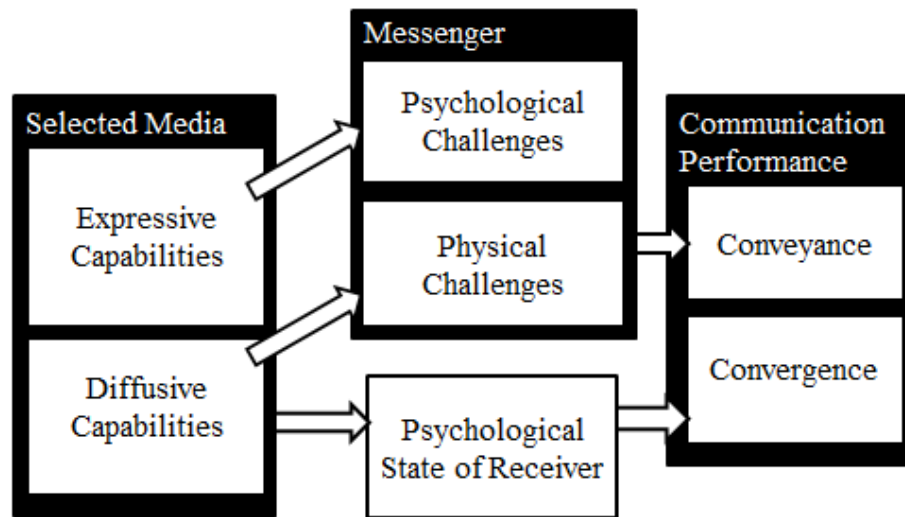
Although parallelism does impact the psychological challenges of communicating necessary evil messages, the importance of parallelism depends on the size of the audience being addressed by the messenger (Nunamaker et al., 1991). If the messenger is communicating the necessary evil message to only one person, the level of parallelism the communication media features is irrelevant. However, as the number of receivers grows the level of parallelism increases in importance (Dennis et al., 1999). One way parallelism can affect necessary evil communication is that parallelism facilitates the communication of standardized messages to many people at once, leading to a more generalized message construction and a decrease in personal identification with the receiver. Messengers using media featuring high levels of parallelism could conceivably deliver a necessary evil message without knowing anything about the receiver (Byron, 2008). For example, a mass email announcing that a hospital will no longer accept Medicaid could be sent through a listserv to patients without the messenger ever looking at the individual email addresses or thinking about the individual identities of the receivers affected by the decision.

In addition to affecting identification with the receiver, parallelism can also affect the salience of the harm caused. When parallelism is exploited and the size of the target audience increases, the salience of the harm done to individuals will decrease as the messenger will not have to directly engage individuals. When communicating with a group rather than an individual, it is easier for messengers to view receivers as numbers rather than people because high parallelism decreases the salience of individual receivers' expressions of emotion during message delivery.

Because an increase in expressive media capabilities results in an increase in messenger identification with the receiver, salience of the harm caused, emotional labor, and intellectual strain, I propose that when necessary evil messengers use media with high levels of expressive capabilities, the result will be an increase in the psychological challenges associated with delivering the message. Similarly, when necessary evil messengers use media with low levels of expressive capabilities, the result will be a decrease in the psychological challenges associated with delivering the message.

Proposition 1: An increase in the level of expressive capabilities accommodated by communication media results in an increase in the psychological challenges experienced by the necessary evil messenger.

Figure 1



Diffusive Capabilities and the Challenges Faced by the Messenger

The diffusive capability of a media depends on the transmission velocity and level of reprocessability ascribed to the media. While these features may in some ways affect the psychological challenges of delivering necessary evil messages, the main effects of these features relate to the physical challenges (e.g. personal involvement and physical strain) faced by the necessary evil messenger.

Transmission Velocity

Transmission velocity impacts the physical challenges of communicating necessary evil messages. For example, low transmission velocity media decrease personal involvement by decreasing the level of interaction between the messenger and the receiver. This decrease in interaction also decreases the amount of time necessary for the messenger to convey the necessary evil message, further decreasing personal involvement (Dennis & Valacich, 1999; Weick & Meader, 1993).

Beyond influencing personal involvement, transmission velocity also affects physical strain. When media feature low transmission velocity, communication can be achieved even if the messenger and receiver are in different physical and/or temporal locations (Kettinger & Grover, 1997). Thus, low transmission velocity media eliminate the challenges of coordinating co-location, such as physically traveling to meet with the receiver in order to deliver the necessary evil message. Similarly, low transmission velocity will media may act as a shield of protection by decreasing opportunities for the messenger to be interrupted or physically prevented from communicating the message (Kraut & Attewell, 1997; Riordan & Kreuz, 2010).

Reprocessability

The scope of this paper is restricted to the immediate moments of message delivery. This limits the effects of reprocessability as one of reprocessability's main uses is related to extensibility. However, even in this context, reprocessability matters. Reprocessability affects the level of personal involvement required on the part of the necessary evil messenger by providing an externally accessible memory for the information being communicated (Rice, 1987). When the media accommodates reprocessability, the messenger can communicate the message one time and refer the receiver to the record of the message if there is any confusion or the receiver has questions about the detail of the message. By allowing the messenger to present the message only once without fear that important information will be lost, media featuring high levels of reprocessability reduce the amount of time and personal interaction necessary to deliver a necessary evil message.

Furthermore, reprocessability reduces the level of physical strain experienced by the messenger. When media facilitate reprocessing of messages, receivers can take comfort that answers to future questions can be found within the reprocessable message. This will decrease the need for extensive follow-up questions or excessive clarification.

Because an increase in diffusive media capabilities results in a decrease in personal involvement and physical strain on the part of the messenger, I propose that when necessary evil messengers use media with high levels of diffusive capabilities, the result will be a decrease in the physical challenges associated with delivering the message. Similarly, when necessary evil messengers use media with high levels of diffusive capabilities, the result will be an increase in the physical challenges associated with delivering the message.

Proposition 2: An increase in the level of diffusive capabilities accommodated by communication media results in a decrease in the physical challenges experienced by the necessary evil messenger.

The Effect of Psychological and Physical Challenges on Message Conveyance

Message conveyance is an extremely important aspect of message communication. It is the responsibility of the necessary evil messenger to ensure that the message is delivered with clarity and fidelity in order to accomplish organizational goals (Margolis et al., 2005). Unfortunately, when a necessary evil messenger experiences high levels of identification with the receiver, salience of the harm caused, emotional labor, intellectual strain, personal involvement, and physical strain, he or she is more likely to experience internal drama in the form of guilt, sympathy, cognitive load and performance anxiety (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). This negative internal drama can affect the process of message conveyance by causing the messenger to succumb to the mum effect and fail to deliver the necessary evil message (Timmerman & Harrison, 2005).

While the mum effect often results in messengers failing to communicate any message, it can also result in the messenger communicating a distorted message (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). This is because internal drama can decrease messengers' abilities to communicate clearly and effectively (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). When necessary evil messengers are overcome by internal drama, they risk falling into one of five dysfunctional conversations: bargaining, cushioning, unloading, arguing, or mechanizing (Molinsky & Margolis, 2006). Each of these dysfunctional conversations is dangerous for various reasons. For example, when messengers bargain, the result is inequitable treatment among victims, which can lead to perceptions of injustice (Adams, 1965). Similarly, when messengers try to cushion the blow, they risk rambling on and delaying the message they are trying to convey (Sussman & Sproull, 1999). Moreover, each of these dysfunctional conversations results in a distortion of the intended message (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sussman & Sproull, 1999).

Even when messengers follow through and convey necessary evil messages, their communication performance is not considered a success unless the message is delivered with both fidelity and clarity. When internal drama is decreased due to the careful selection of media, messengers are less likely fall into dysfunctional conversations and there is a better chance the messenger will successfully convey the bad news message with fidelity and clarity (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005).

Proposition 3: When media capabilities facilitate a decrease in the psychological and physical challenges experienced by the necessary evil messenger, the result is an increase in the clarity and fidelity of the necessary evil message that is conveyed.

Media Capabilities and the Challenges Faced by Receivers

When a message is communicated, it is important that the receiver not only receive the message, but also that the receiver understand and accept the message (Lewis et al., 2010). Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich (2008) refer to this as message convergence. Convergence is important for a variety of reasons. For example, it does not benefit an organization to give negative feedback to employees if the employees dismiss the message as irrelevant, flawed, or untrue (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). If the receiver dismisses the necessary evil message or fails to recognize its relevance, the message will not serve its intended purpose. The most common reason receivers fail to acknowledge bad news is that they are overcome by shock, fear, or guilt (Harvey et al., 2007).

When a message is carefully delivered with sensitivity, receivers are less likely to react with disbelief or denial and are more likely to accept the news as true (Myers, 1983). For this reason necessary evil messengers are advised to use buffers to facilitate mental preparation (Harvey et al., 2007). Media features facilitate buffering to different degrees (Limaye, 1988). For example, it is hard to buffer receivers in preparation of bad news when using a media with low symbol variety because those media restrict the ability of the messenger to use symbol sets appropriately. If the necessary evil messenger sends an attachment via email, the receiver is likely to read the text of the email before opening the attachment, rendering the attachment inadequate for use as a buffer. Another media feature that affects the necessary evil messenger's ability to buffer the message is transmission velocity. People react differently to necessary evil messages and take different amounts of time to prepare for message acceptance. Media featuring low transmission velocity do not enable the messenger to assess the receiver's reaction and appropriately time message delivery after the receiver has mentally prepared to accept the message. Thus, media features that facilitate buffering will result in better mental preparation on the part of the receiver and lead to

greater message convergence. Media that do not facilitate buffering will result in decreased receiver preparation and lead to a decrease in message convergence.

Proposition 4: When media features facilitate mental preparation on the part of the receiver, message convergence will be increased.

PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

While communicating bad news is an unfortunate part of organizational life, it is a necessary evil. Margolis and Molinsky (2008) found that 46% of performers psychologically disengage when executing a necessary evil because the internal drama they experience is overwhelming when they engage. Other research documents that efforts on the part of corporations to make layoffs with interpersonal sensitivity have failed due to the stress and anxiety of the managers communicating the layoff messages (Molinsky & Margolis, 2006). High turnover rates in fields requiring frequent necessary evils further demonstrate the difficulty organizations face when trying to find people who can successfully carry out necessary evils with interpersonal sensitivity (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In some extreme cases, organizations have become so desperate to locate an individual with the psychological fortitude to carry out necessary evils that they have inadvertently hired psychopaths as a solution (Babiak et al., 2010). Psychopathic features such as callousness and lack of empathy make psychopaths uniquely capable of causing harm to others without suffering the consequences of internal drama such as the mum effect.

According to Margolis, Grant & Molinsky (2005), when necessary evils must be performed in an organizational setting, the following three ethical standards should always be considered: (1) The necessary evil should serve to advance the organization's objective; (2) The necessary evil should be performed in such a way that dignity of the target is preserved and protected; and (3) The execution of the necessary evil should sustain the moral sensibility of those executing the morally ambiguous task. Using this research, practitioners can design necessary evil message communication in a way that minimizes the psychological and physical challenges of delivering necessary evil messages and increases the clarity and fidelity with which these messages are conveyed so that empathetic managers can handle this unfortunate chore in the most ethical way possible.

In addition to the practical implications of this study, there are important theoretical implications to consider. This paper adds to the growing body of literature examining the effects of media on users (Dennis et al., 1999; Dennis et al., 2008; Carte & Chidambaram, 2004; Carlson & George, 2004). Prior research in this area has contributed greatly to current understanding of the relationship between media capabilities and communication performance. By introducing the human elements of psychological and physical challenges, this research further illuminates *how* and *why* media features affect communication performance.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In researching this phenomenon, I have discovered some gaps in the literature that could prove to be very interesting lines of research. First, there is a need for empirical research into receiver perceptions of interactional, procedural, and informational justice when necessary evil messages are delivered using media with different features. Research has shown justice perceptions to play a very important role in organizational behavior. Delivery of bad news often results in negative reactions from receivers. When a receiver perceives the bad news as unfair rather than just unfortunate, negative reactions are significantly exaggerated and can become extreme (Timmerman & Harrison, 2005). For this reason, it is very important that organizational leaders understand how and why various types of media illicit different justice attributions by necessary evil message receivers.

Second, empirical and theoretical work examining necessary evil communication governance and best practices regarding the choice of media to communicate bad news would have both theoretical and practical significance. The task of shaping bad news governance would require research into how different combinations of media could minimize harm. Furthermore, governance and best practices guidelines regarding media selection would likely differ to some degree depending on the magnitude of the potential harm. For example, best practices regarding how to inform someone that they will receive a suspension from school for fighting on campus might not be the same as best practices for informing a woman that her child will need chemotherapy. Best practices should be designed considering the characteristics of the messenger (anxiety, communication skill, personality, etc...), receiver (i.e. culture, causal role, etc...), message (i.e. magnitude of the harm caused, complexity of the message, etc...), and environment (i.e. physical proximity, temporal restrictions, etc...).

Third, the study of emotional communication through virtual collaboration looks promising. Research in this area is sparse and much of the existing research is no longer relevant due to the speed with which cultural, technological norms and expectations are evolving. As globalization increases and delivering messages in person becomes more difficult and less socially normative, organizations will be faced with increasing questions about how to best structure the communication of messages that cause emotional reactions in the messenger and/or receiver of the message.

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