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THE PERFORMATIVE VS INFORMATIVE
ROLES OF BUREAUCRATIC DOCUMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The preparation and transfer of documents bureaucratic procedures are generally viewed solely as a means of transferring *information* within the organization. When taken as the basis for analyzing and improving bureaucratic systems, this view is too narrow. Another, *performative* aspect of these documents also needs to be considered in the analysis.

This paper elaborates on this additional function of organizational documents and points out the need for a broader framework for analyzing bureaucratic systems.

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INTRODUCTION

> *red tape* n [so called from the red tape formerly used to tie
> up legal documents in England]: bureaucratic procedure,
> especially as characterized by mechanical adherence to regu-
> lations, needless duplication of records, and the compilation
> of an excessive amount of extraneous information resulting in
> prolonged delay or inaction. (Webster's 3rd International Dic-
> tionary).

An aspect I would like to add to this definition, already implicit in the entymol-

ogy of the term, is that red tape also is characterized by a tedious and complex

movement of *paper documents* from one desk or office to another.

A central precept of information systems analysis has been to consolidate

information processing wherever possible to eliminate unnecessary paper han-

dling. In the last couple of decades analysis of paper flows has also typically

been linked with the application of computer technology to further speed up

communication, reduce duplication of records, etc.

Often, however, despite efforts at systems analysis and automation, red tape continues to exist. This paper presents one possible factor why red tape manages to defeat these attempts: namely that the phenomenon contains an additional aspect not yet recognized in the analytical frameworks applied to it. The documents and forms of bureaucratic systems are generally viewed only as media to convey *information*. The claim here is that these documents play another important role, a *performative* one, which also must be recognized in the analysis if it is to be effective.

WHAT ARE PERFORMATIVES?

The concept of a performative was first introduced by the philosopher/linguist Austin (1962) and elaborated on since by Searle (1969) and others.

A performative is an utterance which not only conveys information, but also, by its being spoken, accomplishes some socially significant act. For instance, the sentence "I now pronounce you man and wife" when spoken by a priest during a marriage ceremony not only describes the relationship between the couple, but actually *creates* it. This example brings out several key features of performatives. One, is that the state created by such an utterance generally is some type of social artifice. Obviously, the mere speaking of a few words has very little physical effect. Rather, it places one or more people in different states of social perception. Often, this involves a certain set of obligations, e.g., of fidelity, economic responsibility in this example.

The roles involved in a linguistic utterance are usually cast as speaker and hearer. However, in the case of performatives, the hearer role must be divided between "addressees" and "by-standers." Clearly, not everybody attending the marriage ceremony becomes socially obligated by the priest's pronouncement,

only the two people specifically addressed.

Also, it is not always the addressees of a performatives who acquire the social obligation by the utterance. For instance, a major class of performatives is the class of *promises*, in which case it is the speaker that acquires the obligation. In other cases the addressee may in fact be an object, e.g., a ship: "I christen thee the Queen Elizabeth." These latter are, however, fairly rare types of performatives.

The social contact surrounding a performative is not always institutional, as with marriage. For instance, such remarks as "I promise to do the dishes tomorrow," are also performatives. However, here, I will be specifically concerned with the role of performatives in institutional environments. In these cases the speaker and addressee must have certain social qualifications in order for the performative to have force—e.g., only priests, ministers, ship captains, justices of the peace, etc., can pronounce marriages, and only unmarried couples of a certain age can become married. Further, apart from the broad social context that enables the performative to have force, for instance the church as an institution, there is also a narrower, "conversational" context where the performative must appear; e.g., the marriage pronouncement must appear at a certain point near the end of the marriage ceremony, not at the beginning, not during the reception afterwards, etc.

WRITTEN PERFORMATIVES

Linquistics generally refer to performatives as a type of *utterance*, that is, a spoken communication. What is often not recognized is that written communications, too, may be performative. In these cases, however, the execution of the performative takes on a somewhat different character. In a spoken performatives the person making the performative is obviously identified as the speaker.

In written performatives, the issue of authorship arises. Also, with spoken performatives the addressee hears the performative at the time it is spoken. Written communications, however, endure throughout time and so the addressee may receive the communication considerably later than when it was initially made. The question then arises: when during this interval does the performatives come into force?

These issues of authorship and timing are commonly resolved by a very simple device, namely the author's handwritten signature, accompanied by the date in which it was signed. The ritual of signing one's name to a document is so pervasive that its fundamental role is often not recognized. Indeed, as a rough heuristic, one can usually distinguish purely informative documents from those with a performative component by whether or not it has a personal signature. For instance, printed announcements, bulletins, etc., seldom have signatures; contracts to pay money (checks, etc.) always do. The effect of the signature is roughly the declaration:

> "I hereby acknowledge that my beliefs and intentions are accurately described by this associated text.

Signed documents, as performative instruments also acquire an unique feature not possessed by their purely informative counterparts: the performative effect of the original signature is not carried over to its mechanical duplicates. For instance, in legal documents, such as contracts, wills, etc., when several copies are made, each must be separately signed by the author(s) to have legal validity.

The unique role of the original in written performatives has, by the way, its counterpart in spoken performatives as well: repeated playbacks of a tape recording of a spoken promise, for instance, do not create new promises. With written performatives, the assumption, of course, is that the signature provides

an unique identification of the author. However, seldom is the authenticity of the signature called into question (e.g., by a handwriting analysis). Its more important effect is that it signals the author's declaration of *personal responsibility* for the associated statements. In the act of signing such a document the signer typically becomes acutely aware of its language and contents (especially if the text has been written by someone else, as in a standardized lease or loan contract), since (s)he is henceforth expected to behave in accordance with this declaration.

The social significance of this ritual, committing the signer to having the beliefs, attitudes or intentions as expressed in the document, has been accepted by nearly every literate culture for centuries. It is an extremely useful historical convention, being the hallmark of honesty and good faith in all kinds of institutional and government transactions and agreements. It should be noted, however, that a signature is not the only way of marking a performative document. In many cases, a special seal, stamp or sticker operates similarly, especially where the effect of the document is standardized and commonplace. Typically, these special performative symbols are designed with a special, intricate pattern that would be hard to mimic. Often, these serve effectively as the signature of an institution, rather than a single individual. The most common examples here are coins, bills and postage stamps.

AUTOMATION OF DOCUMENT FLOWS

In the last couple of decades, the analysis of document processing and flows in organizations has become closely coupled with efforts to apply computer based information technology to the task. The most substantial change introduced when a particular document process is "automated" is that the documents themselves no longer have a fixed physical counterpart as paper, but are

rather only magnetic or electronic patterns. This offers enormous flexibility for information transmission and processing; transfer of the document from one geographic location to another is effectively instantaneous. Likewise, several people can simultaneously work on different parts of the document at the same time, since they may all access a centralized representation of it.

While this technology is especially well-suited to handling the informative content of documents, it does not accommodate documents having a performative aspect. This is due to the fact that in paper form, a performative document has a physical uniqueness that it loses when coverted to a magnetic medium. For physical representations we have clearly developed concepts of individuality and uniqueness. When we move a physical document from one place to another, we know for instance, that it is the *same* document; whereas, if we see two duplicate documents, we know they are not the same since they occupy different physical locations at the same time.

In magnetic form, the original recording of a document is indistinguishable from any of its duplicates. Indeed, what appears as the electronic movement of a document from one place to another is actually copying its information pattern from one magnetic device to another, then erasing the original. Thus, the concepts of individuality and uniqueness of an original and its copies become completely lost when a document is converted to magnetic form.

But why does originality and uniqueness of representation play such an important role in the case of performative documents? Basically, it is due to the above mentioned observation that the document serves as social evidence of someone's personal commitment to a belief, attitude, or intention. In physical form this evidence is much easier to control, e.g., I can void a check by tearing it up. The cases where this is most sensitive are when the document serves to obligate the author (or sometimes another party) to the performance of some

actions, for instance, paying a sum of money. Here it is essential that the document have an unique, non-duplicable representation so that the author cannot be forced into further obligations by simple mechanical reproduction.

STRUCTURED VS UNSTRUCTURED DOCUMENTS

So far, the appearance of the documents under discussion has been left unspecified. The only distinction made so far is whether they contain a signature.

A second, useful distinction is whether the document is "structured." A structured document is one whose possible content is prescribed in fixed ways. As a means of controlling the content, the paper in these cases is usually pre-printed with labeled boxes or blanks. Examples are pre-printed forms of all kinds; e.g., payroll checks, purchase orders, sales orders, routing slips, etc. Unstructured documents, by contrast, do not have such prescribed limitations on their content. Examples of unstructured documents are business letters, memos, meeting minutes, reports, etc. Some documents may, of course, be in an intermediate category, having a structured section plus space for textual elaboration and miscellaneous comments.

While structured documents are *visually* more rigidly organized than unstructured ones, the more important difference is in the predictability of their *contents*. A structured document appears mainly as a recording medium in a formalized *procedure*, designed to deal with a specific range of problems or situations. The structuredness of the document thus reflects the structured, programmed nature of the organization's response to a particular class of situations.

Here in the context of organizational procedures, the

informative/performative distinction can be further elaborated. One aspect of these procedures is certainly to transmit and store information. Another, however, is to control and standardize the behavior of the personnel involved. Procedures are thus means of standardizing the exercises of *authority* of certain individuals in the organization over others.

Authority, of course, includes a wide variety of aspects. However, pertinent to the analysis of red tape, one particular form of authority is prominent. This is where a certain type of behavior is in general forbidden, except under special circumstances. The exercise of authority in these cases amounts to some person's evaluation of the circumstances, and the granting of *permission* where appropriate. In many instances of red tape, however, the action in question is divided into a number of sub-actions each requiring separate permission. The delay or inaction inherent in the definition of red tape thus results not for reasons of information collection or processing, but rather due to the wait times in the personal queues of these various permission granting individuals.

A familiar example of this is automobile registration. In general it is forbidden to drive an automobile on public roads. There are, however, several conditions which together permit this. First, the driver needs to be able to drive. This is demonstrated by an examination by state employees with the authority to certify driving skills. If the driver succeeds in this exam, the examiner signs the examination form which permits the driver to obtain a specially designed card, the driver's license.

Next, one must have an automobile. In purchasing the auto, another special form is required—the bill of sale and/or title certificate—which is signed by both the previous and new owners. Next, the automobile itself must be in safe driving condition. Here, a different individual, e.g., a state licensed mechanic, makes the certification. This is typically signified by a special (again performa-

tive) sticker attached to the auto's windshield or fender, signed by the mechanic. Next, if not already done, the vehicle must be registered, i.e., recorded in the state books. Here, typically, the vehicle manufacturer's serial number is recorded by another state agent on another special form which (s)he signs. This permits the owner to obtain a license plate for the auto. Lastly, in some places, a separate road tax must be paid. Here again, receipt of payment is acknowledged by a special receipt form and/or sticker.

The sum of all these procedures amounts to permission from the state to drive the vehicle on its public roads. Note that the component performatives in this case were sometimes marked by a signature, sometimes by a special seal or sticker, and sometimes both.

Similar types of permission structures exist within organizations. Here a common example is the request of some department to purchase a large item. Often such a request must be approved by a number of individuals to verify for instance that the item is technically sound, compatible with similar items in the organization, competitively priced, etc. In each step along the way, the authorship is inevitably signaled by the signature of the authorizing individual.

Another common type of organization performative is order giving. Interestingly, this seems to be a more efficient process than permission granting. The difference seems to be that orders are generally given by a single individual to a number of others, whereas permission often needs to be granted by a number of people together for a single person. For this reason, perhaps, order giving seems less involved in the concept of red tape.

There is, however, an interesting duality between permission granting and order giving that I would like to point out. This was first suggested by the logician Georg Henrik von Wright (1968) in what he called a "deontic" logic. The term "deontic" is derived from a Greek term meaning roughly "ought" or

"obliged." This logic is thus an effort to formalize the aspects of obligation.

Let "q" symbolize some particular type of action. Then the following operators are introduced:

$$O\ q \quad (q \text{ is obligatory})$$
$$P\ q \quad (q \text{ is permitted})$$
$$F\ q \quad (q \text{ is forbidden/prohibited})$$

Without going into any more logical details, two interesting points can be brought out. The first is that permission and prohibition are negates. That is, to permit some action is not to forbid it and vice versa. Symbolically,

$$P\ q \quad <--> \quad \sim F\ q$$
$$\sim P\ q \quad <--> \quad F\ q$$

The more interesting insight, however, is that obligation and permission are logical duals. That is, to be obliged to perform some action "q" is equivalent to not being permitted not to do it. Conversely, being permitted to do a certain action is to not be obliged not to do it. Symbolically,

$$O\ q \quad <--> \quad \sim P \sim q$$
$$\sim O \sim q \quad <--> \quad P\ q$$

The relevance of this to the discussion at hand is that it suggests a family of what might be called "deontic performatives" that are inter-definable. A deontic performative document is one that obliges, permits or forbids some action. These are important in that they indicate the link between performative documents and authority structures.

Let x and y indicate two people or roles in the organization. Then preceding notation can be modified to indicate three basic types of authoritative action:

$$(x \, O \, y) \, q \; = \; x \text{ orders } y \text{ to } q$$

$$(x \, P \, y) \, q \; = \; x \text{ permits } y \text{ to } q$$

$$(x \, F \, y) \, q \; = \; x \text{ forbids } y \text{ to } q$$

The enabling requirement in each of these cases is that x has the *authority* (within the organizational chart) to control y's behavior in doing q.

In other words, any analysis of the flow and processing of documents of this type must also take into account the authority structure in the organization. This is not just authority in the usual sense of a hierarchical organization chart. That is usually designed to evaluate the overall performance of an employee. However, there are more detailed types of authority that work laterally, and it is these that often make up the real red tape. For instance, the purchasing department may have authority over all others with respect to which suppliers they may purchase from. The personnel department may have authority over the loan of personnel from one department to another. The computing department may have authority over the types of time sharing terminals another department may purchase, etc. This finer, lateral network is seldom considered in discussions of organizational design, perhaps because it is so complex and detailed. It is not general authority, but authority over special domains of activity. However, like the broader, hierarchical forms of authority, it has its rewards and costs in the form of organizational power and responsibility, and it is these aspects that must be carefully considered and respected in any analytical attack on red tape.

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CONCLUSION

The point of this paper has been to suggest a significant shortcoming in the current approaches to analyzing the flow of paper documents or "red tape" in organizations; namely that these documents, in addition to serving to record and transmit information, sometimes have an additional performative function as well. When this latter aspect is also present, the physical form of the document has a special importance that is not captured when the document's contents are automated in an electronic medium.

It is for this reason that these documents are in fact seldom computerized. This is not to say that computer technology can never be used in these cases; however, at least not until these performative aspects are specifically dealt with by the system.

This paper has been only a rough attempt to point out what seems to me a pervasive yet little recognized problem in the analysis of administrative systems. The problem itself needs much further study and elaboration. Certainly there are a number of ways in which performative documents can be categorized, each with special features which might affect the effectiveness of a systems analysis. The so-called "structured deontic performatives" described herein seem to me to be an especially important sub-class since they directly reflect the procedural implementation of organizational authority.

The eventual goal, clearly, is to arrive at some normative prescriptions as to how the performative components of an administrative system *ought* to be designed. I have not tried to make any prescriptive remarks here, however, feeling that any such attempts would be premature at this initial stage.

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