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The spring ‘stay at home’ coronavirus campaign communicated by pending accounts

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ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Available online 4 March 2021

Keywords:
Pending account
Inducement to action
Interpellation
Coronavirus pandemic
Speech act
Promotional discourse

ABSTRACT
The UK government instruction to stay at home exemplifies how governments do things by saying things in a crisis. The force of the government slogan was amplified by its intertextual circulation in wider public discourse to produce an alignment between the duty of government to protect citizens, the spiritual mission of the Church and the public information role of the press. By analysing the rhetorical and sequential structure of promotional discourse with recourse to speech act, narrative and routine theory, we show how its authors concurrently use cognitive and empathetic interpellations to induce subjectivation, configuring pending accounts which not only involve recipients in scripts for restoring order (if ... then ... programming constructions) but also implicate them in restorative storylines (just as there and then ... so here and now ... mimetic constructions). The result is to overlay on the official inducement new voices of hope, conditioned by participation in a collaborative community, naturalising compliance.

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Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives. (UK government advertising slogan, March-May 2020)
Every generation has its higher purpose. Ours is to stay home. (WHO advertising slogan, May 2020)
If you’re feeling powerless during lockdown, you can still make a difference - from donating food to sewing scrubs. (Lead paragraph of a lifestyle feature article, Sam Wollaston, Guardian G2 supplement, 4 May 2020)

1. Introduction

On 23 March 2020, in what is thought to be the second most watched television broadcast in British history, Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the nation and said: “From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction — you must stay at home.” Confronted by mounting evidence of the seriousness of the threat (coronavirus was declared a pandemic by the WHO on 11 March), the British government had not just changed direction — on 3 March people were told they could go about their normal lives while taking precautions, principally hand-washing — but also raised the force of its messages to the population — no longer just giving advice but giving instructions.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.02.025
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Until late March, the government’s expert advisers had justified delaying the lock down by the risk of non-compliance. Chris Whitty, the UK’s chief medical officer, said, for example, on 9 March:

What we are moving now to is a phase when we will be having to ask members of the general public to do different things than they would normally do. There is a risk if we go too early people will understandably get fatigued and it will be difficult to sustain this over time. (Guardian 30 April 2020)

With the benefit of hindsight Whitty’s fears (widely shared and echoed by the media at the time) about asking the public to “do different things” seem exaggerated: so well did the message work that by late April newspapers were instead voicing concerns about how, eventually, to coax people out of lockdown and give them confidence that not staying at home was a safe thing to do again. The Sun even coined the phrase ‘coronaphobia’ after an Ipsos Mori poll suggested over 60% of people would feel uncomfortable carrying out their usual activities — like going to bars or restaurants or using public transport — when lockdown was eased (2 May 2020).

What contributed to the initial triumph of public health communication? Suspicion of authority or expertise would have been understandable given that previous announcements of ‘impending catastrophes’ of the same type, like H5N1, turned out to be premature (Chateauraynaud, 2011). An almost complete saturation of the news and social media agendas by a single topic meant people had been exposed to a flood of information on coronavirus not just from government institutions, but from the media (national and local), local authorities, social networks and family debates. To pay heed only to quantitative expansion is not enough, however. Assuming individuals and groups turn to sources they believe share their values when making decisions in the face of risk and uncertainty (Paton et al., 2008) then their receptivity to competing messages and the actions they are willing to take in response to official messages depend on their positioning and self-positioning in multilateral communication processes. All discourse is interdiscursive and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981), especially in the case of slogans that are capable of circulating in the media (Krieg-Planque, 2010) and provoking a chain of supportive or critical reactions forming a dialogical network (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2004). We show how dialogicity (understood in a broad sense as the threads of relevance discourse producers weave, always in particular times and places in response to particular matters of concern) is the quality that grants promotional discourse its essential performativity: the capacity to get people to do things.

In the following sections we first explain our conception of (health) promotional discourse, understood as a complex speech act which works by interrupting and displacing reported action sequences to induce an audience response, and which is susceptible to dialogical amplification and diversification. Then we describe our methods of analysis and justify our selection of data. Following this we present the results of our analysis of three interlinked texts communicating, from different perspectives, a message to stay at home at Easter 2020. The discussion section considers the implications of our findings for speech act theory and public health communication, including questions of (dis)empowerment. In the conclusion we return to our two main claims about the essential hybridity and dialogicity of the inducements configured by promotional discourse.

2. Promotional discourse

According to Charaudeau (2009), promotional discourse is characterised by the presentation of the discourse producer as a socially responsible adviser; the construction of the object of discourse as a restorative collective good in response to concerns about a threat to social order; and the envisaged transfer to the receiver or target public of a motivation and/or obligation to adopt a new model of behaviour in the name of social solidarity. Furthermore, since it has to get others to accept a programme of action that is typically not, initially, desired, health promotion discourse engages an ethic of responsibility that tries to nullify the option of not acting by stigmatising non-conformity. Viewed through this lens, the stay at home message needed to perform a remarkable feat of resignification: it had to turn an activity hitherto seen as natural and positive for physical and mental health into a threat to public health. The inverse of staying at home — going out (except for the “very limited purposes” listed in the Prime Minister’s instruction) — became the behaviour stigmatised. Reports, especially in tabloid newspapers, as well as the vox populi of social media sites and radio phone-ins, quickly appropriated this resignification, condemning “covidiots”, “rogue” citizens and “lockdown flouters”, and labelling people “irresponsible” for making “unnecessary” journeys. Conversely, social media users implicated themselves and others in restorative scripts and storytelling by making images of honourable self-denial with the #stayathome hashtag. Such responses reinterpret what (the speaker says) has to be done in terms of what we (public-spirited citizens) want and are able to do (see Cooren and Sanders, 2002). Staying at home thereby gets normalised, enabled and ennobled. This glorifying version of the slogan is exemplified by the WHO advert in the epigraph to this paper.

Promotional discourse, like any other, can be analysed as speech acts and their sequences (Searle, 2011). We can read Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives. in at least two different ways. Either we see it as a triple directive — three commands — or, more likely, we hear it as follows: if you stay at home, you will protect the NHS and save lives. Or even: if you stay at home, you will protect the NHS and thereby save lives. As will be explained below, the if ... then ... programming formula is a simple argumentative construction commonly found in procedural or instructional texts like manuals or patient information leaflets (Adam, 1987, 2001). It is the format typically chosen by health educators when preparing people for pandemics: “Public education for a pandemic advises people that if they adopt a particular behavior, [then] the result or outcome will be increased safety.” (Paton et al., 2008:475, emphasis added) Such texts mobilise us to do something by assuring us, with a high degree of probability, and usually in the name of an expert authority, of the results we can expect.
In what follows we make two claims about promotional discourse: that its persuasive force relies on reporting practices that interrupt and displace action programmes, interpellating readers in ways that induce subjectivation (Bosančić, 2019; and that the amplification and diversification of promotional messages by other actors and authors is both an inescapable feature of today’s public sphere and a precondition for generating concerted action across segmented publics. These two claims address limitations in the health communication literature, where the cognisability of promotional discourse is rather taken for granted and where little attention has been paid to the ways mediators (other than journalists) modify health promotion messages as they circulate.1

To start with the first claim, the likelihood of a meaningful influence on the actions people take in response to official messages depends on successful mobilisation of a particular kind of rhetorical structure which we call a pending account. The concept is derived from Jukka Törnönen’s notion of pending narrative combined with Jean-Michel Adam’s notion of injunctive-instructional discourse. Both authors were concerned with the ‘performative’ power of discourse to guide or persuade audiences to do things. The essence of pending accounts is the use of junctures together with empathetic or cognitive interpellations to create rhetorical force. Junctures have a temporal and a spatial dimension: an interruption of the account as soon as participants’ motivation and identities have been established; and a displacement of action from the storyworld or text-world to the lifeworld or site of telling. Rhetorically, the inducement to action is reinforced by interpellations offering subject positions based on empathetic identification or cognitive understanding.

Discontinuities are a “central rhetorical form of persuasive speech” (2000:81), Törnönen argues, before expanding:

[…] persuasive speeches seek to superimpose their own reality on top of the audience’s reality. They want to see the reality of the text merged completely with the reader’s reality so that the action program set out by the text is absorbed into the receiver’s reality. That is why the story is interrupted and left open. (2000:84)

The act of persuasion works by inspiring the reader to pick up the challenge or quest bestowed on a hero in an unfinished story. This necessarily involves translation as well as identification, for the quest has to be perceived as relevant to the reader’s ‘here and now’ if it is to be accepted. That is presumably what Törnönen means by the story being “left open”. But this translational dimension evaporates when he argues further that:

the interruption of the story serves to build a bridge between the present and the future. The goal aimed at - whether that is national wealth, a sustainable relationship with the environment, virtuous life, or spontaneous freedom - will be attained so long as the subject recruited for the task understands the necessity of following the instructions … (2000:87, emphasis added)

In this reformulation Törnönen comes very close to Adam’s definition of injunctive-instructional texts, which “assist, facilitate and guide the realisation of a task deproblematised by the manual or procedural instructions, everything unfolding in a temporality that is linear and simplified” (2001:9). Törnönen is still, we would argue, describing an important type of persuasive text, but no longer must it be a pending narrative. Injunctive-instructional discourse also uses junctures, rooted in the chronic unreliabilities of practice, to standardise problems so that they can be resolved routinely by following procedural instructions. Adam argues, following Werlich (1975), that “the cognitive process underlying the ‘instruction’ is our capacity to make plans” (1987:66) and that the instruction is an iterative or recurrent inducement to act related to a typified situation. This is why we use the term pending routine to refer to the rhetorical structure of genres as varied as manuals, recipes, sermons, prayers and articles of law. This term shows their family resemblance with Törnönen’s pending narratives, but also their distinction. Greimas (1983b) called them programming texts (textes programmeurs), a term we also borrow here.

An important difference between (pending) narratives and routines concerns the motivation to act. Törnönen invokes passion as the driving force of pending narratives:

[I]n the pending narrative, all enunciative, rhetorical and utterance-related solutions aim at instilling in the audience an obliging will and a passion to support action, to take action, or to continue with the action they have started. (2000:96)

This underscores how the resumption of the unfinished story depends on the audience’s motivation to transfer the locus of action from the storyworld into their world. Passion needs to be (made) present at that juncture. Passion has been defined communicationally as what actors invoke upon the breach (or fulfilment) of expectations (Vásquez and Cooren, 2011), which is generally the situation we find at the juncture of pending narratives. By analogy, something needs to be made present to animate a restorative action if pending routines are to be taken up by their intended users, i.e. if instructions are to be read compliantly – as instructions. We suggest this also occurs as a response to unfulfilled expectations – in this case the sudden failure of recurrent or iterative practices. In contrast to pending narratives, however, reason or interest rather than passion are invoked to ‘instill an obliging will’ in the audience. Routines mobilise us when we mobilise them in the process of searching for a solution to a problem or a reasoned justification for a certain course of action. Our practical reason allows us to identify, understand and process the speaker’s purpose (their illocutionary force).

Our second claim can be stated briefly. It is that the dialogical embedding (or imbrication) of official messages in other institutions’ and groups’ discourse generates intentional or unintentional consequences (perlocutionary effects) via a chain-like iteration of more and more specialised messages. If speech acts like persuasion and incitement are usually complex sets of

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1 Readers less interested in theoretical/conceptual debates may skip from here to the results section.
individual speech acts that “accumulate into an act of persuasion” or incitement (Kurzon, 1998:586), this interlayering process is vital to amplify, even as it modifies, the original message. Since the hearer has to believe in the trustworthiness of the speaker for a perlocutionary effect to ensue (Sbisà, 1983:309) imbrications that introduce (locally) trustworthy voices should increase perlocutionary force. This may entail a divergence of the actual effect on the hearer from the original speaker’s intended effect (Austin, 1976:118) but, as revealed by public opinion surveys on the reception and interpretation of official guidance, communicating to people about the pandemic “in the universal code of a mass audience” is bound to fail anyway (Coleman et al., 2020:42). During the first ‘wave’ of the pandemic, British government promotional discourse, accompanied by daily statistics about death tolls and infection rates, keyed mostly into registers of fear (about contagion) and perseverance (enduring disruption). As will be shown, the Church and the local media (as well as a range of other actors) may have naturalised compliance by overlaying new voices of hope in an alignment of programmes of action.

3. Methods and data

Our analysis is grounded in a version of social constructivism that apprehends reality as constructed — or, better, communicatively constituted — via an interdiscursive process whose actors are simultaneously involved as participants in scripts and implicated as protagonists in storylines. It has been developed over the course of a long-term theoretical and empirical research programme (Kabele, 1998; Kabele, 2005; Smith et al., 2014; Smith and Kabele, 2020). Our analyses are in line with a sociolinguistic, pragmatic approach paying close attention to the linguistic anchorage of arguments (Ducrot, 1984) and to text-conversation dynamics (Taylor et al., 1996), drawing on speech act theory (Searle, 2011), narrative theory (Greimas, 1983a; Baroni, 2007) and organisational routine theory (Feldman et al., 2016). Routines ensure flexible stability based on the regularity of pattern-iteration, allowing for partial corrections of previous readings or performances of patterns of action that lead as a rule to an expectable result. Routines involve us in a script for maintaining or restoring order. Our understanding of narrativity accounts for transformation rather than pattern-iteration, accomplished textually via the attribution of participant roles indexed to motivations, commitments, transformative action and sanctions and by sequential structures that produce intrigue. This implicates us in a restorative storyline.

Our corpus of three texts is associated with an event — the Easter bank holiday — chosen because it was the first big test of the British public’s adherence to the stay at home slogan. It is a “corpus caught in mid-air” to grasp a discursive moment when actors are searching for the appropriate words to address the crisis and all its local manifestations (Moirand, 2018): the government is searching for the right slogans to get people to participate in a common programme expected to meet resistance; a priest is searching for the right words to deliver an Easter message at a time when churches had to remain closed; a local newspaper needs to appeal for readers’ support after the collapse of direct sales and advertising.2 Our analysis of the three texts attempts to grasp the semantic and lexical instability of the situation, and through it the emergent sense of discourse, by approaching it from the perspective of a situated interpreter — the reader of a local weekly newspaper in the north of England (grounded in the daily experience of the first author). We take a single edition of the paper published three days before Easter, together with the transcript of the government’s daily press conference from Easter Day. Such a selection is more likely to correspond to the actual exposure of a real individual than a corpus assembled to re...

According to Adam (2001:23) one of the key enunciative characteristics of pending routines is “a contract of truth and a promise of success” which provides “an implicit guarantee to the receiver that if they conform to all the recommendations and if they respect the procedures indicated, they will attain the desired goal” (ibid., emphasis added). Besides the if ... then ... prototype, instructions for restoring an expected order can also be communicated using constructions like: In order to get B, do A or How to get B? Do A (ibid.:13). As theorised in the previous sections, pending narratives are set in motion by a translation of the moralising force of an incomplete story to the situation in which readers (collectively) find...
themselves, motivated by a passionate reaction to threatened expectations. *Just as there and then ... so here and now ...* is a timespace-bridging construction akin to what Ricœur (1986) called a living imbrication. It produces a transposition from the storyworld to the situation of enunciation and hence to the strategic question of what is to be done about the present matter of concern. By comparison with pending routines, our prototype for pending narratives was a less reliable search tool for identifying sequences of text. We have chosen an example where it occurs, but often it is merely implicit, for readers are usually able to retrieve the moralising force of stories without explicit markers. For example, we can recognise parables as inducements of the same type without their teller having to guide us with a *just as there and then ... so here and now* (Tsiplakou and Floros, 2013).

Linguistically, the most common surface markers of pending routines are the use of imperatives, the future tense (in the predictive sense), and explicit sequential indicators like first, next, then, afterwards, etc. (Adam, 2001). More generally, routine sequences are often marked by use of the continuous present to indicate procedural description — communicating how things are usually/routinely done in a given context or situation. Pending narratives can be indicated by the appearance of evaluative clauses (where the narrator draws a moral) and by the topos of precedents and turning points (Chateauraynaud and Doury, 2010). They can also be marked by use of the future or future conditional tense, and other ways of modalising likelihood and desirability, to create narrative tension: by describing hoped-for goals or developing warning scenarios they represent impending threats to justify and motivate pending actions. Narrative sequences generally contain narrative temporal markers (beginning, end, finally, eventually, today, in those days, the current time, the coming weeks, etc.) or meta-narrative markers (words like stories, events and histories).

In both cases the main level of analysis is the sequence. The virtue of focusing on this level, mid-way between the sentence and the text (Adam, 1987), is that it allows us to recognise the extremely heterogeneous character of most texts and the gradual rather than sharp distinction between texts according to their (predominant) types. In other words, most texts are narrative-routine hybrids. This means, firstly, that whichever rhetorical repertoire is dominant, pending accounts can generally be subdivided into narrative and routine components; and secondly, that each pending narrative or pending routine is likely to contain further narrative and routine sequences. This creative mixture of narrativisation and routinisation plays a vital role in building empathetic identification or cognitive understanding: when speakers/authors employ this structure of persuasion they effectively delegate rhetorical authority to these imbricated sequences.

Our findings, indicative of plausible explanations, constitute a snapshot of a fleeting but typical discursive moment with regard to the diversification and serialisation of messages and commentaries to which the addressees of promotional discourse are exposed.

4. Results

4.1. The Downing Street briefings

How was the stay at home message embedded in wider discursive configurations? As a typical example of government discourse we can take an extract from the Downing Street briefing on Easter Day, delivered by Health Secretary Matt Hancock:

> This is an uncertain Easter for so many people. At a time when we normally come physically together, we must stay apart. It runs counter to every human instinct and every intuition that we possess but we must persevere. Because if we follow the rules and slow the spread of the virus, then each new day will bring us closer to normal life. And we can enjoy Easters to come, safe in the knowledge that when it mattered, we did our bit and rose to the challenge. And we put our loved ones, we put our NHS staff, and we put our local communities first. So please, this Easter, stay home, protect the NHS and save lives.

In an attempt to visualise the rhetorical structure and pragmatic sense of this and each of the following texts taken as examples of promotional discourse, Figs. 1–3 represent each text as the conjunction of an orientation (the matter framed by the text as a concern) and an action-inducing message addressed to the reader as a potential participant in a collective response to the matter of concern. The lower parts of the diagrams distinguish two kinds of discursive configuration used to involve or implicate the public — two kinds of pending account — characterised as either routine or narrative in style. Embedded within the texts may be a series of further narrative or routine sequences. By inducing subjectivation they serve to build readers’ empathetic identification or cognitive understanding and hence support the development of a collaborative community.

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3 Every day from 16 March to 23 June 2020 a member of the cabinet, usually ranked by two scientific or medical advisers, delivered an hour-long press conference from Downing Street. They were used to announce policy changes, provide statistical updates, answer questions from selected journalists and members of the public (via video link), but also to encourage, thank, exhort or warn the public.

4 This particular broadcast had a live television audience of 3.7 million (Daily Mail 6.6.20). Briefings were also aired live on BBC radio. Highlights from the briefings generally led the evening news bulletins and often set the agenda for the next day’s newspapers. For example, “Don’t give up: save lives this Easter” was the headline in the London Evening Standard on 13 April, with the subtitle: “Downing Street pleads with public to stay at home on sunny bank holiday.”
Fig. 1. Health Secretary’s Easter message as a pending account. PR = Pending routine, PN = Pending narrative, EI = Empathetic interpellation, CI = Cognitive interpellation.

Fig. 2. Vicar of Halifax’s Easter reflection as a pending account. PR = Pending routine, PN = Pending narrative, EI = Empathetic interpellation, CI = Cognitive interpellation.
At all the government press briefings from 20 March to 9 May 2020, the slogan — capitalised and slightly abbreviated to STAY HOME > PROTECT THE NHS > SAVE LIVES — was displayed on the front of the speakers’ podiums, and as shown above, Hancock repeats it at the end of his speech. We have already explained how it implies an if … then … programming routine. Yet, as shown in Fig. 1, Hancock’s rhetorical repertoire is broader than a simple instruction. Prior to his closing plea, his argumentation takes a detour through a visualisation of a future state of affairs in which we can look back with the pride of those who have contributed to a successful restoration of order (“we can enjoy Easters to come, safe in the knowledge that when it mattered, we did our bit and rose to the challenge”). While the interpellations used are cognitive, he incites us to act by constituting a virtualised storyworld in which the desired transformation is already accomplished and this storyworld supplies a self-denying programme of action we are invited to emulate. Emulation could mean just staying at home on Easter Monday bank holiday, but it could also mean a range of other actions limited only by each recipient’s discretionary interpretation of the ‘higher purpose’ invoked — putting loved ones, NHS staff and local communities first. In short, he sets up the pending routine with a pending narrative. The Health Secretary’s pending narrative is, in fact, a prophetic variation of the usually historicising construction just as there and then … so here and now …, for it positions its addressees at a junction where what we must do in the here and now is implied by the future as there and then.

4.2. The take-up of the message by civil society and the media

In this subsection we look at how the stay-at-home message was relayed and reworked by other actors in public discourse, taking two examples from the same edition of a local newspaper, one a vicar’s Easter reflection, the other an appeal to readers by the editor-in-chief. The former attempts to convert the frustration of not being able to celebrate Easter as a community under the constraints of lockdown into a new competence: a genuine experience of solidarity with all those who are suffering, whether with illness or fear. The latter seeks to transform readers’ forced isolation into cooperation with an offer

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5 On 10 May Johnson announced “a change of emphasis” captured in a new slogan, STAY ALERT > CONTAIN THE VIRUS > SAVE LIVES, which continued to be used throughout 2020. The instruction to stay at home “as much as possible” remained in force.

6 The Halifax Courier, published by JPIMedia, covers the district of Calderdale in West Yorkshire and has a circulation of about 13,000. The town itself has a population of just over 80,000. Once a centre of the wool industry, Halifax’s economy is now dominated by banking, food production and heritage tourism.
of guidance through the surfeit of sometimes confusing information about coronavirus and an appeal to renew the best traditions of a community-based local newspaper.

Canon Barber’s reflection (Fig. 2 and Appendix 1) incites action by a/ framing Easter using routine patterns of action referring to the regularities of Christian traditions and beliefs, on the basis of which we are induced to endure a difficult situation; b/ framing Easter using narrativised patterns of action referring to the virtualities of the Easter story, on which basis we are induced to contribute to the collective effort to recover from a difficult situation. Unlike Hancock’s speech, narrative sequences and empathetic interpellations dominate the vicar’s article. Having evoked an analogy between the pain of death and feeling of abandonment experienced by Jesus on the cross and the sentiments of many human beings in the current situation, he exhorts us to let ourselves be animated by God (or infected by passions) using the just as there and then ... so here and now ... construction:

Just as God transformed Jesus from being dead to being alive, so too can we be transformed into being Easter people: people who bring hope to a lost and vulnerable world through not only their prayers and daily living, but by acts of generosity and kindness, be it through vocational lives in the public / private / third sectors and caring professions, or through volunteering.

As Baroni and Clivaz (2012, Baroni, 2016 for an English summary) have shown, the story of the Passion remains intriguing in spite of repeated retelling because its message of hope refers to the “unactualised virtualities” available in the account, implicitly or explicitly, for contemplative application in the lifeworld. After all, spiritually following Jesus and ‘taking worries to Him’ form the very essence of the ritual, in which not only do believers routinely practise their contemplative skills, but in this case they are also preparing for the peak of the Church year by enduring a lengthy fasting period. But although this pending narrative drives the vicar’s message most explicitly, it is accompanied by a pending routine: a second message of hope stems from the familiar interpretative context of Easter rituals. Hope springs from the saying (the retelling of the Easter story within Christian culture or the recurrence of secular Easter rituals) and from the said (the Easter story’s unactualised virtualities). Our diagrammatic representation of the rhetorical structure of the pending account demonstrates how the dominant pending narrative is underpinned by a narrative sequence which still has a referential counterpoint in a routine sequence with its cognitive interpellations, and the same applies to the pending routine aspect of the vicar’s message. In some cases it is possible that either the narrative or the routine component of the inducement is merely implied, but we suggest this duality is always present at least implicitly.

In an editorial in the same edition of the Halifax Courier (Fig. 3 and appendix 1) its editor-in-chief seeks to reaffirm the implicit contract of communication between the newspaper and its readers. She does so by stressing the benefits of accurate reporting and clear sensemaking routines at a time of crisis, backed by a reference to the newspaper’s historical memory of other crises:

But together, down the years, this newspaper and its readers have come through some of the greatest threats to society ever recorded ... 

Although the precedents are unspecified, their invocation contradicts (with the inflecting “But”) an immobilising and individualising force implicitly attributed to “unprecedented times”. By making them present in the here and now the author convokes an experience-based collective competence. Yet the precedents are not used to incite action in the same way that the Easter story was used in Canon Barber’s commentary, for they feed directly into an if ... then ... programming construction evoking pattern-iterating continuity:

... and if we continue to stick together, we will come through this, too.

The following section makes a junction with the dependable routines of professional journalism, reassuring readers: if you seek expert advice, you can better protect yourselves. The ‘argument’ of this pending routine culminates in and authorises the promise:

... and this is our commitment to you; whatever happens, we will be there for you.

A pending narrative is then opened in the last section of the editorial with the convoking of several generic role models (the volunteers, the fundraisers, the care in the community nurses) whose pandemic response stories the editor-in-chief commits the paper to covering. With these examples, she also incites readers to contribute to a joint action: by engaging in similar acts of generosity or nominating community ‘heroes’ for newspaper coverage they can serve a twin higher purpose of “defeat[ing] coronavirus” and constructing “stronger, tighter, more resilient communities than ever before.” As the diagram shows, this editorial exhibits the same combination of cognitive and empathetic interpellation found in the vicar’s reflection.

Although neither of the above texts explicitly repeats the stay at home message, it forms a background assumption. They would literally not make sense were it not a given that good citizens are obeying it. It is evoked when Canon Barber refers to the “world locked down” and when editor-in-chief MacQuarrie refers to lives “turned upside down”, schools “shut down” and businesses facing “tradeless isolation”. It also finds an interdiscursive echo in one of the slogans used in the Courier’s advertising: Stay safe, stay better informed. Against this backdrop they each seek to define the roles of the institutions they represent (the Church and the local media) and to mobilise their members or readers — exposed to an individualising pressure — to forms of action congruous with playing one’s part in the creation of a collaborative community (the sense of
togetherness invoke in the editorial’s title). They overlay messages of hope on the stay at home message keying registers of fear (about contagion) and perseverance (enduring disruption).

This is significant given that media campaigns about disease threats registered by a domino of fear can trigger over-protective reactions detrimental to self-esteem (Coppola and Camus, 2007) or lead people to avoid or delay seeking treatment for other serious medical conditions. Hopeful messages are more likely to generate a sense of efficacy among their recipients, favouring danger-control responses rather than avoidance, denial or reactance as long as they do not minimise the severity of the threat or actors’ susceptibility (Witte, 1992). In our examples that is not the case: both articles explicitly invoke ‘fear’ or ‘threat’ and frame the danger as existential (see the orientation component in Figs. 2 and 3); yet they convey messages that bring hope and confer efficacy, declaratively in the vicar’s case (delivering a blessing) and commissively in the newspaper’s case (promising to provide expert guidance). Compliance with the stay at home message is naturalised (the texts assume both the readers’ loyal response and its efficacy as a response to the threat) and members of the respective communities of practice are interpellated by culturally-relevant, institutionally-backed world-to-word speech acts. Although Hancock’s action-inducing message to stay at home, a directive, has the same direction of fit it delegates responsibility for compliance to a universal ‘we’, whereas the collective actors mandated to cope by the other two texts — a congregation and a readership or local community — supply more tangible contours for identification.

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper is explicative, not theoretical. What we hope to have shown through these brief examples is how the success of the health promotional message to stay at home may have been linked to its conversion into a series of pending accounts transforming strong anxieties and fears into inducements evoking hope, carried by participation in a collaborative community. Each inducement was a textualisation of a restorative collective good with a routine and a narrative component. This hybrid quality, so our first claim goes, is important for performativity: promotional discourse gets people to do things by combining instructional inducements (if... then... programming constructions) and translational inducements (just as there and then... so here and now... mimetic constructions).

In addition, turning to our second claim, the force of the slogan was redoubled by its intertextual circulation in wider public discourse to produce a chain of essentially congruous inducements coming from discourse producers more easily construed as socially responsible advisers (Charauadeau, 2009) by the constituencies they serve. That is because the multiplication of voices, implicitly supporting the government message, multiplies the number of authors speaking in the public discourse to produce a chain of essentially congruous inducements coming from discourse producers more easily seen by the readers’ loyal response and its efficacy as a response to the threat) and members of the respective communities of practice are interpellated by culturally-relevant, institutionally-backed world-to-word speech acts. Although Hancock’s action-inducing message to stay at home, a directive, has the same direction of fit it delegates responsibility for compliance to a universal ‘we’, whereas the collective actors mandated to cope by the other two texts — a congregation and a readership or local community — supply more tangible contours for identification.

In relation to speech act theory, promotional discourse exemplifies the difficulty of measuring the success of perlocutionary acts. When/how could we know that the stay at home message had been taken up? Pandemic response communication is clearly a case where a mere change in the hearer’s mental state or attitude is insufficient, pragmatically almost irrelevant to the success of the act and the wider campaign. The government’s preferred tests were indicators like transport volumes, ‘footfall’ on high streets and transmission rates (e.g. the so-called R number as a measure of how many other people an infected person interacts with and infects). These tests involve following the chain of consequences a long way from the initial speech act. When the priest and the local newspaper expanded and diversified the initial inducement, they added subsidiary tests of success: the bringing of hope and the finding of comfort in the first case, readers’ informedness and communities’ resilience in the latter. If we extended our analytical focus to these effects (which is clearly beyond the scope of this paper) we would scarcely be in the domain of speech act theory, but we can use it as a starting point for our analyses (and a source of relevant sociological research questions) because the idea of performativity is crucial for understanding what is at stake in pending accounts.

In relation to public health communication, population-wide public health messages about threats like coronavirus cannot very easily be tailored to the communication needs of particular groups (see Coleman et al., 2020). Nonetheless a sort of tailoring effect often occurs when messages get imbricated in the discourse of different actors and institutions. Lee and Basnyat (2013) found, for instance, that news coverage of the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic effectively translated official press releases in ways that expanded and diversified the Singapore government’s preferred frame, producing notably an “amplification of positive tone”. But research has not looked at how further expansion and diversification can occur when messages are relayed and altered by actors other than journalists. Nor, barring a few studies in sociolinguistics, has it devoted enough attention to the ways mediators alter the tone and context of the original message, which can have a profound impact on how credibly warnings of catastrophe or appeals to vigilance are treated by audiences (Chateauraynaud, 2011). Our

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7 This concept, coined by Anscombe and popularised by Searle (2011), differentiates speech acts according to whether their point is to ‘fit’ words to the world or the world to our words. Searle’s widely accepted classification distinguishes assertives (word to world), directives and commissives (world to word), declaratives (both directions) and expressives (neither direction).
observations of the coronavirus stay at home campaign suggest that one of the key mechanisms may be the imbrication of the official message as a background assumption in specialised (here religious and journalistic) hope-inspiring pending accounts.

If we take the simple, generalised preventative practice of self-isolation as the speaker’s intended effect (the perlocutionary object of the message), then the chain-like iteration of pending accounts from government press briefings to third-party commentaries is an effective amplifier because in a diversified society any given recipient is more likely to act in response to more specialised appeals. But this is not only a reflection of the third-party sources’ greater credentials for truth-telling in the eyes of their natural constituencies: our examples suggest it may also be because the imbricating pending accounts deploy more narrativity (and empathetic interpellation) alongside argumentation and routinised or procedural instructions (cognitive interpellation). We refer here not to the kind of narrative identification that is well-known to motivate behaviour change in interpersonal healthcare interactions (Frank et al., 2015; Heley et al., 2020) but to storytelling that facilitates identification with a collaborative community mobilising its own reserves for a restorative endeavour in the name of a collective good using mimesis or storyworld-to-lifeworld translation.

Circulation and diffusion, however, can alter the original message’s implications in the context of wider political, economic, cultural and ecological stakes. Hence the same property that makes pending accounts irreplaceable instruments for maintaining society’s capacity to react to threats such as pandemics — their rhetorical potency — makes them the object of a difficult conundrum for democrats. Imbrication allows communication to target reason and interest (pending routines) as well as passion (pending narratives), and the rippling of pending accounts through dialogical networks permits an expansion and diversification of repertoires of rhetoric and hermeneutics so that subjectivation can function effectively across a greater range of regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2001) in keeping with the divisions and specialisations of modern societies. But the more potent the discursive construct through which an inducement to action is delivered, the more open it is to abuse and the greater the necessity of critique (Boltanski, 2011).

Questions of democracy should not be avoided just because, to quote the WHO advert cited in the epigraph, we are staying at home in the name of a higher purpose (public health) that most ‘reasonable’ people would recognise. Returning to Charaudeau’s insistence that health promotion messages are at once implicating and stigmatising, the thorniness of promotional discourse is that it confounds the target public (in our case all citizens) with the concerned public, since everyone’s behaviour is the source of disorder to be eliminated. When involvement or implication are shared, then everyone’s behaviour matters, since inaction as well as action constitutes a consequential response to the inducement, and in that sense it cannot be avoided. The pending account produces chains of relatively congruous inducements that help reduce uncertainty at a crisis moment and which are empowering in Latour’s sense that power is explained by the actions of the people who obey and should not be understood as something held by those who are obeyed (1986:265–268). In obeying the lockdown nothing prevents us from performing psychologically rewarding and communally beneficial deeds like “donating food and sewing scrubs”, two of “10 ways to lend a hand” suggested in the Guardian feature quoted in this paper’s epigraph. Yet neither the encouragement of such humanly noble acts of obedience in a newspaper supplement nor their publicisation in local newspaper coverage in and of itself confers agency. Agency, in fact, is inferred as much as conferred — a function of the chain of inferences drawn from the chain of inducements and the circumstances in which they are drawn. When in August 2020 a partial lockdown was reimposed on Calderdale and other parts of West Yorkshire after a rise in infection rates, the Director of Public Health appeared in the local media to “ask for residents’ help to tackle COVID-19” but also to acknowledge the unintended and disempowering effects of the stay at home message on residents: “She said people in high incidence areas told her they felt stigmatised and blamed for the situation the borough now finds itself in.” (Halifax Courier 20.8.20). Empowerment means the action templates afforded by messages that interpellate subjects as the speaking, living and embodied subject (Bosančić, 2019:97).

They leave room, in other words, for creative “meaning-making responses” to interpellations which can “challenge, enhance, extend and unfix [their] extant meanings” by propelling narrative (as well as routine) forms “into spaces where new knowledges and actions are explored and realised” (Crinall, 2009:21).

6. Conclusions

“How we communicate as a government has a direct impact on the spread of the virus. The communications are part of the policy”, Health Secretary Hancock said just after Easter on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme (16 April 2020), irritated at an interviewer’s insinuation that the government was too focused on the ‘spin’. He has a case, for rarely is the interventionist character of political discourse — that governments do things by saying things — more obvious than in a public health crisis. Indeed it is a tenet of pandemic planning that communication campaigns effectively replace pharmaceutical interventions during the initial period of pandemics, since — in the absence of vaccines and effective antiviral drugs — limiting their adverse health impact is only possible through behavioural interventions promoting hygiene, isolation, quarantine and social distancing (Reynolds and Quinn, 2008:135).

If these campaigns are to work, trust and credibility are essential for galvanising people to take and sustain preventive and protective action. They are essential elements of the contract of communication between government or public health officials — those issuing the inducements to action — and publics. But it would be absurd to reduce this contract to a direct relationship between officials and publics, since communication flows in emergencies are a complex and distributed dialogue between official discourses and other actors’ voices, orienting towards the same matter of concern but from distinct points of view (Laidlaw, 2019). We have highlighted one feature of this dialogue: the embedding of official messages as background
assumptions in the discourse of other actors whose awareness of knock-on effects and competence to intervene within specific constituencies are vital assets. They made the government’s ‘paradoxical’ request to the public (because staying at home is disordering under normal circumstances) relevant by weaving it into locally situated restorative scripts and storylines (the alignment of programmes of action referred to above) (Cooren and Sanders, 2002).

This interlayering has the potential to overcome fragmentation and paralysation and so amplify the public’s will and capacity to act by adjusting the mood of the inducements pending accounts constitute. This is why emergency health promotion campaigns, in order “to communicate messages that will reduce illness, save lives, and maintain societal structures” (Reynolds and Quinn, 2008:16S), must, counterintuitively, relax the organisational imperative to speak with one authoritative voice and embrace dialogicity and generic hybridity. Getting people to do arduous things in the name of a restorative collective good requires more than good advertising slogans, more than the ‘message clarity’ so often called for by governments’ critics during 2020. It requires offering individuals and groups within segmented publics empathetic and cognitive inducements to want to participate in the pandemic response and to know how they can contribute to and benefit from participation in a collaborative community (Zask, 2011). Empowerment concerns the terms on which these ‘modal objects’ (wanting to do, knowing how to do and being able to do) are transferred and the scope for subjectively working out what it means to accept or resist inducements. Clearly, policy also has to be empowering, especially for those groups facing economic barriers to compliance. But at the initial stage of the pandemic public acceptance of the sacrifices entailed by staying at home and belief that individual actions could make a difference were paramount in making the pandemic everyone’s concern. In dynamic societies we are always situated on the cusp of a pending account, but do not always see ourselves as its actors or perceive the relevance of the instructions and narrative templates offered to us as inducements to action. Effective promotional discourse makes people present at these turning points as the co-authors of the ‘interrupted’ accounts while searching for a “concordant discordance” (Ricoeur, 1986) between the cascading scripts and storylines it sets off.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1. Full texts of newspaper articles

Celebrating Easter at this very unusual time

Halifax Courier, 9 April 2020.

Easter for the Christian community is the most holy time of the year when they remember the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

HOLY WEEK begins on Palm Sunday, when Jesus arrives on a donkey in Jerusalem, and is greeted by his followers like a king.

Sadly, this event confirmed the Roman Authorities view of him as a potential troublemaker, and plans were made to have him removed.

After having supper with his friends, and following the betrayal of Judas, Jesus was arrested and following trial, put to death by crucifixion, as was custom in those days.

After his burial his followers thought this to be the end of the story, but we now know that in fact three days later, on Easter Day, Jesus did in fact rise from the dead and re appeared to many of his followers, before he eventually ascended into heaven.

Jesus’ death and resurrection gave hope to his followers that if they shared in his suffering, that they too, would share in his resurrection, and following death would come to be with him in heaven and enjoy eternal life.

Today the idea of life and death could not be more acute, with much of the world locked down and in response to a worldwide pandemic called Coronavirus.

We’ve never lived through anything like this before, and none of us know when it will finally come to an end, and what state the world will be in when it does?

Many people are living in fear, for themselves and their loved ones. And yet, we can find hope, hope in a God who knows our thoughts and feelings, our fears and our desires, because he became a human being in the person of Jesus, who died and rose again.

We can take all our fears and worries to Jesus, and ask him to bring us comfort, strength, hope and a future life.

We don’t know what that will look like, and we have little control over it, except in the knowledge that God will protect and love all that he has made, including you and me.

On the cross Jesus experienced the pain of death and the feeling of abandonment, which many humans feel at the current time.
And yet, we also know that God was always present, and that he always will bring good out of evil, and light out of darkness, and this must surely be our hope and prayer for our world this Easter Day.

Just as God transformed Jesus from being dead to being alive, so too can we be transformed into being Easter people: people who bring hope to a lost and vulnerable world through not only their prayers and daily living, but by acts of generosity and kindness, be it through vocational lives in the public/private/third sectors and caring professions, or through volunteering at the local food bank, dementia café, or prison visitor or debt counsellor.

What ever your situation may be this Easter, may the risen Jesus Christ bless you and keep you, and all those whom you love and carry in your hearts.

Reflection. By Canon Hilary Barber, Vicar of Halifax Minster.

We must work together to beat this

Halifax Courier, 9 April 2020.

We are living in unprecedented times. None of us has seen anything like the coronavirus pandemic before. As the Prime Minister said: we are facing the worst public health crisis in a generation.

But together, down the years, this newspaper and its readers have come through some of the greatest threats to society ever recorded and if we continue to stick together, we will come through this, too.

Our lives are being turned upside down: schools have shut down; parents are struggling to juggle work and home life; businesses are scrambling to protect their employees whilst safeguarding their very futures. Pubs, clubs, restaurants, theatres, cafes, sports centres and many, many more small independent traders, are all facing months of tradeless isolation.

Thanks must go to those putting themselves in harm’s way in the care sector, as the NHS prepares to look coronavirus in the eye and not back down, caring for our loved ones should they be among those who contract the virus. Thousands will.

But there are things we can all do to better protect ourselves and our families. It starts by seeking out the very latest expert guidance on what to do and what not to do as the pandemic gathers pace in the coming weeks and months. We will bring you that guidance.

We know that for you, having a constant feed of reliable news and information that you trust is vital, and this is our commitment to you: whatever happens, we will be there for you. There to make sense of the situation. There to steer you towards any help you might need. There to offer reassurance and a calm, steady hand.

We know that in the worst of times, the very best in people comes to the fore and so part of the commitment we are making to you today is to shine a light on the heroes in this hour of need. The volunteers getting bread, cheese and milk for those who cannot. The fundraisers keeping small businesses afloat. The care in the community nurses not stopping for breath on their mission to look after the vulnerable.

We will highlight any positive community initiatives and good causes. We know that you are going to need us just as much as we need you. We will be there for you as, down the years, you have been there for us.

Together, we will defeat coronavirus and emerge from it as stronger, tighter, more resilient communities than ever before.

Look after each other.

Jean MacQuarrie, Editor-in-Chief.

JPMedia, including Harrogate Advertiser, The Scarborough News, Wakefield Express, Halifax Courier.

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