

## Superpromoters: summary of a literature study

### Rationale and definition

The government in the Netherlands is seeking new ways of getting its message across as cogently as possible. This is particularly true in situations in which the message is an 'activating' or motivational one – that is, a message calculated to persuade people to act in a manner desired by the government, e.g. as part of dealing with a risk or crisis situation.

The term 'superpromoter' was coined by Rijn Vogelaar in 2009. A superpromoter is 'an enthusiast who communicates his enthusiasm and in that way influences others'. According to Vogelaar, superpromoters play a pivotal role in their social network by deliberately or otherwise infecting others with their enthusiasm and in that way convincing them of the rightness of the message. At the time of writing, the concept has been defined and applied only in relation to the sale of commercial products.

To gain a picture of the opportunities and threats associated with the use of 'superpromoters of government policy', the Research and Documentation Centre (*WODC*) of the Ministry of Security and Justice (*Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie*) in The Hague asked Crisislab to conduct a literature study into the effects of employing superpromoters in risk and crisis communication.

In line with the classical definition given by Leiss, we take risk communication to be 'the flow of information and risk evaluations back and forth between academic experts, regulatory practitioners, interest groups, and the general public'.

We then take crisis communication to be a particularization of risk communication such that it takes account of the specific elements of a crisis, in other words urgency, uncertainty, and a society in shock.

For the definition of a superpromoter of government policy we align ourselves as far as possible with the definition given by Vogelaar:

#### **Definition of a superpromoter of government policy**

A superpromoter of government policy is an individual who on the basis of their own *intrinsic motivation* disseminates a *government standpoint* within their own social network, where their views may be *expected to have cogency*.

## What factors theoretically determine the effectiveness of a superpromoter?

The key factors that correspond to the four core elements (the superpromoter's intrinsic motivation, their personal social network, the motivational message being conveyed, and the superpromoter's likely powers of persuasion), and which collectively determine the effectiveness of superpromoters, are the following.

According to what is known as self-determination theory, **intrinsic motivation** is determined by

- the degree to which a free individual may or may not, as they see fit, pursue a particular course of action (*perceived autonomy*)
- the actual or experienced *connection* felt by a person with an individual, group or culture, and
- perceived *competence* to pursue the course of action concerned.

Intrinsic motivation is further increased by personal experience of a risk, and diminished by forms of reward (other than positive feedback).

For the other **three core elements** the dominant factor is that the individual's personal network has social mass, i.e. that the prevailing social norms and values have a limiting effect on messages which are not compatible with them (and hence on the senders of those messages) and a stimulating effect on those senders and messages which are.

Variable properties of the **personal social network** that have an effect are:

- strong ties between sender and receiver have a positive effect on the transfer of complex messages and bringing about a change in behaviour on the part of the receiver.
- weak ties, however, may be suitable for the rapid transmission of a simple message where it is certain that the receiver is already motivated to carry it out, as in crisis situations. Because people's actually or potentially weak networks are larger than their strong networks, it is possible in such circumstances to reach more people.

More generally, the **message** will come across better if it is addressed to an individual, though there is then a risk that such a personal message will have a negative effect on other receivers. Credibility is one of the last independent properties of the message: it is aspects such as perceived truthfulness that determine the reception of the message.

The **sender's cogency** is determined by his credibility (which includes the aspect of involvement) and the extent to which the receiver can identify with the sender. Also important is the degree of perceived congruence between the sender and his message.

In summary, however, it may be said that the literature reveals no integrated and predictive model in which the effects of all these factors are brought together.

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## **What moral aspects must a government examine when contemplating the use of superpromoters?**

In its broadest sense, risk and crisis communication, in the sense in which the term is used here, is designed to effectively encourage citizens to perform certain actions desired by the government. In other words, risk and crisis communication has what might be termed a manipulative premise, a fact which immediately raises the ethical question of whether a government has any business wishing to restrict citizens' autonomy by influencing their thinking. Second, there is the ethical matter of whether the government in question really knows for certain that its motivational message is the right one: all too often in the past it has eventually turned out that 'in the light of what we know today' the government view at the time was after all not the right basis for giving citizens the best possible protection against a risk.

The chief point made in the literature when summing up the position is that the moral argument must ultimately be that manipulative messages are ethical as long as citizens have a realistic possibility of departing from the government's 'wish', and provided that the government's decision is democratically arrived at and based on an evaluation of which actions possess the greatest possible societal utility.

In the case of crisis communication it follows that providing direct, non-neutral, manipulative information is legitimate if it helps ensure that its receiver can act to protect himself against imminent and major risks. It is also important to remember that in such a situation offering neutral information that will have to be assessed and interpreted by the receiver may take up valuable time.

These general considerations also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the decision to use superpromoters.

However, in the particular case of the use of superpromoters there is an additional responsibility resting on the shoulders of the government. This is because now it is a matter of using ordinary citizens, who must not be allowed to be burdened by responsibility in the event of a promoted course of action subsequently proving to have been ill-advised, or to become the victims of a negative reaction on the part of the receivers of the government's message (see also the next section).

To sum up: a government must be very sure of the rightness of its motivational message before employing superpromoters.

## **In what circumstances will the use of superpromoters be more likely to be counterproductive?**

The literature makes reference to three mechanisms which lead to predictably counterproductive consequences of using superpromoters.

In the first place, people who are highly antipathetic to the point of view supported by a message will receive that message selectively, experiencing it as an argument for counteractive action or communication. This can produce 'antipromoters' such as those familiar to us from the history of government vaccination campaigns.

Second, the use of superpromoters will attract media attention and in that way, according to current media logic, will cause at least an equal degree of attention to be paid to the opposite view. The result will be greater media focus on, for example, antipromoters.

Third, and more generally, a motivational message that for whatever reason fails to get across may lead to what for the government is an undesirable compensating reaction from the receiver. Such boomerang effects may also be aimed at the superpromoter as the bringer of an unconvincing message.

**To summarize: Theoretically, when and how can superpromoters best be employed?**

The core idea underlying the use of superpromoters is that within their own networks intrinsically motivated citizens can disseminate a government message with greater cogency and persuasiveness than would be possible for the government through conventional communication campaigns.

Conversely the government would then have to act as follows to employ superpromoters:

- Given a particular target group for risk or crisis communication, the government would have to analyse which personal networks of suitable potential superpromoters can be identified as overlapping the target group.
- The potential superpromoters would then have to be armed with information (the motivational message) and perhaps also with the competences needed to a) become intrinsically motivated and b) to be likely to gain cogency.

We note at this point that we have found no prescriptive indications in the literature that might be of assistance in the above analysis – that is, in helping to discover potential superpromoters.

From the above description alone it is immediately apparent that using superpromoters for not particularly urgent risk communication will generally be a labour-intensive matter. It follows that the decision to use superpromoters rather than conventional communication must be driven by special circumstances.

The situation may be different in crisis situations: the literature shows that a crisis can give rise to situational altruism, i.e. that people are intrinsically motivated to help each other and that potential networks can be swiftly activated between people who are geographically close together or who have some form of contact through social media.

Regarded in this light, the use of superpromoters in crisis situations is virtually unavoidable, and it is thus frequently on the agenda. Crucial here is the swift availability of a confidence-inspiring message that delivers an appropriate prescription for action.

### **In conclusion**

The concept of superpromoters that is the focus of this study is one of a range of concepts that make novel forms of government communication possible. These include concepts that underline the sense that government must have a presence wherever our society 'speaks' about matters that are close to its heart, as in discourse communities and the social media.

This literature study does not give a definitive answer to the questions of whether and how superpromoters can be 'used' as a modern means of communication. The literature simply does not yet hold such insights. Perhaps this study does, however, offer governments some alternative options. The insights in this report have purposely been presented in such a way as to render them to a large extent more widely useful to those engaged in thinking about modern interactive government communication.