Subformal Warning Systems in the Species Homo Politicus

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ABSTRACT

A political activist needs to pick up early warning signals that "something is happening" which might require his attention. The "something" could be an emergent danger or opportunity. An ideal-typical warning system is postulated to account for what is believed to be the extraordinary infrequency of activists being caught off guard under most "routine" conditions. Such a system would ideally meet four criteria: rapidity, comprehensiveness, validity, and selectivity. The postulated system rests on what Anthony Downs has called "subformal" communications channels among individuals and groups interrelated by principles of specialization and the division of labor.

Talk to any moderately competent bureau head, interest group leader, or legislative staff man and you will learn that (a) ominous developments are on the horizon which threaten his cherished programs; (b) by good luck, and by dint of a certain personal skill, he has gotten intimations of such developments in time to initiate a protective response; (c) other developments are probably afoot the intimations of which will reach him, alas, only belatedly. Moreover it is not only intimations of disaster that will reach him belatedly, he will say, but also those that might have signalled opportunities for fruitful cooperation, had they only been received in time. Of course, how could it be otherwise, he will lament, when "people in our (policy) area have yet to learn how to communicate?" The same litany can be heard at any level of government and with regard to almost any governmental function—mental health services, corrections, housing, pollution control, or whatever.

It is my impression, however, that such litanies are usually addressed to phantoms. Intimations and omens do, I believe, in fact reach virtually all organizations and individuals who are in fact disposed and able to initiate some plausible response,

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and reach them in a timely fashion. If such a hypothesis is perhaps extreme, it is probably a lot closer to the truth than one which asserts that the opposite is the case. At any rate, I shall treat this hypothesis as only a working assumption, from which I shall move to propose a model of communications processes among political activists that would account for the conditions I take to exist.

Let us define the parameters of the problem more explicitly. For any public policy area there is a large, heterogeneous, and somewhat amorphous "attentive public." This public typically is composed of persons from public and private agencies, professional associations, clientele organizations, elected officials and their staffs at one or more levels of government, employee groups, suppliers of goods and services to the agencies or their clients, citizen watchdog groups, and a number of less easily categorized individuals. One could imagine an attentive public of, say, 10,000–50,000 persons for the politics surrounding mental health programs in a large state; of 500–5000 for urban renewal politics in a city of population 200,000; of 50,000–1,000,000 for national housing policies. Precise numbers are unimportant, though, since the principal point here is that an attentive public is very small compared to the entire citizenry—0.01% to 3.0%, let us say—but still quite large in absolute numbers. The characteristics that distinguish members of the attentive public from the rest of their fellow citizens are their general level of concern for and awareness of the issue area, and their disposition (however slight or occasional) to do something political (however small) about it. Almost any given development in the policy area, however, is of serious concern to only a small subset of this larger attentive public; and only a subset of that subset actually cares enough to take action on the matter. It is this latter small subset with which I am primarily concerned here. My model seeks to explain how all or nearly all persons in this subset acquire such timely news. It will also explain why people outside the attentive public are much less likely to receive timely news.

The present exposition is purely theoretical, though it will not be without empirical grounding in example and anecdote. During 1966 and 1967, and again during 1972–74, I have been a fairly close observer of mental health politics in California. Although my systematic studies during both periods have been directed towards theoretical purposes other than the ones discussed in this paper, these years of field observations, interviewing, and document reading have produced a store of impressions, puzzling questions, and finally some tentative speculation about the answers. Further research will be necessary to refine and test the proposed model and the various hypotheses that can be derived from it.

**Political Alarms**

Participants in an attentive policy public operate in a state of "dissociated vigilance," in Erving Goffman's phrase. Because of the political, and therefore conflict-provoking, nature of their activities, they exaggerate the condition of dissociated vigilance common to all creatures, whether human or animal, which as Goffman asserts:

exhibit two basic modes of activity. They go about their business grazing, gazing, mothering, digesting, building, resting, playing, placidly attending to easily managed matters at hand. Or, fully mobilized, a fury of intent, alarmed, they get ready to attack or to stalk or to flee. Physiology itself is patterned to coincide with this duality.