

Using Role Sets to Engage and Persuade Visitors of Websites That Promote Safe Sex

Michaël F. Steehouder
University of Twente
M.F.Steehouder@UTwente.NL

Abstract

Promoting safe sexual behavior is difficult because of the face threatening nature of such messages. Too much facework involves the risk of the message to become unclear and noncommittal, while too little facework might end in the reader resisting the message, and even boomerang effects (reactance). In this paper, it is argued that creating appropriate author and reader roles (role sets) might be an effective way to escape from this dilemma. Some examples are analyzed to identify different role sets and to discuss how they can help. The paper concludes with some considerations on the effect of creating role sets on the persuasiveness of websites.

Keywords: *health communication, politeness, personas, role sets, persuasion*

Introduction

Over 22 million people worldwide have died of AIDS until now, over 40 million are infected by HIV, and their number increases every year, despite the enormous investments in prevention and care programs by the United Nations, governments and non-governmental organizations. Among these investments, information and education programs take an important place, in particular with respect to infection prevention and health behavior.

Informing people about HIV/AIDS and persuading them of safe sexual behavior is one of the most important weapons in the struggle against AIDS. Numerous campaigns have been started in the past years, some of them worldwide, some on a national level.

One of the important obstacles for effective communicating about HIV/AIDS and safe sexual behavior is shame. Since discussing sexual behavior is taboo in most cultures, young people rarely have access to clear and accurate information on sexual matters, leading them to indulge in risky sexual behaviors.

How important this barrier is, was demonstrated by former South African President Nelson Mandela when he announced the death of his son Makgatho on January 6th, 2005/ He explicitly informed the press that AIDS was the cause of his death:

“For some time I have been saying ‘Let us give publicity to AIDS and not hide it’. It is the only way to make it appear like a normal illness. To come out and say someone has died of HIV, then people will stop regarding it as an illness reserved to people who go to hell and not heaven.”

Many considered this announcement as an act of courage. “I would like to pay tribute to Madiba for his courageous decision to speak out about the cause of his son’s death.” declared Inkatha-chief Buthelezi, whose own son Nelisuzulu also died of AIDS-related illness. Both Mandela and Buthelezi’s comments illustrate how important shame and taboo is in communicating about aids.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework for communicating safe sexual behavior, based upon the notions of face and politeness as analyzed by Brown and Levinson [1] and the concept of altercasting, as discussed by Pratkanis [2]. Although most of my argument is applicable to paper materials (such as brochures) as well, the emphasis will be on the use of role sets in websites. This paper can be considered as an elabo-

ration of the role playing framework set by Coney and Steehouder [3].

Politeness Theory

Every member of a society wants to be respected, or, as Brown and Levinson [1] formulate it, wants to claim for a 'public self-image'. This notion of face includes two aspects: the freedom to act as one chooses, unimpeded by others ('negative face') and the want to be positively appreciated by others ('positive face'). Since we all want to 'keep our face', we normally try to respect each others face by leaving each other free in acting and restraining from disapproving judgments about each others personality or behavior.

However, in most forms of communication, it is almost impossible to keep each other's face to the full extent. As soon as we try to persuade others to a certain behavior (e.g., by giving advice or instruction), we threaten their negative face by putting pressure on their actions. And if we express our point of view on a certain matter, there is the risk of implying disapproval of other persons' opinions, and thus harming their positive face.

Brown and Levinson ([1, 65-68] mention a large number of categories of so-called Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), both negative and positive. Among these, three are particularly relevant when we try to persuade people to safe sexual behavior.

- Advice, suggestions, warnings and guidelines. As soon as we recommend or promote forms of sexual behavior (the famous abc: abstinence, being faithful, condom use), we attempt to curtail someone's freedom.
- Disapproval, criticism, or disagreement with the recipients' opinions or behavior, and in doing so harms their positive face. By promoting 'good' behavior, we imply that our audience at least is inclined to 'bad' behavior, and thus we imply a disapproval of the other.
- Mentioning taboos. A taboo is (by definition) something we don't talk about, or only in guarded terms. If we talk freely about sexuality, neglect the fact that it might be a taboo for the addressee, and we suggest not to respect his/her values.

Brown and Levinson argue that communicators have to balance the pros and cons of three inten-

tions: (1) to communicate the message effectively, (2) to be efficient, and (3) to maintain the face of the recipient. As a result of the balancing, we can opt for different strategies.

- Going off record: the FTA is not communicated directly, but suggested by the content of the message. Going off record is a strategy that maintains the recipient's face, but it is not efficient, and there is a risk that the message is not communicated.
- Going baldly on record means doing the FTA in a direct, clear and unambiguous way. If we choose this option, the message is communicated efficiently, but there is a considerable risk of harming the recipient's face.

Between the previous, there is the possibility to add redressive action. This means that we do the FTA in such a way that the recipients understand that it is not our attention to harm their face. When adding redressive action, the message can be well communicated and the risk of harming the recipients' face is lowered, but the communication is less efficient than when we go baldly on record.

There are two types of redressive action:

- Positive politeness means that we show appreciation for the recipients by recognizing their wants and values, or by emphasizing our good relationship with them.
- Negative politeness means that we assure that we respect the recipients' freedom of choice, and that we only want to minimally interfere.

Of course, there is also the option not to do the FTA after all. In that case, there will be no hard feelings for the recipient's face, but we can also be sure that the message is not communicated.

It is not simple to predict which of the strategies is the best in a given situation. Brown and Levinson argue that a number of criteria will be taken into consideration.

The payoffs of each strategy. By going on record, we can, for instance, be credited for honesty and for the fact that we trust the addressee. By going off record we can be credited for being tactful and for giving the other the opportunity to act 'spontaneously' by doing what we suggest. By adding re-

dressive actions we can maintain, or even strengthen, the good relationship with the recipient.

The social relationship. If the social distance between the communicating parties is larger, the risk of harming the face is also larger, and there will be a stronger tendency to indirectness and/or redressive action. Also the power distance is important: those who are high in power can easier afford to neglect FTAs than those who are less in power. The ranking of a particular FTA in a specific culture. Asking someone to lend some money is much more tolerated in some cultures than in others.

The Dilemma: Indirectness or Reactance

The politeness theory predicts that messages that promote safe sex will be carried out highly 'off record' and/or supplemented with expressions of politeness. However, indirectness and politeness might harm the clarity and the persuasive power of the message, and hence its effectiveness.

The dilemma can be illustrated by comparing the following examples from the FACT website (URLs of website mentioned in this paper are provided following the References section). The following is a passage that describes the so-called ABC-measures against HIV infection (Abstinence, Being faithful, Condom use). However, instead of promoting these behaviors (which would be a FTA), the writers choose for an 'off record' strategy by just mentioning them. Doing so, the passage suggests a behavioral advice, but leaves it to the reader to take over that suggestion: the passage can also be read as 'just information'.

Not having (abstaining from) sexual intercourse is the most effective way to avoid STIs, including HIV. For those who choose to be sexually active, the following HIV prevention activities are highly effective:

- *Having intercourse with only one uninfected partner*
- *Using latex condoms every time you have sex*

The most eye-catching way of presenting the advice 'off record' is the use of general descriptions such as *those who choose to be sexually active* instead of directly talking to the reader with *you*. The use of this pronoun in the last sentence suggests that the off record strategy is not applied consistently.

As an alternative, advice can be formulated much more directly 'on record', as in the following passage from the same website:

You need to use a new condom every time you have sexual intercourse. Never use the same condom twice. Put the condom on after the penis is erect and before any contact is made between the penis and any part of the partner's body. If you go from anal intercourse to vaginal intercourse, you should consider changing the condom.

The FTAs in this passage are done much more direct. The reader cannot neglect the persuasive intention. But now there is the risk of the message being offensive, and therefore even producing resistance against the advice.

In social psychology, such response is known as reactance. *Reactance* refers to defiance and resentment toward a form of persuasion that appears to threaten an individual's behavioral freedom.[4] Further, the reactance theory predicts that when individuals perceive that their behavioral freedom is threatened, they will change their attitude to the opposite of what is advocated in the persuasion (i.e., "boomerang effect") in an attempt to reclaim the threatened freedom.

Role Sets to Prevent Reactance

It has been argued by Brown and Levinson that the force of FTAs is influenced by the social relationship between the communicating parties. Some FTAs can be done more easily if the relationship is appropriate. For instance, a manager can give orders to employees, an officer can command the crew, and parents can 'push' their children without really affecting the face of the other party. Whether an FTA is acceptable or offensive (or in-between) depends on the roles of the speakers and the hearer in a particular situation.

In many forms of (mass) communication participants (readers and writers) do not know each other personally, nor have they a particular relationship. This holds for the majority of the messages used in web communication about HIV/AIDS: the websites are hosted by anonymous organizations that have no personal or social relationship with their visitors. In such cases, roles and role sets are not given, but they are *created* in messages, as relationships between *fictitious personas*. Scholars in Rhetoric have long been aware of the potential of role playing to understand the nature of any com-

munication, to better predict its success and to understand where it has gone wrong.[5] They argue that communication participants take on a role that serves a particular function in the communication and that serves the purposes of each participant. For example, in manual writing, Coney and Chatfield [6] found that an author can develop an authorial persona of the “helpful mentor” and a complementary role of “eager learner” for the reader. Steehouder [7] shows that readers of operating instructions are addressed in a role of operators who are interested in buttons and switches, but also in a role of users who want to use their appliance for real life tasks.

Since role sets are important determinants for the force of FTAs, creating role sets in texts might be a useful strategy to perform FTAs in a more straightforward (bald) manner that would *be appropriate otherwise, without* the risk reactance. Things that are taboo or offensive between relative strangers can be tolerated and accepted between peers.

Altercasting

Creating role sets to persuade people is also known as the strategy of *altercasting*. Altercasting means that we ‘force’ an audience to accept a particular role that make them behave in the way we want them to behave. Pratkanis [2] gives an overview of research that supports the effectiveness of this strategy. He distinguishes two basic forms of altercasting:

- *Manded* altercasting means that we ‘tell’ people who they are (or are supposed to be) by recalling a role that the other already has (‘You as an American citizen should...’), by attributing a role the other might not be aware of (‘You as a responsible caring person should ...’), or by asking people to play a role.
- *Tact* altercasting means that we put ourselves as senders in a role that ‘evokes’ a natural counter-role for the other. For example, some common role sets are expert versus unknowing, or helper versus help-seeker.

Altercasting is considered as a powerful persuasive tactic because

- the social role is a basic unit in people’s everyday condition;

- presenting oneself in a social role that can be used to cast the alter (tact altercasting) is relatively easy;
- constructing roles that trap others in a course of action is also relatively easy;
- people often easily accept the social roles offered to them.

See Pratkanis [2] for a review of studies that support the effectiveness of Altercasting.

In concluding, the theoretical framework can be summarized as follows:

Promoting safe sex is inevitably a face threatening act, because it is an attempt to impose specific behavior, it criticizes the current opinions and behavior of the addressee and it refers to a taboo-topic. Doing the FTA indirectly or with politeness makes the FTA more acceptable, but it also makes it easier for the addressee to neglect the advice. This dilemma can probably be solved by altercasting: introducing an appropriate role set that allows for putting forward FTAs more directly without offending the addressee.

Some Role Sets Discussed

The following is an analysis of some examples of role sets, found in websites or individual web pages that promote safe sex, HIV testing or other HIV/AIDS-related behavior. The analysis is not based on a systematic quantitative form of content analysis; probably it is still too early for that, nor has the analysis been tested in experiments. The main purpose is just to identify some typical role sets and to develop hypotheses about their potential effectiveness.

Expert-Unknowing (E-U) An expert is an individual with specialized knowledge. Experts manifest themselves in texts by just providing information without reference to sources for argumentation. The expert provides knowledge and explains. His or her expertise makes it unnecessary to justify the information. If the author persona of a web page behaves as an expert, he creates a role set that puts the addressee in the role of an unknowing individual.

The E-U role set is particularly manifested when information is presented in a school book-like

manner. A typical example is the following (from the FACT website)

*What Happens when HIV Enters The Body?
When HIV enters the body, it attaches itself to the wall of the white CD4 blood cell (also called the helper T cell). This cell, or lymphocyte, belongs to a class of lymphocytes called T cells. T cells form a critical part of the body's immune system as they organize the overall immune response to a variety of infectious diseases.*

The following are examples of 'school book' characteristics:

- The heading has the form of a factual question.
- There is a strong focus on terminology (synonyms and explanations).
- The text does not explicitly refer to the persona of the expert or to the persona of the unknown addressee.
- The information is presented in a general, abstract manner (it does, for instance, not mention 'your' body but 'the' body').

Another context where the E-U role set is created can be found in *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQ) pages, where questions of unknown addressees are cited (whether they are asked by real people, or just uses as a rhetorical device is not important here) and answered by the expert. The context suggests that the initiative for providing the information was taken by an unknown individual. Many of these questions, however, do not refer to an individual, and do not give a reason for asking the question, such as in the following example (from FACT website again).

*Why is HIV called a retrovirus?
HIV does the reverse of what other viruses do. The normal transcription from genetic information in cells is from DNA to RNA. HIV uses an enzyme to transform its viral RNA into DNA in order to produce more viruses.*

The suspicion that FAQ-pages (at least partly) do not often reflect questions of real people is strikingly illustrated by the fact that this page also contains the question: What happens when HIV enters the body? with almost the same answer as above.

Since the expert-unknown role set requires a very neutral, impersonal tone, FTAs will usually be

done 'off record'. The on-record mode would be inappropriate because keeping face is very important in distant relationships. Adding positive or negative politeness does not fit into this role set either, since the expert is not supposed to have any 'feelings' about the unknown.

Consultant-Advise-seeker (C-A) This role set resembles the Expert-Unknown role set, since the Consultant is somebody who has also more knowledge than the consultant. The distinction between the role sets is that in the C-A role set the topic of discussion is framed as an individual problem of the Advice-seeker, related to behavior or feelings. An example of a passage where the C-A role set is created is the following (NB, not taken from the FAQ page).

*I Tested Positive, now what?
A positive test result means that you have HIV antibodies, and are infected with HIV. You will get your test result from a trained counselor or health-care professional who should tell you what to expect, and should let you know where to get health services and emotional support.
Testing positive does not mean that you have Aids. Many people who test positive stay healthy for several years, even if they do not start taking medication right away. If you test negative and you have not been exposed to HIV for at least three months, you are not infected with HIV. Continue to protect yourself from HIV infection.*

How is the C-A role set created in this particular passage? First, the question-answer combination suggests already that the reader (or better: the reader persona) takes the initiative, asking for advice. Second, the question frames the topic as a personal problem of the Advice-seeker, which is reinforced by the direct way he/she is addressed ('you'). The use of this personal pronoun is probably the most obvious characteristic of the C-A role set.

The C-A role sets seems also very useful for preview passages where the visitor can choose a topic by clicking, (e.g., the following (from Khomeani):

HIV and AIDS can be prevented. Here's an important area for you to learn about sex education, the use of condoms and how to negotiate safer sex with your partner.

Such ‘previews’ suggest that the role set will be continued in the pages that appear after clicking. However, this is only partially true. After this preview, passages appear like the following, where distant and closer language alternate.

Anyone who is in a sexual relationship should know about HIV and AIDS because HIV can be passed from one person to another during sex. Most people who are infected with HIV do not know they are infected, and you cannot tell if a person is infected just by looking at them. It is important to talk to your sexual partner about the risk of infection with HIV. There are a number of ways to have safer sex including using condoms, or having sex where no penetration or contact with body fluids occurs.

Some couples in serious relationships choose to have an HIV test. This helps them make choices about their sexual practices and their future. Couples who are planning to have a baby should know that the baby can also be infected with the virus during pregnancy, birth or through breast feeding. Only some babies born to infected mothers become infected with HIV.

If you are in a sexual relationship:

- *talk to your partner about HIV and AIDS*
- *practice safer sex by using condoms*
- *find out other ways to have safer sex*
- *know the facts about HIV and AIDS*
- *consider having an HIV test*

You and your partner have the right to say no to sex, and to practice safer sex. Respect your partner, and work together to prevent HIV and AIDS.

In terms of the politeness theory, the C-A role set allows for a much more straightforward approach of FTAs than the E-U role set for various reasons. The Consultant is supposed to help the advice seeker, so giving behavioral advice cannot be seen as a strong FTA. Moreover, the Advice-seeker is supposed to take the initiative for discussing the topic, and by doing so, he or she permits the other to give behavioral advice. And finally, the C-A relationship is a more personal relationship than the E-U relationship, which opens the possibility of positive politeness (‘I respect you’). Within the A-C role set, it is even possible to use imperatives without offending the negative face of the ad-

dressee (‘Continue to protect yourself from HIV infection’).

Instructor-Follower (I-F) In some passages, the C-A role set becomes an I-F role set: the advisor provides procedural instructions, as in the following example (from the FACT website).

How can I get these medicines?

Go to a doctor as soon as you can and ask about anti-retroviral medicines that could reduce the risk of getting HIV. [...]

You should ask the doctor to give you an HIV test. [...]

While you are waiting for the results of the HIV test, the doctor may give you the medicine so that you can start taking it immediately. [...] Ask the doctor about things you can do to look after yourself when you have HIV.

If you only get a starter pack, go back to the doctor to get the results of your HIV test. [...] [etc.]

The I-F role set allows for an even more straightforward presentations of FTAs since the instructor has a greater authority than an advisor (cf. [7] for an analysis of author personas in instructions for use).

Peers Occasionally, the suggestion of intimacy between the expert and the unknown is created, such as in the following passage from the Lovelife website. The passages stems from the ‘Ask Gerald’ section, where questions of teenagers are answered by a (otherwise not-identified) persona called Gerald:

Hi G, I'm Kitty (14) and have been very naughty; I think it's peer pressure. This boy asked me to walk him to a garage after school and we ended up in the toilet having sex without a condom. I don't want to get pregnant. Help me!

Gerald replies

Yo Kitty Kat! Yeah, I can understand the panic! I am too nice to tell you that “snyt kom altyd agterna” (being sorry afterwards)! If you had unprotected sex you can still get the morning-after pill from any pharmacist or clinic, so that a pregnancy can still be avoided within 72 hours after the act. I hope for your sake that you are not pregnant or got a nasty sexually transmitted infection or HIV. You

should have an HIV test within the next six weeks to be sure you didn't get HIV – and again after three months. Go to your local clinic and talk to a nurse, a doctor, or a counselor about your risk of infection and options if you're pregnant. You know enough to know having casual sex – and without a condom – was a big mistake. Good luck, Kitty!

The 'chatty' tone of the *Ask Gerald* section creates an intimate atmosphere, where both parties are more or less peers - albeit Gerald is the more knowledgeable of the two.

A noticeable characteristic of this role set is that the concern for face might be less careful than in other role sets. It allows strong positive politeness ('I can understand you') as well as strong positive FTAs ('was a big mistake') without offending the relationship. Moreover, within a relationship of peers the taboo of talking about sexuality is probably weaker than in other relationships.

The Effectiveness of Creating Appropriate Roles

In the previous section, I illustrated possible advantages of creating adequate role sets in websites promoting safe sex. This does not mean that particular roles sets are by definition better than others. The appropriateness of role sets depends on many factors, a number of which were already mentioned and illustrated in Coney and Steehouder. [3]

The author role has to be credible and inviting. The reader of the text (or visitor of the website) has to 'believe' in the role that the author persona takes, whether it is the expert, the advisor, the instructor or peer. Although one may speculate about factors that make personas credible and trustworthy (such as consistency, attractiveness), there is only little research that enable us to predict the effectiveness of particular roles.

The addressee's role, on the other hand, has to be attractive enough for the reader or visitor. How attractive is it for the target group of safe sex promoting websites to 'play' the role of an unknown, a consultant, a follower of instructions, or a peer of the author? An interesting and challenging question is how a credible presence of particular role sets can be created. In my analysis of some web pages, I suggested some features that create, for instance, an expert-unknowing role set (factual in-

formation, attention for terminology) of an Advisor-Consultant role set (framing the topic as a personal problem, use of personal pronouns). But these features are far from complete, and a careful analysis of many more examples is needed to get a deeper insight.

And, finally, it is important to realize that credibility and persuasiveness of role sets is a particularly culture-dependent matter. It is very likely that some role sets are more or less successful in one culture than in another. And it is important not only to take into account differences between national cultures, but also differences between generations, sexes and cultural groups within nations.

Despite these desiderata for further research, the theoretical framework might already serve as a source of inspiration and critical thinking about the way we promote topics like safe sexual behavior. Most of the current research literature about persuasive texts is oriented towards content (e.g., fear appeals) or form (e.g., visuals). It is important to take also the social perspective into consideration.

References

- [1] P. Brown and S. C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge MS: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- [2] A. R. Pratkanis, "Altercasting as an influence tactic," in *Attitudes, behaviour and social context: the role of norms and group membership*, D. J. Terry and M. A. Hagg, Eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Ass., 2000, pp. 201-226.
- [3] M. Coney and M. Steehouder, "Role playing on the Web. Guidelines for designing and evaluating personas online.," *Technical communication*, vol. 47, pp. 327-340, 2000.
- [4] J. W. Brehm, *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York: Academic Press, 1966.
- [5] M. B. Coney, "Technical readers and their rhetorical roles," *IEEE Transactions on professional communication*, vol. 35, pp. 58-63, 1992.
- [6] M. B. Coney and C. Chatfield, "Rethinking the author-reader relationship in computer documentation," *Journal of computer documentation*, vol. 20, pp. 23-29, 1996.

- [7] M. F. Steehouder, "Author and reader in instructions for use," in *Crossroads in communication. IPCC 97*, A. Morris, Ed. Piscataway: IEEE Professional Communication Society, 1997, pp. 77-90.

Websites Mentioned in the Paper

FACT – Forwarding AIDS communication and training, hosted by the University of Stellenbosch, South-Africa.

Available: <http://admin.sun.ac.za/aids>

Khomanami – Caring together for life. hosted by the South African Government.

Available: www.aidsinfo.co.za

Lovelife; South Africa's national HIV prevention programme for youth.

Available: www.lovelife.org.za/kids

Woman and HIV/AIDS, hosted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Woman's health.

Available: www.4woman.gov/HIV

About the Author

Michaël Steehouder holds the Chair of Technical Communication at the University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands. His research interests include the design of procedural instruction, helpdesk, and rhetorical aspects of technical communication. He published over 150 articles in Dutch and international journals, and text books on professional communication skills, forms design and software manuals. Michaël is chair of STIC, the Dutch society for technical communication, member of IEEE-PCS' AdCom and associate editor of IEEE Transaction on Professional Communication.