Executive Summary: Understanding Risk Communication Best Practices and Theory

Report to the Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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About This Report

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About START

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Understanding Risk Communication Best Practices and Theory

Failure to implement effective risk communication can undermine preparedness efforts, exacerbate disasters, and impede the recovery process. When conducted appropriately, risk communication can significantly increase community resilience, mitigate the cost of disasters, and save lives. The *Understanding Risk Communication Best Practices* and *Understanding Risk Communication Theory* documents are designed to provide emergency managers with the foundations for conducting effective risk communication during the preparedness, response, and recovery phases of all homeland security-related hazards. Effective risk communication requires a strong understanding of complex factors including trust between the communicator(s) and the audience(s), cognitive involvement and uncertainty of the audience, cost-reward tradeoffs, emotional responses to risk, and understanding and acknowledging diverse audiences. Risk communication is especially challenging now as new media changes the landscape for both communicators and their audiences.

Three documents accompany this executive summary:

- *Understanding Risk Communication Best Practices: A Guide for Emergency Managers and Communicators* outlines factors that influence the publics' perceptions of risk, a deep understanding of special needs publics, and the impact of different forms of media including best practices for each risk phase.
- *Understanding Risk Communication Theory: A Guide for Emergency Managers and Communicators* presents a comprehensive review of theories and models, including discussion of unique risk event characteristics, outlined and oriented by risk phase.
- The *Appendices* contain tables and illustrations that summarize and provide further details on the concepts, theories and models outlined in the *Best Practices* and *Theory* documents.

What is Risk Communication?

- Risk communication is commonly defined as the *"process of exchanging information among interested parties about the nature, magnitude, significance, or control of a risk*" (Covello, 1992, p. 359).
- Other definitions include the importance of managing the risk (McComas, 2006), the need for dialogue between organizations and stakeholders (Palenchar, 2005), and the necessity of continued monitoring of the risk (Coombs, 2012).
- In comparison, *crisis communication* is defined as the cross between managing information and managing meaning, during crisis prevention, response, and post-crisis learning (Coombs, 2010).
- Crises often have focusing events, are sudden and unpredictable, and require a response from the institution, organization, or individual involved (Coombs, 2012; Fishman, 1999).
- The simplest way to understand the connection between risk and crisis communication is the explanation that "a crisis is a risk manifested" (Heath's, 2010, p. 3).

These reports apply to the wide variety of hazards that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and emergency managers across federal, state and local authorities will typically need to prepare for and manage. Additionally, the reports include a detailed analysis of relevant theories and models within a

variety of related fields, including communication, sociology, anthropology, political science, and psychology. The reviews thus capture the diversity of the field, including an analysis of key strengths and weaknesses of dominant best practices, theories, and models. The *Appendices* contain related resources that summarize theories and models in an easily digestible format, acknowledging key researchers and seminal articles; highlighting methodologies, strengths, and weaknesses of the research itself; and identifying how findings can be applied.

The *Theory* report discusses theories and models by event phase – preparedness, response, and recovery – as they relate to publics and communicators alike as well as those that apply to multiple phases. We define the three relevant event phases as follows:

- *Preparedness*: Pre-event risk communication outlines practical measures the public is encouraged to undertake to prepare for various hazards including education on likely risk characteristics of various events.
- *Response - imminent warnings*: Crisis communication and warnings immediately prior to, in the midst of, or during the hours following an event.
- *Recovery*: Risk communication needs in the weeks, months, and years following an event.

Organized this way, risk communicators and managers should be able to quickly and easily find the most relevant information and research to aid them.

Communication Checklist

There is no single conceptual framework that provides "the answer" to effectively communicating risk. There are, however, critical factors that all communicators and managers need to be aware of, regardless of experience and training:

- *Publics' perceptions:* Understand your audiences' risk perceptions and address each public as a unique entity with different preferred methods of communication. Some publics may have different requirements for communication based on variables such as physical or mental disabilities, literacy levels, age, or racial and ethnic diversity. Additional attention should be paid to the social, cultural, and familial contexts shaping a public's reaction to the message.
- *Spokesperson/Spokespeople:* Use trusted credible spokespeople to deliver messages, most importantly individuals that publics feel are "just like them." Past performance of messengers and institutions will influence how the public perceives them for the next event.
- *Message content:* Scare tactics are often ineffective. Providing publics with a clear plan of action and having individuals they respect model the behavior brings about a much higher rate of compliance. Uncertainty can play a large role in public action or lack thereof, so prime the public for the risk by acknowledging an evolving context and be willing to change messages to include new and relevant information. Messages must make sense to the public, and there should be a feedback mechanism.
- *Unique risk characteristics:* Understand how the perceived familiarity with and dread of an event varies considerably across hazards and may change as you move from preparedness

to response and then to recovery. Public understanding of severity of and proximity to risk are also critical features in communicating effectively.

- *Communication channels:* Select the most appropriate communication channels for the target audience and be willing to use a range of both traditional and social media formats. Acknowledge the platform the public is most likely to utilize and find credible, keeping in mind both the potential for technology to fail and the increasing ability of all individuals to contribute to a conversation, including by sending incorrect or incomplete messages that must be monitored and rebuffed.

Risk Communication as a Field

For decades scholars have worked to improve risk communication practice through developing, testing, and refining communication theories and models that endeavor to explain the expected and unexpected impacts of risk communication efforts and provide insights on how best to be effective. These efforts have led to an abundance of scientific discoveries, but there is no single theory or model that captures the full range of considerations that contribute to the impact of risk communication efforts.

Among these distinct theories, though, there is agreement that understanding characteristics of an audience is key to developing effective risk communication efforts; that how, when, and by whom a message is delivered impacts its effectiveness; and that communicators must continually adapt to changing situations.

Research on risk communication is more robust at the preparedness and response phases than at the recovery stage, which has received less attention from scientists and practitioners. To address this weakness, we adapted some approaches to the recovery phase based on what they can offer rather than what they were originally designed for.

The multidisciplinary nature of the communication field provides robust insights for the development of training material to guide effective message development. The collective insights of this work can inform what types of communication efforts are most likely to be effective in specific situations.

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