

Experience in risk communication around the world

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Every day, information is generated and made available to the public about the risks and benefits of public policies, new products, and corporate behaviour. People are accessing this information in real time via traditional news, online media, and word of mouth. The public's near-instant access to this unfiltered information presents significant new risks, including reputation damage for companies who cause health or environmental damage, or ineffective policy outcomes when health-related guidance is misunderstood or ignored.

Risk communication operates in a realm of uncertainty as facts about the situation or event may be unclear and the science base underpinning potential responses imperfect. In addition, risk communication frequently operates in emotionally-charged environments as fear, anxiety, distrust, anger, outrage, helplessness, and frustration are common reactions to the health risks associated with diseases.

During non-crisis periods, ineffective risk communication can result in low-impact, wasted resources, and other undesirable outcomes. During times of crisis, on the other hand, messaging can be lost in the noise, resulting in unintended consequences, rejected messages, or public fear and confusion. When deployed effectively, risk communication is an invaluable tool for engendering trust, protecting organizational value, and helping the public make informed decisions.

Effective strategies for risk communications should fully consider how life circumstances, cultural values, and perspectives on risk influence behaviour if ignored, current communication gaps could result in unequal protection across society.

Research shows that a variety of message and person variables contribute to warning effectiveness, typically defined in terms of their alerting/informing functions and behavioural compliance. During the past decade, there has been a growing acknowledgement of the usefulness of behavioural theory in the development of behaviour-change interventions. Theories of behavioural prediction and behaviour change provide a framework to help identify the determinants of any given conduct, an essential first step in the development of successful interventions to change that behaviour. Clearly, the more one knows about the determinants of a given behaviour, the more likely it is that one can develop an effective communication or other type of intervention to reinforce or change that behaviour. Much of this work has been successfully applied to a wide range of practical issues varying from refining the design of product labelling to influencing voluntary and legal requirements and guidelines in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of market globalization has converged to create an urgent need for a better understanding of how best to communicate hazard information to an increasingly diverse universe of product and users worldwide.

This session is aimed at stimulating alternative ways of thinking about risk communication in the new era with the goal of provoking new research that is receptive to the demands of the rapidly emerging global economy.