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Strategic risk communication: Adding value to society

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a concise summary of the evolvement and the current state of risk communication research and draw insights from a decade of risk communication studies [Heath, R. L., & Abel, D. D. (1996). Proactive response to citizen risk concerns: Increasing citizens' knowledge of emergency response practices. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 8*(3), 151–171; Heath, R. L., & Palenchar, M. (2000). Community relations and risk communication: A longitudinal study of the impact of emergency response messages. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*(2), 131–162; Palenchar, M. J., & Heath, R. L. (2002). Another part of the risk communication model: Analysis of communication processes and message content. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 14*(2), 127–158; Palenchar, M. J., & Heath, R. L. (2003a). *Protracted strategic risk communication: A longitudinal analysis of community's zones of meaning.* Paper presented at the conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Kansas City, MO; Palenchar, M. J., & Heath, R. L. (2003b). *Strategic risk communication: A longitudinal analysis of a community's emergency response awareness and practices.* Paper presented at the conference of the National Communication Association, Miami, FL; Palenchar, M. J., & Heath, R. L. (2006). *Strategic risk communication campaigns: Some insights from the culmination of a decade of research.* Paper presented at the conference of the International Communication Association, Dresden, Germany; Palenchar, M. J., Heath, R. L., & Dunn, E. (2005). Terrorism and industrial chemical production: A new era of risk communication. *Communication Research Reports, 22*(1), 59–67]. A meta-analysis of the authors' research based on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, including professionally conducted telephone interviews, focus groups, in-depth interviews and ethnography, suggests that strategic risk communication based on the concept that ideas and meaning count, transparency, building trust through community outreach and collaborative decision making, acknowledging uncertainty, and narrative enactment are fundamental communication guidelines for good organizations communicating well; keys for risk communication if it is to add value to society.

Keywords: Risk communication; Transparency; Trust; Uncertainty; Narrative; Public relations

Throughout history, in numerous and eclectic ways and often by inventive means, human society has been deeply engaged in discussions to try to understand, interpret, mitigate and manage risks, supporting Mary Douglas' (1992) notion that society is structured essentially for the cooperative management of risk. This sense of risk invades homes,

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businesses and communities like never before, particularly for residents and employees who live near or work at potentially dangerous chemical manufacturing[1] facilities. From media's unremitting coverage of terrorist threats against energy and transportation systems to activists' blogs exposing the environmental destruction as a result of the present-day course of energy consumption, life hazards related to chemical manufacturing are an ascendant part of contemporary life. Part of these risk characteristics, especially concerning chemical manufacturing, includes political and ecological destruction, human health impacts, poverty and corruption, and security arrangements and human rights abuses.

Community residents who live near or work at potentially hazardous manufacturing facilities are neither spurious nor false in their reasons and desires to be safe and healthy; they are and should be sensitive to the fairness and equality of risk distribution and the resulting environmental and aesthetic implications. These are among the numerous motivators people use when deciding whether a problem exists that affects them and deserves their attention, including the option of making personal responses or collaboratively seeking collective solutions by engaging in public policy struggles (Singer & Endreny, 1987).

These motivators and social relations, among others, have been at the forefront of public discussions regarding risks and the development of the field of risk communication during the past three decades. To add to this discourse, the purpose of this paper is to provide a concise summary of the evolvement and the current state of risk communication and develop insights from a decade of risk communication research (Heath & Abel, 1996; Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Palenchar & Heath, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Palenchar, Heath, & Dunn's, 2005) in communities where over time efforts have been made to build relationships between industry and area residents whose lives are affected, positively and negatively, by the presence of hazardous manufacturing operations.

1. Risk communication

Various definitions of risk can be found in the literature, though common themes of risk feature a probabilistic event of various magnitudes that can be augmented or mitigated by various actions and circumstances. The magnitude and valence of a risk as well as when it occurs, who/what it affects and how great the effects' magnitudes are matters that can be variously calculated by science. Science may also be able to intervene to change the probability and magnitude, while some argue that science is also one of the factors that increase the risk. In the event that risk is not proactively controlled, health, safety and environmental concerns remain at the forefront of media, community and public policy discussions. As a result, community residents and industry employees bear the risks associated with living and working near manufacturing facilities, outcries from activists continue to be fueled and the credibility of risk generators is constantly questioned.

Early on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency identified risk communication as a means to open, responsible, informed, reasonable, scientific and value-laden discussion of risks associated with personal health and safety practices involved in living and working in close proximity to harmful activities and toxic substances (National Research Council, 1989). This view of risk communication typically involves large organizations whose activities can pose a risk to members of a community. According to Palenchar (2005), dialogue about risk:

> [I]s a community infrastructure, transactional communication process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control and overall perception of a risk. Risk communication provides the opportunity to understand and appreciate stakeholders' concerns related to risks generated by organizations, engage in dialogue to address differences and concerns, carry out appropriate actions that can reduce perceived risks, and create a climate of participatory and effective discourse to reduce friction and increase harmony and mutuality. (pp. 752–753)

Disciplines do not agree and often assume substantially different interpretive approaches to risk. Althaus (2005) offered a comparative analysis of the disciplines' approaches to risk by starting with economic conceptualizations that differentiate risk from uncertainty; risk is a structured application of knowledge to the unknown. As such her review considered:

[1] For simplicity reasons, chemical manufacturing refers to exploration, refining, production, storage and transportation of oil, natural gas, specialty chemicals and other energy sources.