
RISK COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Risk communication is an important aspect of any risk management strategy, it is a scientific way of informing the public about potential risks. It gives those who are threatened by the risk the correct tools to approach a dangerous situation. The paper studies the components that are important in any risk communication strategy and the impact of various factors on the actual process of communication. It uses this information to analyse how information was disseminated to a large and diverse country during an extremely threatening event. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the essential elements required for efficient risk assessment and communication were lacking. In this situation administrators and researchers had to develop methods of communicating the potential dangers of this virus, without creating mass hysteria within the country. To examine the effectiveness of the communication that took place, the major strategies and events are studied. One such event was the Prime Minister's address announcing the first lockdown. A systematic dissection of the address reveals that the message itself created more issues and was counterproductive. It is found that when communicators do not have adequate time and resources to prepare a message, it causes disarray due to anxiety in the public

INTRODUCTION

Risk communication is a scientific way of expressing information about potential risks, between those who assess and manage the risk, and those who are affected by it.¹ Its main purpose is to allow a stakeholder to take decisions in an informed, and logical manner. Risk communication is an aspect of risk sciences, which provides methods and principles for risk management².

¹ WHO, *Risk Communication*, WHO (Accessed 28 March 2021)

² Terje Aven, *Risk Science Contributions: Three Illustrating Examples*, Risk Analysis, Vol. 40 (2020)

The tools used in the process range from visuals, written statements, and verbal means³. These are conveyed through conventional (eg. newspaper, television) and non-conventional media sources.

The full effectiveness of risk communication is realised when it is conducted in a systematic manner. In the process of risk communication, it first is important to determine the group whose interests are at stake, and then an open line of conversation can be started with the representatives of those handling the risk and those affected by it. Information must be collected and summarized. It can then be used to identify the dangers and lead to discussion about the way to handle the issue appropriately⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by shock. It created fear and panic in the minds of all. During this time, it was noted that risk communication can be helpful in the world of public health. Dearth of information, high mortality and lack of solutions resulted in fear-mongering, and incorrect information being circulated. Risk communication in the scenario was complex, as a large and diverse base of citizens were to be informed about the uncertainty of the situation, at the same time nervousness was to be subdued. But lessons from previous public health emergencies were applied in approaching risk communication for COVID-19.⁵

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FINDINGS

Factors Influencing Risk Communication

1. Perception of Risk

To understand how risk communication will be received, one begins by understanding how it is perceived. Perception is a combination of the:

- attitude of the audience, which depends on their culture and internalized values, and:
- The qualitative value of the risk, such as how observable, or controllable the risk is, or the intensity of impact.

³ United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Risk Communication*, EPA (Accessed 27 March 2021)

⁴ WHO, *supra* note 1

⁵Elissa M. Abrams&Matthew Greenhawt, *Risk Communication During COVID-19*,1791 The Journal Of Allergy And Clinical ImmunologyVol. 8(6) (2020)

Due to this, risk maybe perceived differently by each individual. The response thus differs in each individual.⁶

2. Source of Information

The source of risk communication can have an impact on how the message is received. If the communicator is a trusted source, the audience responds better to the message. Trust is gained when the source is seen as knowledgeable, an expert, with no stake in the outcome.⁷When the messenger is seen as a reliable source of information, the communication is influential.⁸

3. The Message

The way a message is presented has to grab the attention of the intended audience. It must be crafted carefully to be comprehensible and give all the relevant details in a limited amount of time⁹.The information should not be vague and should be backed by evidence. Further infographics, data, and choice of design must go along harmoniously with the information being presented.

Risk Communication During COVID-19

Communication channels in the modern age are far too many. This can make the job of a communicator difficult when trying to control and coordinate all channels¹⁰, but it can prove to be an advantage by making their task easier as they have many ways of reaching all groups of people.

The pandemic has led to not only physical dangers, but it has resulted in mental unrest amongst the masses. This cause of fear is most often uncertainty. To dissipate the fear, it is the responsibility of government mechanisms to provide the public with necessary information not just about the disease but also about preventative measures. Communication

⁶GM Breakwell, “*Risk communication: Factors Affecting Impact*”, Br Med Bull. Vol. 56(2000)

⁷Ibid

⁸MA Kamrin, “*Risk Communication*”, 174 Encyclopaedia of Toxicology, 3rd Ed (2014)

⁹Breakwell, *supra* note 6

¹⁰Lisa D. Ellis, “*The Need for Effective Risk Communication Strategies in Today’s Complex Information Environment*”, Harvard School of Public Health, (5 Jan 2018)

is of the utmost importance in helping individuals be prepared to deal with the problems that may arise. Studies show that effective risk communication can reduce hysteria¹¹

The nature of the pandemic was vague, the healthcare experts, and the governments were learning new things about the virus constantly. When the professionals themselves are confused, it becomes difficult to plan a risk communication and management strategy for the public. COVID-19 was a hazardous situation with the potential of inciting outcry from the public.

While governments had to come up with their own specialized communications, international consortiums such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) curated guidelines and packets to help them.¹²The WHO declared a pandemic in early March, it advised government to unite the country as whole to avoid the spread of the disease. But as cases and death rates rose across the world, the governments soon understood that the situation was not under their control.

In such a crisis like situation, the communicator is under immense pressure to spread information at the right time, to a large audience, and give accurate, clear messages.¹³The possibility of miscommunication, and misinterpretation is high. The professionals have little information to base decisions on, and a misstep can result in the loss of many lives

In India, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare understood that that communication during a public health emergency can be a great tool of risk management¹⁴. Their COVID-19 strategy prepared for five possible outcomes of the virus, and risk communication held an integral role in each outcome.¹⁵

The Indian government exhausted all forms of media to reach out to the masses. Announcements were made on loudspeakers, messages broadcasted on television, online sources packed with information. The bombardment of messages was in an attempt to reinforce the guidelines in the public's minds.

¹¹Zhengzhou Normal University, "New Study Highlights The Role Of Risk Communication In Coping With COVID-19", EurekaAlert (Accessed 26 March 2021)

¹²WHO, "The COVID-19 Risk Communication Package for Healthcare Facilities", WHO (2020)

¹³Deborah C Glik, "Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies", 33 Annual Review of Public Health, Vol 28 (2007)

¹⁴Neetu Purohit & Seema Mehta, "Risk Communication Initiatives amid COVID-19 in India: Analysing Message Effectiveness of Videos on National Television", 262 Journal of Health Management, Vol. 22 (2 June 2020)

¹⁵Ibid

The nature of messaging changed from January to April 2020, when the threat of the virus increased. The initial messages emphasised washing hands and maintaining hygiene. Masks were then advised only for those affected by the virus. Slowly focus shifted on encouraging social distancing and masks for all in public areas and advising the public to isolate indoors¹⁶. The scientific accuracy of the messages was never compromised, as more was known about the virus, the citizens were given updated precautions to adhere to.

There were also attempts to get medical professionals to address the myths and nervousness of the people. The use of an expert was intended to provide a trustworthy and credible channel of communication.¹⁷

The content of the message was concise, in a language that was understandable, and was coherent. Special warnings were provided for groups more susceptible to developing symptoms of the virus. This included pregnant women and the elderly.

These notices are successful examples of risk communication. But a significant event in the risk management timeline of India is the address by Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing the “Janta Curfew” or the lockdown at the end of march. It was telecasted live across the country. The message tried to strike an emotional chord with the people and bring the nation together. It was meant to reiterate the seriousness of the situation¹⁸. But many issues have been pointed out in the notice.

Firstly, there was ambiguity surrounding the reason for the curfew. Many were unaware that it was in pursuit of distancing people and reducing interactions. The suddenness of the lockdown caused people to descend into a panicked state. The citizens felt unprepared and started hoarding supplies. The urban and migrant labourers were not given a plan of action to follow, as a result many rushed to trains and buses to reach their villages¹⁹. The broadcast proved counter-productive; gatherings grew instead of diminishing.

After the announcement of the curfew the police officials enforced the directives like a law-and-order issue and not as a public health emergency. There was a disconnect between the policymakers, the policy enforcers, and the citizens. These gaps in communication caused

¹⁶Purohit, *supra* note 14

¹⁷Purohit, *supra* note 14

¹⁸ThePrint Team, “*Janata curfew: Brilliant nudge or Modi should’ve assured more about India’s preparedness?*” The Print (20 March 2020)

¹⁹Thomas Abraham, “*COVID-19 Communication in India*”, 10 *Journal of Communication in Health care*, Vol. 13 (2020)

anxiety and confusion.²⁰ Even though the message was delivered via a credible source, the vagueness caused the message to be perceived as a dramatic threat.

But India was not alone, many countries faced similar reactions and problems when communicating the guidelines to battle the novel coronavirus. The WHO's guidelines were taken with a grain of salt.

For effective risk communication to take place, it is important that the communicators are well versed on the topic they are informing others about. They should be aware of the demography being spoken to and formulate a communication strategy that will have a positive reception from the audience. As important as it is to give the correct information, it is equally important to know which information to withhold. Saturating the receivers with too much information can result in vital information being overlooked.

Social media is an upcoming tool for risk communication. It is used by the citizens to form their perception of how intense a risk is. It can be used by government agencies to reach a large audience.

The informer should take the opinion of experts to prepare well in advance for all possible outcomes and reactions to a situation. This skill is learnt through experience and is mastered overtime. Risk communication is a continuous process that has to be re-evaluated and refined²¹.

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CONCLUSION

Risk communication at the right stage can mitigate the mental distress an uncertain situation can cause. Time for preparation is of the utmost significance in risk management as it allows discussions and deliberations to occur. These can be important while forming rational recommendations. During the pandemic, some instances of risk communication were unsatisfactory, but this can be blamed on the lack of time governments had to draw up a plan or a framework to follow. The most critical part was to reach a diverse nation with multiple regional languages, and the government did that to the best of its ability. It was a learning experience for all. As the unprecedented times continue the government is getting a better grasp on how to convey messages to people.

²⁰Ibid

²¹ Ellis, *supra* note 11

The significant aspect of risk communication is that it must be from a reliable source, who has an understanding of the audience perception. But main takeaway is that it is an imperfect process that can only be improved but never be flawless.

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