
Technical feature on Communication Content
Pre-Guide working - Feedback requested

This is a one subject issue:

Appendix attached

See you soon with *NEWSLETTER No 39*.

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Appendix

Communication - more on the twin context

In Issue No 34 (November 2008) we looked at the concept of a holistic approach to Communication to embrace the two prime needs of *organisational* communication and *risk* communication in a "one stop" message system.

Which of the following do you think is most effective and to achieve what end?

- 1) " Take the lorry up to the northern depot urgently. The weather forecast is of heavy flooding in the area, but the depot manager says its OK the roads are clear."
- 2) "Take the lorry up to the northern depot urgently. The depot manager says the roads are clear, but there is a weather forecast of flooding in the area".
- 3) "There is a weather forecast of flooding in the area of the northern depot, but the depot manager says the roads are clear. Take the lorry up with the urgent load."
- 4) "The northern depot manager says the roads are clear, but the weather forecast says there is flooding in the area. Take the lorry up with the urgent load."

If we split the two risk messages with the organisational one in the middle (with the emergent risk staying at the end of course) we get:-

- 5) "The northern depot manager says the road is clear. Take the lorry up with the urgent load, but the weather forecast says there is flooding in the area".
- 6) "There is a weather forecast of flooding in the area of the northern depot. Take the lorry up with the urgent load, but the depot manager says the roads are clear".

I have devised this message (topical at the moment) that is holistic with both organisational and risk content – there is also a conflicting risk message caused by emergent uncertainty of two risk messages:

The driver is being told to take his lorry up to the organisation's north of England depot with a very urgent load but there is a weather forecast of heavy flooding in the area. However, the depot manager has said that the roads are clear (we will ignore a suggestion that the depot manager is being *optimistic* about the floods as he urgently needs the equipment on the lorry to complete something on time for his multi-thousand pound productivity bonus! This of course brings out another aspect of our work "is it a good thing that managers get big bonus payments? and is it better that drivers and traffic clerks and others know about Depot Managers' bonus structure under a culture of openness to help them make their own risk assessments, as in real life they probably wouldn't know (but may suspect) – this being due to a high management "need to know" basis". Further, we disallow any information if the driver has a safe driving bonus scheme or not.

Anyway I digress - but the potential multi-dimensional aspect of these day to day operational situations is clearly seen).

Some excellent work has been done in the area of "risk communication" by Breakwell and Barnett (2001) in a research paper from HSE Books on *The Social Amplification of Risk Communication* and a subsequent paper in 2003 enlarging other work by Pidgeon, Kasperson and Slovic.

In the 2003 work, Breakwell and Barnett designed two experiments to highlight some of the ways in which the impact of risk communication can be affected by the presence of: 1) acknowledged (proactively explained) uncertainty
2) inferred (emergent), uncertainty.

The overall objectives also included the testing of seven established hypotheses about risk perception to communications. Not all aspects of the full study, which was complex, need concern us in our quest for a greater general understanding, but I was interested if part of the results could be adapted to suit our quest for a combination of *risk* and *organisational* communication in a single message. Ed.

The setting for the experiments was:

50 women volunteers in the age range 30 to 40 who were not taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and believed the risks were low, were split up and each smaller group were given differing data. They rated on five-point scales, first the risk to users of HRT and then the credibility of the evidence that had been given.

Experiment 1 compared responses to acknowledged (proactively explained) uncertainty in a single-source communication – this was of particular interest to us, as many *organisational* communications are in this format too. (blue words that follow are my additions to the word of the text. Ed)

The split was as follows:-

Group A (the Control Group) was given info from a report purporting to say that there was a risk of developing breast cancer after two years of starting HRT.

Two other groups (B and C) were given similar info but with differences, Group B that only a certain sub-group of women were vulnerable and Group C that there was uncertainty about the onset of the timescale.

All three of these Groups were classified as having the situation “proactively explained” to them.

Two more groups (D and E) were involved, **but an element of the emergent aspect was added**. They were given similar info to the Control Group (A) plus further conflicting data from another report that said there was no risk at all – the women had to make up their own minds between the conflicting alternatives.

Group D had the bad news (proactively explained uncertainty as the Control Group A) set out first with the good news following.

Group E had the good news first with the bad following.

One point which was not clear at the outset and caused me to spend quite a lot of time re-reading this, was if the good news (no harmful effects of HRT) was given first as was the case with Group E, then had that become the “proactively explained uncertainty”? and the “control group” info about risks after two years became the emergent uncertainty as it came to Group E’s notice later?

Of the results from the test of *Hypothesis 4* of the list, the one involving Groups D and E is perhaps the one of most interest to us:

“Where there are conflicting messages from two sources, the audience will rate the credibility of the evidence lower (**assumed that the writers meant the Control Group evidence about cancer risk after 2 years**)”.

This was shown to occur where the emergent uncertainty involved a high-low risk sequence (**the Control Group threat in the first half of the message**) but not where a low-high risk sequence message was used (**threat in the last half of the message, apparently resulting in higher credibility given the evidence which was given to Control Group A**).

Editor’s Conclusion on Breakwell and Barnett

Both Groups Appeared to take more notice of the second half of the message (emergent), be it good news or bad.

Our use of this theory

Academic research is important as a basis for knowledge. The above example is the best I have found to date and I believe it to be sound – however, in parts the intention was somewhat confused due to lack of clarity in the use of language, and the experiment may anyway be slightly skewed as - whilst we can assume that the women are all in England, there is no mention of the social nor educational mix nor the exact wording of the questions asked and if any of the women only used English as a second language. Remember, adjustments must in any case always be considered when applying “text book” concepts in a practical situation.

Our mission with the Guide is to establish greater clarity in our area of research. A somewhat revised version of this *NEWSLETTER* will need to be included as part of the Communication and Reporting section. Your editor has his own view on the best of the six messages, indeed there could be two best, one for priority of getting the load through at all costs and one for being a good risk manager (threat biased) and obtaining maximum caution - but I'm just one voice and probably not the best one to draw the correct conclusion, so advice is sought - please.

And just to conclude:

There were several permutations I could have used to present the running order for this *NEWSLETTER*. Indeed, for a long time I had the six alternative questions at the end with the Breakwell and Barnet experiment at the start. My deliberations really became quite confusing on this aspect - but that's another story.