The Impact of Risk Messages about Food Bioterrorism on Attitudes and Behaviors

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Environmental Context

- Post 9/11 environment
- Heightened media attention
- Increased public criticism of government
- Media “savvy” audiences
- Heightened perceptions of risk
Practical Implications

- Keeping the public safe
- Controlling spread of food-borne disease
- Relationship with media personnel
Theoretical Significance

- Integration of theories from different subdisciplines in communication
- Extension of theory into understudied areas
- Qualitative detail not often gathered in order to enhance and apply theoretical concepts
Variables Measured

- Perceived threat/problem recognition
- Level of personal involvement
- Perceived barriers/constraint recognition
- Self-efficacy
- Source credibility
- Fear arousal
Two-Stage Method

1. Qualitative Discussion Groups
2. Experimental Design
Stage 1 Discussion Groups

- 6 discussion groups of various groups of individuals
- A total of 62 participants
- Trained moderators
- Interview guide and pre-test
- Presentation of news scenarios as well as general discussion
Perceived Problem/threat

- “Level” of source used in news
- Geographical proximity
- Severity of risk, risk of death
Personal Involvement

- Proximity
- Perceived similarity to victims
- Perceived susceptibility
- Shared experience with source of news
External Constraints

- Time
- Lack of access to resources
- Engagement in other activities
- Language
- Diet and health
Internal Constraints

- Perceptions of uncertainty
- Low self-efficacy
- Fatalistic beliefs
- Cognitive overload of information
- Perceived inability to process information
- Prioritization of risks in everyday life
- Fear
Theoretical Significance

- Supported integration of theories from different subdisciplines in communication
- Elaborated on dimensions of key variables from well known theories
- Applicability of theories to areas of bioterrorism and risk communication
- A top research paper award from national communication conference
Practical Significance

- Guidance for dissemination of information in time of risk
- Prioritization of factors before communicating to media
- Address constraints in order to increase likelihood of preventive actions
Challenges and Limitations

- Lack of visual stimulus used in discussion groups
- Lack of diverse audiences to be included in participant pool
- Little distinction between 1) media as focus of perceptions and 2) government sources as focus of perceptions
Next Step: Stage 2 Experiment

- Experimental design: pre-test, post-test with control group
- Focus on ways to increase problem recognition and level of involvement and decrease constraints
- Manipulate perceived shared experience
- Produce simulated radio news story