

Relevance of Communication to Risk in Disaster Management

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This article focuses on discussing the perception of risk and the approach to the problem of disaster management from the perspective of public policies, with special attention to communication strategies for prevention, information and intervention in the face of these phenomena.

In order to analyze these issues from the point of view of political communication in its crisis and risk dimension, we will focus on disaster risk management and the role played by State policies and the media in such contexts.

This implies the elaboration of a holistic view of the problem that allows adapting or modifying pre-existing behavioral patterns at all levels and social spheres in the face of risk.

With this article we hope to contribute to the construction of knowledge linked to a particular area of public policy studies oriented to the production of indispensable communicative strategies in accordance with current needs in the field of disaster risk management, which may be taken as references by public organizations at different levels of the State.

Keywords: disaster management, risk communication, communication strategies, public information

INTRODUCTION

We are immersed in the current situation in which we are witnessing expressions and phenomena of risk associated with a process of universalization of danger in today's societies. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of this year reaffirms this and highlights the urgent need for nations, non-governmental organizations and communities to prepare for this type of threat.

However, the hazards that surround us do not necessarily have to turn into disasters. Prevention is possible, and risk can be reduced by building comprehensive risk management practices and actions.

The approach to these phenomena implies understanding, fundamentally, their integrality, contemplating the causes that originate the phenomenon, the damage caused, the social dimension of their effects (including the conditioning factors derived from social inequality), as well as the management tools or devices available in the face of such events, among other variables that can be considered.

This invites us to reflect on how the perception of risk is constructed and the impact this has on the problem of disasters, inquiring about the characteristics of risk and crisis communication and its inclusion in disaster risk management plans.

The topic addressed is important, since the risk of catastrophes, disasters and pandemics is added to the complexity of social orderings, the logics of accumulation and growth that have dominated a global scene perceived as chaotic and in exponential projection.

Here we develop a qualitative work whose general objectives are to review the paradigm changes in the perception of risk and its effects on communication and on the structuring of disaster risk management plans.

To this end, we propose the following specific objectives:

- To observe the scope of situations arising from disasters and the challenges they pose in terms of risk and crisis management, especially from the perspective of government communication.
- Reflect on the future challenges that these situations pose for governments, the media and communities.
- To analyze from the communicational dimension the elaboration of disaster risk management plans.

PERCEPTION OF RISK

Since the 1990s¹ there has been a significant change in the perception and approach to the problem of disasters. For Geller (2013), the problem is no longer focused so much on the event of the occurrence of the disaster and the response (disaster management) but on the risk that predisposes the disaster, which is socially constructed; that is, no disaster can occur without the prior existence of a risk situation, which not only allows the occurrence of the disaster but also determines the dimension of its impacts. Consequently, risk became the substantial element to understand how disasters are “constructed,” and to determine the elements (methods) on which to influence in order to avoid the occurrence of a disaster or reduce its effects (Geller, 2012:13).

In contexts of crisis and uncertainty such as those described, a perception of risk tends to emerge among the population, i.e. the elaboration of subjective judgments made at the individual level on the possible negative consequences of these situations that require a greater need for information on the part of the population and, where appropriate, a certain perception of affectation at the personal level (Muñiz and Corduneanu, 2020:45).

However, in this environment, it is not only important to provide adequate, accurate and timely information, but also to think about the ways in which each community perceives the risk to which it is exposed, because this is how it will respond with the changes that are required of it.

In this sense, Douglas (1996), with a view from the social sciences, thinks of the public’s perception of risk as a strongly socially constructed phenomenon. This idea of risk perception that must be constructed, according to the author, requires the participation of the public - its involvement - which implies citizen interaction to construct and evaluate risk and to incorporate cultural aspects of community beliefs that are a substantive part of a particular idiosyncrasy since, if the public does not perceive a risk, it will not respond adequately to foresee it.

To this end, it is extremely important to incorporate, from a general communication perspective, the contributions of risk communication and its particular approach to risk perception.

RISK MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Risk communication is an interactive process of exchanging information and opinions among individuals, groups and institutions². It is the instrument through which a government defines expectations and perceptions of risk in order to foresee or modify dangerous situations.

Currently, risk communication assumes a participatory orientation that includes the public as an element of collaboration. In the moments or situations in which it is present, risk communication has the purpose of increasing knowledge and understanding, increasing trust and credibility, as well as preventing and solving conflict situations (Lupin, 2011). In addition to raising awareness and modifying habits or behaviors, as Riorda (2020:21) argues.

Indeed, the consequences resulting from these situations depend on the planning and efficiency of a risk communication plan to inform, protect, increase confidence in public authorities and, no less important nowadays, avoid rumors and misinformation.

Risk communication campaigns often resort to persuasion methods centered on fear and damage to the population. The experience of fear, of individual or collective threat, of loss are rhetorical strategies that characterize risk communication in crisis situations.

Associated with emergency risks, crisis risk communication plays a very important role in the preparation, prevention, response and recovery from an emergency or health crisis. In this type of communication, the risk of causing panic with information is less than the damage caused by lack of information (Moreno and Peres:65). At the same time, when we require changes in individual and collective behavior -for example, in the event of a Covid-19 emergency- hand washing, disinfection of the articles we use, social distancing-, we must use risk communication for care, especially to address the particularities of each affected group or community, taking due consideration of their conditions, forms (informal settlements such as slums, favelas, shantytowns, and young towns) and living environments.

Faced with these phenomena, different international organizations³ and local governments have recognized the need to prevent, assess and manage risks, as well as to communicate them to all the actors involved in an efficient manner in order to mitigate the damage they produce in the communities (Cozzi, 2019:9).

Hence, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda set targets to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of people around the world⁴.

For these reasons, governments must be able to push and set the issue of risk management on the agenda for public discussion, in a style that is both planned and responsive to the needs of the community; one that is conducive to articulating policies and building consensus, helping to establish trust and alleviate fear among the population.

To do this, risk information professionals must understand the needs of the community and be able to facilitate dialogue on the technical issues surrounding health risks. Messages must be developed based on what the audience already knows, what the audience wants to know, and what the government wants to communicate so that the (receiving) community will change its behavior in the face of a given hazard. Hence, among disaster risk management policies⁵, communication strategies for prevention, information and intervention these events, as it is applied to understand the ways of action in the face of emergencies. Both threat and vulnerability are combined in the occurrence of disasters. In the particular case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus threatens to a greater extent exposed populations, which are also vulnerable and live in adverse conditions and their health systems do not have the capacity to respond. Furthermore, understanding the health problems related to the phenomenon allows organizations and institutions to propose strategies that will help them to better respond to the needs of the public (and their interest) in terms of their concerns about the various risks.

For these reasons, public communication should never be dissociated from the risk management process. The application of effective communication is essential to change habits, support actions and invite participation and thus save lives.

COMMUNICATE ALWAYS COMMUNICATE

No crisis management will be effective if it fails to generate credibility and trust in the audience, and the way to achieve this perception on the part of the public is through the messages or, in other words, the communication strategy.

But how is it possible to generate trust and credibility? To this end, it is recommended to inform the uncertainty instead of hiding it, to explain the difficulties of assessing and estimating risk, to provide clear and simple explanations on how to obtain data, to share information generously, clarifying what is known, what is not known and what will never be known. Likewise, the role of the spokesperson is essential to establish a clear reference in terms of communication in order to avoid distortions that may lead to rumors and errors. If mistakes are made, they should be corrected and clarified as soon as possible.

Empathy is also one of the key factors that the audience must perceive at the time of communication. A sincere perception of concern on the part of the government is necessary.

Social networks must be integrated into crisis communication plans. The delay in acting on them allows the traffic of junk information, false news that make fun of the situation. It fosters an information vacuum and is also a reflection of other deficiencies.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

We start from the consideration that preventing, assessing and managing risks, as well as communicating them to all the actors involved and encouraging their participation, become indispensable actions in today's highly mediatized societies, where the centrality of risk management by governmental organizations is a crucial element. In this sense, the press assumes a key role in emergency situations as a privileged channel to reach the population with the responsibility of communicating facts truthfully to promote the safety and well-being of the entire community. In addition, an adequate and timely handling of information contributes to reduce the risks and effects of the emergency.

They should be considered as the main source of information for public perception of risks, and each report should invite organized action by the population. In this way, the audience for the discussion of a particular issue can be broadened.

NEW TOPICS TO BE DISCUSSED FOR INCLUSION IN FUTURE AGENDAS

Crises are the opportunities to generate important changes. They are the opportunity to bring people together and to make the community the protagonist of these changes in order to include new topics of debate in public agendas, such as:

- Regulation of exceptional government communication (not allowing that which is not a resource of the pedagogical dimension of communication),
- Early emergency systems (development of controlled and regulated large-scale warning systems),
- Evaluation and review of government performance (obligation to inform upon public request),
- Institutionalization of risk (emphasis on disaster risk management),
- Public and societal awareness (collective self-regulation in the adoption of safety and care measures),
- Convenience and speed in the constitution of new consciences (environmental awareness, social awareness and less consumerism),
- Promote, from higher education, lines of research linked to risk management (innovation-general perspectives),
- Increase the resilience of people, their communities and livelihoods (invite participation, change habits, attract attention to support advocacy actions).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Government communication is thus aimed at reducing the population's risk and generating capacities in the audience in order to reduce existing vulnerabilities.

Governments face the challenge of maintaining a clear distinction between communication techniques seen by the public as propaganda and those designed to provide technical information, promote, educate and change attitudes.

Making the risk evident or visible makes one "appreciate" its existence, since when there is no visible effect, one has the impression that the risk does not exist.

Communication is an area of knowledge and action that must be present in all risk management processes. The application of effective communication is essential to obtain changes in attitudes, actions and policies in the face of disaster risk.

Risk communication becomes a fundamental tool in disaster risk reduction and management.

The situation in which the whole world finds itself today, with very few exceptions, as a result of the pandemic (Covid-19) has challenged governments, showing that they are never fully prepared for an event of such magnitude.

The exceptional nature of a health emergency such as this one tests more than just the courage and professionalism of those on the ground: it tests the strategic organization, emergency plans, crisis communications and the actions of the technical and political leaders of nations. It also tests their sensibility.

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ENDNOTES

1. Although this paradigm shift is taking place at the international level, it is in Latin America where the main theoretical developments that will have an impact on the proposals for action, promoted by the Network of Social Studies in Disaster Prevention in Latin America (LA RED).
2. Taken from the definition of risk communication developed in 1989 by the National Research Council of the United States.
3. This list does not pretend to be complete and does not include all the organizations that, with vast experience and proven dedication, provide valuable assistance. Simply, and by way of an overview, some of the most relevant international organizations that intervene in emergencies are mentioned: United Nations Organizations (United Nations Development Program, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Health Organization); Intergovernmental Organizations (Humanitarian Aid Office of the European Commission, Caribbean Disaster Emergency and Response Agency, Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America); International Non-Governmental Organizations (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, OXFAM, Médecins Sans Frontières).
4. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of people around the world. In 2015, all UN Member States adopted 17 Goals as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out a plan to achieve the Goals in 15 years. More information is available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainable-development/es/development-agenda/> Date of consultation: July 24, 2020.
5. They refer to the Sendai Framework (2015), the successor instrument to the Hyogo Framework, which was in force between 2005 and 2015. The main difference between one and the other is that the latter focused on “Disaster Management,” while the former focuses on “Risk Management.” More information available at: https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_spanishsendaiframeworkfordi-sasterri.pdf. Date of consultation: July 24, 2020.

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