You Have Been Framed! How Antecedents of Information Need Mediate the Effects of Risk Communication Messages

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Abstract

This study investigates the processes that mediate the effects of framing flood risks on people's information needs. Insight into the effects of risk frames is important for developing balanced risk communication that explains both risks and benefits of living near water. The research was inspired by the risk information seeking and processing model and related models. In a web-based survey, respondents ($n = 1,457$) were randomly assigned to one of three communication frames or a control frame (experimental conditions). Each frame identically explained flood risk and additionally refined the message by emphasizing climate change, the quality of flood risk management, or the amenities of living near water. We tested the extent to which risk perceptions, trust, and affective responses mediate the framing effects on information need. As expected, the frames on average resulted in higher information need than the control frame. Attempts to lower fear appeal by stressing safety or amenities instead of climate change were marginally successful, a phenomenon that is known as a "negativity bias." Framing effects were mediated by negative attributes (risk perception and negative affect) but not by positive attributes (trust and positive affect). This finding calls for theoretical refinement. Practically, communication messages will be more effective when they stimulate risk perceptions and evoke negative affect. However, arousal of fear may have unwanted side effects. For instance, fear arousal could lead to lower levels of trust in risk management among citizens. Regular monitoring of citizens' attitudes is important to prevent extreme levels of distrust or cynicism.

Keywords: Affect heuristic, flood risk, framing, information seeking, mediation analysis, risk communication, risk perception, trust

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