

PANEL/ROUNDTABLE: The Ethics of Strategic Risk Communication

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Chair: Ragnar Löfstedt

Abstract:

This roundtable seeks to stimulate an open dialogue in the risk community about the ethics of strategic risk communication. Strategic thinking is central to effective risk communication practice, or as Professor Lawrence Freedman puts it: “Without a strategy, facing up to any problem or striving for any objective would be considered negligent.” Rather than relying on intuition and unproven best practices, risk communicators are strongly encouraged to be evidence-informed, set clear goals and objectives, make smart tactical choices, and pre-test messages. While effectiveness is vital, strategic risk communicators also must carefully consider the ethical implications of their actions as their choices can significantly affect other people and their communities. Risk communicators must consider appropriate ways to behave, holding that risk communication decisions and actions may result in unintended consequences. Risk communication cannot be considered “good” if communicators strategically choose selfish goals or employ unethical tactics such as lying to an audience or manipulating them into accepting a technology, activity, or hazard.

In this roundtable, an international panel of risk communication scholars will discuss three important questions that the organizers feel come up frequently but are rarely addressed:

1. To what extent should risk communication be employed as an instrumental tool to help individuals, groups, or organizations achieve their ends?
2. To what extent should responsible messengers ever seek to persuade audiences about the risks and benefits of a given hazard, activity, or behavior?
3. Under what conditions are strategic tactics such as appealing to emotions (e.g., fear, anger) or choosing different frames ethically justifiable?

Some view these questions as uncontroversial in their area of risk communication. Others are deeply concerned that risk communication research may be used to “brainwash” audiences. This roundtable seeks to provide an open dialogue on a set of important questions that are all too often overlooked.