Exploring the Path of Strengthening Government Trust through Risk Communication in Public Health Emergencies

—Using the German BfR Risk Communication Model as a Reference

Chang Che, Lei Feng*, Xufang Cai

School of Public Health and Management, Chongqing Medical University, Collaborative Innovation Center of Social Risk Prediction and Management in Health Field, Chongqing, China
Email: chewuche@126.com, *594003796@qq.com, 1204508668@qq.com

Abstract

Government trust and risk communication of public health emergencies is a concomitant relationship. Good government trust is a booster for effective risk communication, and effective risk communication will also promote and strengthen government trust. Currently, with the improvement of people's economic and cognitive levels, people are increasingly concerned about the social risks around them, especially the high sensitivity to risks related to physical health and safety. Risk communication has also put forward new requirements. Based on the analysis and reference of the German BfR risk communication model, this article clarifies that the trust relationship between the public and the government in risk communication of public health emergencies should be strengthened from aspects such as communication methods, information disclosure, risk assessment, and communication ability.

Subject Areas

Public Administration, Public Health

Keywords

Public Health Emergency, Germany BfR Risk Communication Model, Risk Communication, Government Trust, Public Participation in China

1. Introduction

Nicholas Luman believes that "risk and trust are one body and two sides, and the significant flow of society leads to the need for a system or institution to cope

with the risks brought about by strangeness, whereby trust becomes an act of accepting and eliminating risks." [1]. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines risk communication as an indispensable component of any emergency response, and a real-time exchange of information, suggestions, and perspectives between experts, community leaders, officials, and people at risk. [2] It is generally believed that risk communication is a consensual means of promoting government trust in a risky society. Compared to other countries, China has achieved good results in the prevention and control of public health emergencies, but there are shortcomings in using risk communication to promote government trust, which has to some extent exacerbated the spread of false information, leading to a crisis of trust in some governments. Based on this, this article intends to explore how to strengthen government trust through risk communication by using the risk communication model adopted by the German Federal Risk Assessment Institute (BfR) for reference.

2. German BfR Risk Communication Model and Its Function of Strengthen Government Trust

2.1. German BfR Risk Communication Model

The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is established as a federal agency with legal jurisdiction under the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL), and is an authoritative body for conducting risk assessment and risk communication [3]. I summarized BfR (**Figure 1**), indicating the basic structure and main responsibilities of BfR risk communication.

Risk communication is an important task of BfR, which is defined as a continuous and interactive process characterized by participatory dialogue, with early public information about possible health risks, knowledge gained, and work outcomes forming the basis for the dialogue. As can be seen from **Figure 1**, risk communication involves people who hold different values and have different levels of subjective perception and acceptance of risks. The purpose is to determine whether there are differences in the perception, evaluation, and treatment of risks among various target and interest groups, and to reach a consensus on evaluation and action choices. The German BfR risk communication model is a complete, scientific, fair and transparent communication system, which warns that in order to eliminate panic and anxiety among the public due to individuals' limited abilities and knowledge that cannot recognize modern risks, the government or legally authorized scientific research institutions must assume the responsibility of objectively assessing risks and communicating risks transparently and impartially [4].

2.2. The German BfR Risk Communication Model Strengthens the Function of Government Trust

2.2.1. Emphasize Public Participation and Promote Benign Interaction

The BfR risk communication model reflects that risk communication is a two-way dynamic process, and public participation has important value in risk
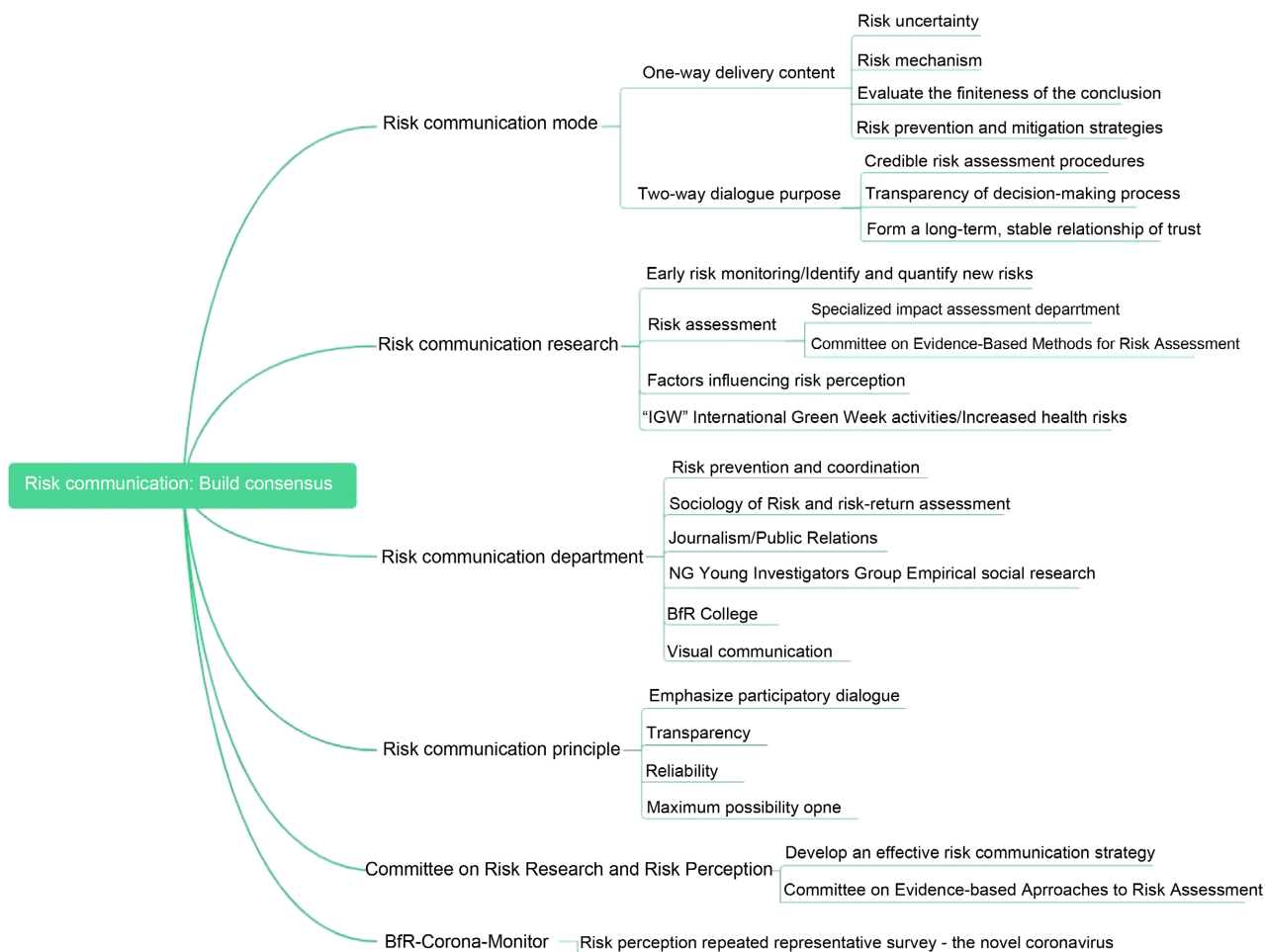
Figure 1. Basic structure and main responsibilities of BfR risk communication.

communication. In the one-way information transmission process, BfR will publish professional opinions on risk issues that the public cares about or does not understand through the official website, invite the media to publish risk assessment results, and record video explanations by experts. Bidirectional information exchange communicates risks through the active participation of various interest groups such as expert seminars, public forums, and stakeholder meetings, and communicates possible health risks to the public in a transparent and understandable manner, enabling the public to understand, identify, and respond to risks [5]. In addition, BfR also actively creates opportunities for risk communication with the public, such as International Green Week (IGW), and activities such as entering schools to carry out publicity and education. Invited experts face public concerns through face-to-face communication to improve the public's correct risk knowledge and risk acceptance ability. The purpose of risk communication is not to persuade the public to either accept or reject a certain type of risk, but rather to engage in open dialogue with the audience, provide scientific answers to risk issues that are of public concern, facilitate positive interactions between relevant parties, and establish a long-term and stable rela-

tionship of trust.

2.2.2. Publicly Evaluate Information and Improve Communication Credibility

BfR risk assessment is one of the important research projects in risk communication, and is the responsibility of a dedicated impact assessment department. In the face of risk issues of public concern, risk assessment research provides scientific answers through scientific journals, conference documents, brochures, and other forms. The published documents are also formal risk assessment reports that can be applied to the legal and political fields. In addition, BfR has also developed the "BfR Corona Monitor" ("Corona Monitor"), which is a representative survey of repeated risk perception relative to COVID-19 [6]. So far, a total of 41 waves of telephone interviews have been conducted, with a sample size of between 500 and 1100 people. Respondents' feedback has been promptly responded to and answered, and the effectiveness of risk communication and public satisfaction has been evaluated. The process and content of risk assessment are presented transparently to all the public. Through comprehensive, complete, and understandable risk communication, BfR makes science visible and available to the public. The scientific research based approach, relying on scientific risk assessment results, provides an important impetus for public health protection and is conducive to improving the credibility of BfR risk communication.

2.2.3. Set up Independent Departments to Break Down the Pressure of Government Responsibility

BfR has also established a legally authorized Risk Research and Communication Committee. The interdisciplinary risk communication department conducts research projects on risk perception, early risk detection, and consequences assessment. It actively engages in dialogue with various interest groups from science, business, politics, media, associations, non-governmental organizations, and consumers through focus groups, scientific seminars, and other activities, Combine the information needs of stakeholders and determine the information level of experts and laymen using a qualitative and quantitative investigation method, and develop effective risk communication strategies [7]. In addition, BfR has also established an evidence-based risk assessment methodology committee to explore scientific risk assessment mechanisms and promote the formation of a multi-agent governance system. Scientific institutions and stakeholders release concerns and anxieties in communication, share social risk responsibilities, and avoid accumulating irreconcilable contradictions that undermine the credibility of the government.

3. The Shortcomings of Risk Communication in Promoting Government Trust in Public Health Emergencies in China

3.1. Low Public Participation

Public participation is an important factor that affects government trust in risk

communication. In the field of public health, due to the limitations of knowledge, the public is basically in a position to passively receive or inquire about the information [8]. The government mostly neglects public participation, using it as a mere formality and symbolism, or focusing on popular science propaganda rather than public consultation, which also reflects the dilemma of public participation and consultative governance in public health events [9]. The unequal status makes it difficult for the public to establish a good trust relationship with the organization. In addition, in the early stages of public health events, public awareness of the epidemic is often vague and limited, and strong negative perceptions can prompt the public to demonstrate a strong willingness and desire for hands-on participation. When the government blindly adopts a single, top-down information transmission model while ignoring the public's participation needs, it is difficult for both parties to establish a true trust relationship [10]. During the epidemic period, there is a lack of consideration for public opinions and emotions regarding the containment and management of mid to high risk areas. Most of the public is at a loss and at loss for the containment measures, and can only choose to passively implement and accept them. If grassroots participation in the implementation of containment measures can be increased and public participation strengthened, it will effectively promote government trust. Low public participation leads to negative attitudes toward epidemic prevention and control, which affects the effectiveness of risk communication.

3.2. Information Is Sometimes Not Transparent or Published Slowly

Information blockades or low-quality information disclosure can stimulate public distrust and widen the gap between trust and risk perception. Real information is often more easily accepted by the public than alternative facts that are concealed, and concealment only increases public panic and anxiety [11]. With the occurrence of public health events, the public's lifestyle is limited and their lives and health are threatened, and their rational and logical cognition is often closed. Generally, the most reliable public information source is the official authoritative information, and the government bears the main responsibility for public information management. However, when they are unable to obtain a reasonable explanation of the event of concern from formal channels or the explanation time exceeds the time limit expected by the public, the public will construct an explanation of the event based on their own experience and information obtained through other channels. Massive amounts of information are difficult to distinguish between true and false. At the factual level, information supply and demand are unbalanced, and the public has a negative perception of the government's risk governance ability, leading to distrust.

3.3. The Risk Assessment Mechanism Needs to Be Improved

Risk assessment is a scientific process that assesses the probability and conse-

quences of risk occurrence based on mastering risk characteristics. The development and progress of risk communication work will be limited by the scientific process of risk assessment. Only when the results of risk assessment are confirmed can the government take corresponding communication measures to alert populations at risk [12]. At present, China's public health event risk assessment mechanism is not perfect, and there is a lag in the evaluation and accurate recognition of public health events, especially infectious diseases. Due to the impact of scientific processes, risk assessment may underestimate serious risks or overestimate objectively insignificant risks. Sometimes, risk assessment work cannot provide a precise time for the submission of certain information or provide corresponding emergency measures. In addition, risk assessment is scattered among different institutions, often with unclear responsibilities and unclear boundaries, making it difficult to conduct a scientific and objective risk assessment. The lag in evaluation results leads to a lag in information. When people's demand for information on public health events surges, the lag in information can affect people's emotions and exacerbate the public's sense of distrust.

3.4. Improper Communication Planning and Implementation

George Cvetkovich, a representative of social trust methods, believes that "public trust in an organization is based on an understanding of the organization's goals, motivations, and behaviors consistent with its values" [13]. When there are communication barriers or public perceived emotions are high, the government's ability to respond to risks and protect the public can affect the government's decision-making on trust or not. However, when conducting risk communication specifically, the government itself will also add obstacles to this work. First, there is a lack of communication plans. There is no detailed communication plan for public health events, such as the current human, financial, and resource resources. In the face of events, people often rush to battle or follow the command of the above; The second is the indifferent attitude of the management. In a state of scarce public health resources, management often pays more attention to risk assessment and result identification than risk communication; Third, risk arguments cause trust damage. Conflicts of interest between the government and various institutions trigger debate over risk information, strengthen public risk perception, and cause trust damage; Fourth, they are unwilling to view the public as equal participants in risk communication, believing that the public does not have the ability to understand science.

4. Suggestions on Strengthening Government Trust through Risk Communication in Public Health Emergencies

4.1. Improve Communication Methods and Enhance Public Participation

The German BfR risk communication method embodies the value of public par-

ticipation, concern, and feedback in risk communication, both theoretically and in a specific practice. Public participation in risk management is an inevitable trend, which is not only the direction of government governance, but also the direction of the people. In this context, the government is required to establish a specialized risk communication department with the goal of building multiple consensus and value recognition, and innovating the ways for the public to participate in risk communication through various forms (online and offline consultation meetings, hearings, etc.), giving the public more opportunities to participate in risk assessment, risk communication, and risk decision-making. Introducing public participation into risk communication can not only provide organizations with a wider information network, optimize and improve decision-making, but also enhance the public opinion base of decision-making, thereby improving the credibility of information.

4.2. Strengthen Information Disclosure and Strengthen Public Emotional Identification

In the face of public health events, the government is the main undertaker of public information management, and should disclose information as soon as possible and provide the public with corresponding action guidelines, which will produce good results in disease prevention and control and rumor containment. First, acknowledge the uncertainty of risks, do not conceal reactions to tragedies, do not make excessive guarantees, be transparent, and do not hide negative information (such as mortality); Secondly, timely disclosure of information, disclosure of the truth, and an honest attitude allow the public to perceive the goodwill of the government, generating emotional recognition; Thirdly, in the preparation of information, it is necessary to follow the principle of "brevity, conciseness, and simplicity", refine core information, emphasize it repeatedly, and determine the appropriate language, sentence structure, and layout to develop risk communication information [14]; Finally, if conditions permit, shorten the information interaction distance with the public, such as face-to-face communication, facing public concerns directly, responding to public demands, and establishing emotional trust.

4.3. Evaluate Risks Scientifically and Cultivate the Public's Rational Risk Perception

The lack of a risk assessment mechanism can lead to poor risk communication and affect the process of risk management. It is recommended to establish a scientific, objective, and impartial risk assessment institution relying on authoritative scientific research institutions around the health and safety concerns of the public and various emerging risks [15]. Firstly, establish a risk monitoring team → explore and determine risk monitoring and evaluation methods → produce risk monitoring and evaluation reports, which should be formal risk evaluation report applicable to the legal and political fields; Secondly, actively collect

public concerns and suggestions, provide continuous feedback and explanation of information, achieve a dynamic two-way risk communication mechanism among the government, scientific institutions, and the public, and promote trust among the three parties; Thirdly, on the basis of scientific evaluation, make the risk assessment information easy to understand, publish the risk assessment results through multiple channels, and cultivate the rational risk perception and tolerance of the public.

4.4. Improve Communication Skills and Enhance Public Positive Perception

To build trust, it is more necessary to improve the government's ability to prevent risks and effectively respond to risk events after they occur. First, develop a public health risk communication plan in advance. Analyze the constraints on risk communication between the organization and the public based on the actual situation, such as the organization's human and financial resources, review and approval procedures, and public sentiment. Develop a complete and efficient risk communication plan. The second is to conduct benign cooperation with stakeholders. The harm caused by risk events often exceeds the support scope of existing resources, and the power of stakeholders must be mobilized and utilized. Clarify their responsibilities and values based on teamwork, and improve the efficiency of risk communication. Third, improve the credibility of the government. Government credibility has inherent advantages in risk communication [16] [17]. The ability of the government to protect the public, its business skills, the authenticity and openness of information, and the display of empathy are key elements to enhance the trust and reliability of the government. The government should use risk communication events to explain risks to the public and establish a good trust relationship with the public through trustworthy actions to enhance the public's positive perception of government integrity and goodwill.

5. Summary

To sum up, insufficient two-way communication between the government and the public, insufficient comprehensiveness and detail of some information content, shortcomings of traditional media in disseminating information, untimely clarification of untrue information, insufficient trust in government risk communication, and others (I don't care, it's irrelevant to me, etc.) are the main reasons that affect the public's satisfaction with government risk communication. Therefore, risk communication is used to strengthen government trust, The following aspects need to be considered: improving communication methods and enhancing public participation; Compile popular information and ensure efficient communication; Strengthen punishment for dishonesty and purify the network communication environment; Improve communication skills, enhance government credibility, and improve public satisfaction, thereby enhancing mu-

tual trust and understanding between the public and the government.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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