

COMMUNICATING DYNAMIC RISK IN A CONNECTED WORLD; PERCEPTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES



Author: Celeste Young

Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies , Victoria University, Victoria

Why people respond to dynamic risk the way they do?

Bushfires and natural hazards are a dynamic risk where risk levels are unpredictable and more likely to change or fluctuate quickly. They are also often systemic and can result in unanticipated outcomes. Communication in this area is crucial and is only effective if it is based upon a broader understanding of how people respond to dynamic risk and why.



There are four areas that are key determinants in shaping responses to dynamic risk.

The social and cultural context are key determinants in what different individuals and groups of people value and also can contribute to how they may perceive certain risks. For example, people may choose to live in a high risk area because they value amenity more than they value the risk of bushfire. A lack of a cultural context for bushfires may also contribute to this decision.

The internal physical context is shaped by the 'hardwired' physical and emotional responses. They are part of how we as humans respond to 'dangerous knowledge' which can be seen as a potential threat. For example, people becoming agitated or angry. Gender based responses are also part of this, for example, it has been found that the women generally more sensitive to risk [1].

External physical context is the context that physically surrounds people such as the environment. This determines the potential level of the risk, what resources are available for people and their capacity to respond and recover. Their experience or lack of experience of the hazard within this environment may also affect their perception of the risk and decisions they make.

The nature of dynamic risk is unpredictable, requires ongoing learning and the outcomes are often uncertain. Because this can be difficult, these risks often solicit responses such as fear, anxiety and disengagement.

Lessons from elsewhere for communicators

The importance of understanding these different areas and how they shape responses to dynamic risk, has been already been recognised in areas of practice that deal with this, such as health, climate change and innovation. Some key lessons from these areas that relate to communication include the following:

- Risk communication needs to be viewed in a broader landscape of policy and support programs that encourage and facilitate active responses to what is communicated.
- Most communication is ongoing and requires continuous learning and adjustment to be part of the process. It also usually requires long term resources and planning to be effective.
- There are multiple types of communication required to suit the different tasks needed across the different parts of the process of managing dynamic risk.
- Values are central for understanding how communication is best framed and positioned.

Connecting in new ways

New technologies are changing the way we see and interact with the world. For communicators, this offers new opportunities to reach out in ways that have not been possible before. The challenge for communicators is how to reach beyond these tools to the people they are communicating with.

Being technologically connected does not mean that people are automatically connected to the information that is being communicated. It is important to understand where pre-existing ways of communicating are more effective and use technology as an enhancement to this not a replacement. (See handout for case studies).



Beyond messaging

Communication of the risk of bushfires and natural hazards is not just about dissemination of information or messaging. It is something much more complex and interesting. Because it is a dynamic risk, it requires building relationships with the people you are communicating that support knowledge exchange and promote ongoing learning.

This area of practice is changing in response to recent events such as the Black Saturday bushfires which have moved beyond what has been previously experienced. It requires people to not only to understand these changes but also to develop new ways of thinking and responding.

A pivotal part of this communication process is building trust between diverse stakeholders. This requires communicators to engage with their audience in a way that creates active responses through developing respect and ownership of the risks.

Questions to consider when you are communicating dynamic risk are:

- Why are you communicating? How do you want people to respond?
- Who am I communicating with and what are their circumstances?
- What is the social, environmental and cultural context of the audience?
- What are likely responses to this information this audience may have?
- What strategies are needed to deal with these responses and what are the most appropriate tools to do this?

References:

1. Eckel, C. C. and P. J. Grossman. 2008. "Men, women and risk aversion: Experimental evidence." Handbook of experimental economics results 1:1061-1073

