

AUDIENCES AND COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

1.0 BACKGROUND

A communication channel refers either to a physical transmission medium such as a wire, or to a logical connection over a multiplexed medium such as a radio channel in telecommunications and computer networking. A channel is used to convey an information signal, for example a digital bit stream, from one or several senders (or transmitters) to one or several receivers. A channel has a certain capacity for transmitting information, often measured by its bandwidth in hertz (HZ) or its data rate in bits per second.

2.0 Audience needs

Various targeted audiences have different information needs depending on their specific circumstances. The challenge for the communicator is to pinpoint the needs of each audience and to script messages that satisfy their requirements. Each audience can be reached through different communications channels.

The fact that a communication attempt worked well with one social group does not ensure that it will work well with another. For effective communication, the identification of possible audiences has to be made before the event occurs. Each emergency will have different audiences, and these may change at any phase of the emergency. All of them can be directly or indirectly involved in the emergency.

3.0 Identifying audiences

The most important audiences to reach are those people who have been directly affected by the emergency. These groups will include those affected by any contamination and their families and friends, and those people who depend on the physical and social infrastructure that may be affected by any contamination. These audiences must be reached very early in the emergency event, and they must receive a steady flow of reliable and useful information throughout the event.

Some people will be receiving information about specific protective actions to minimize contamination. Another distinct audience is the police, firemen and other emergency responders called to action by the emergency and those among them who will be monitoring contamination levels to inform responsible officials and the public at large.

Political and social leaders in an area affected by contamination can have great influence over how affected populations respond to an emergency. They need accurate information early and often during the event. Likewise, those responsible for making decisions about radiation protection measures require timely and succinct information in order to take appropriate actions.

Partner organizations in the nuclear field can be natural allies in a communications campaign, but only if they are provided with adequate and timely information in the early phases of an emergency. Information provided to journalists, activists or officials visiting the scene of an

emergency must be carefully tailored to prevent misinterpretation, misunderstanding and false reporting.

4.0 Key communication tips

High priority audiences need to be involved in information exchange with nuclear authorities in advance of any radiation emergency. Transparency and an open discussion of the potential hazards associated with nuclear technologies can build trust and consensus among stakeholder groups that can yield big dividends during a real emergency.

Reaching out to various stakeholder groups in the community around a nuclear facility, for example, has become a valuable way to directly involve the public in key policy decisions. Successful stakeholder involvement through effective communications will help to build trust, understanding and cooperation.

Many audiences view nuclear technologies and institutions with considerable skepticism and distrust. Simply communicating with some stakeholder groups will not ensure a trusting relationship. That trust needs to be earned by the communicator through the consistent provision of thorough and reliable information on a timely basis.

5.0 Audiences, channels and messages

Specific communication products and activities convey the appropriate messages crafted to meet the needs of certain audiences. Customize your approach to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of communications resources.

6.0 Key channels of communication

- Different channels are available to transmit information from an organization to the public
- These channels can be controlled by a specific interest or can be completely uncontrolled
- Communications channels include telephones- both voice and text; electronic media- television and radio; print media; internet-email, websites and social networking technologies
- Not all channels will necessarily be available or practical to use in an emergency

7.0 Classification of channels

Messages can be transmitted through organisational channels, and through mass media. But messages take on a life of their own in informal social networks. Different audiences' use and trust different channels. For example, in a local crisis use of the local media could be the most efficient way. If the message is targeted to young people, the internet and even social media could be used. Multiple channels should be used during a crisis.

8.0 Organization website

Technology has created new opportunities for rapid delivery of information during an emergency. Most organizations will already have a website and this can be a valuable communications channel during an emergency. Not only should it have pre-existing content on radiation safety, it should be familiar to some audiences already. In addition to posting new information, websites can also allow visitors to sign up to receive updates by email, to enrol on listservs or to email specific questions. However, because of high demand during an emergency, the website will need to be robust, with sufficient bandwidth to handle high traffic volume.

9.0 Mass media

Mass media play a dominant role at all phases of emergency. They are the prominent information channel for the general public, they are used for communications by different audiences and in addition they act as the “watchdog” of society – they monitor the emergency management and actors. Mass media are employed to communicate with the public at the time of a emergency as well in the time of cleaning up the contaminated site. Media will also form a link between the emergency actors and the risk perceptions among the population.

10.0 Conclusion

Communications channels are used to transmit information, either en mass or targeted to specific audiences. The type of information should be appropriate to both the channel used and the intended target audience. Without regard to the nature of the emergency, different communications means are physically present.