

Project Summary

Project Title	Modeling Public Participation in Health Risk Communication: Emergency Preparedness for Flu Pandemics in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
Principle Investigator	Dr. Thomas Barker, Professor, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
Co-Principle Investigator	Dr. David Johnson, Capital Health, Edmonton, Alberta
Project Dates	September, 2008 – August, 2009

General Statement of Development Project

With the outbreak of Avian influenza (H5N1) in 2004, the World Health Organization and other public health agencies worldwide became alerted to the threat of an influenza pandemic and the public health risk communication challenges such a disaster would present. According to President George Bush, while the government will do much to prepare for a pandemic, “...individual action and individual responsibility are necessary for the success of any measures.” Often crisis risk communication materials designed to assist the public and manage emergency preparedness are written with little follow-up as to their effectiveness with real people. (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/pandemic-influenza.html>). As Deborah Glik points out in an article entitled “Risk Communication for Public Health Emergencies,” (2007), the field of risk communication for emergency preparedness “still lacks in-depth evaluation of the effectiveness of event-specific crisis risk communication efforts.” This study hopes to contribute to a model of effectiveness by asking the question: “What is the role of the public knowledge in a public health crisis?”

Objectives

1. Describe patterns of public perception of health emergencies, emergency preparedness, and response to emergencies across social sectors
 - Strategy: Interview citizens who have received or will receive emergency preparedness information*
 - Strategy: Interview communicators who prepare risk communication documents and coordinate emergency preparedness*
 - Strategy: Analyze risk communication documents*
2. Build a model of individual action and responsibility to health emergencies across social sectors
 - Strategy: Analyze interview transcriptions for cultural and contextually meaningful content*
 - Strategy: Analyze the social and economic context surrounding public health emergencies*
 - Strategy: Establish theoretical guidelines for shaping the interaction of institutional objectives and public objectives*
3. Establish methodologies for crisis risk communication research
 - Strategy: Adapt proven activity modeling methodologies to measure effective public risk communication*

Related Development Work

Research in the broad discipline of technical communication and more specifically in risk communication is well developed. The National Library of Medical Science lists 847 citations under the topic of “health risk communications.” The Technical Communication E-Server, listing work in technical communication, indicates 68 citations. Numerous articles, such as “Communicating about Environmental Risk with Stakeholders,” (Hart, 2001) explore barriers to successful communication, issues of public trust, communication modes, and language used in risk communication. Additionally studies have established the usefulness of survey and focus group methodologies. *The proposed research study builds on these studies in two ways: it employs an activity theory approach and it focuses on flu pandemics.* Activity theory and the related methodology of “genre tracing” has recently been the subject of a book-length study. *Tracing Genres Through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach To Information Design*, (2003) by Clay Spinuzzi offers a detailed methodology that will inform the procedures in this study. *This study will attempt to break new ground by using the genre tracing methodology in the public arena, as opposed to the organizational arena in which it was developed. (see Objective 3 above).* Alarms about the world-wide threat to public health of an H5N1 avian influenza pandemic are numerous. According to Dr. Arlene King, Health Canada’s Director of Immunology and Respiratory Infections, “Everyone believes we’re overdue for [a pandemic].... In Canada, everyone has used SARS as a dress rehearsal for pandemic influenza.” (2004) The timeliness of this threat is evident to most people. However, because this threat affects all social sectors, it is particularly apt for the proposed study (see Objectives 1 and 2 above).

Intended Procedures and Schedule

The proposed project consists of two phases: data gathering/field research (Fall, 2008) and data analysis and interpretation (Spring and Summer, 2009). The data gathering/field research will consist of document analysis of artifacts (genres) relating to the activity system of pandemic flu readiness in the Edmonton area, a series of recorded interviews in conjunction with public education events sponsored by the EPO, and one or more recorded focus groups (using volunteers recruited from the interviews).

Data Gathering

My plan is to conduct a number of interviews and focus group meetings with members of the general public from representative demographic groups in the Edmonton area who would be recipients and consumers of flu pandemic information. I will begin with interviews with members of the public and, from this research group, invite persons to participate in focus group meetings. Similar interviews will also be conducted with health-service providers and other representatives of agency information.

Data Analysis

I will use an activity-based interview schedule (Spinuzzi, 2003) to identify key elements of collaborators, instruments, objectives, outcomes, domain knowledge, community, and division of labor, all of which comprise the emergency preparedness activity system. The Phase 2 analysis and interpretation will consist of transcribing, content analysis, and interpretation.

Site Selection

The primary reason for selecting Edmonton, Alberta, Canada is the presence of an abundance of information about social health, made available to the public through the Edmonton Social Planning Council (*Tracking the Trends: Social Health in Edmonton, 2007.*) *Tracking the Trends will be an important background document for analyzing the social and economic context of the emergency preparedness system.* The second reason for selecting Edmonton is the presence of The Emergency Preparedness Office, of Capital Health (a provincial health-care provider system) serves this diverse and well documented population. The Capital Health Office of Emergency Preparedness has produced a number of public health emergency documents that will constitute the background for this research. The focus of the proposed research will be on the three documents that address the threat of pandemic influenza. This focus was chosen, in part, because of its timeliness, and its potential to have affects across all economic and social sectors. . Eric Bone, *Regional Director, Office of Emergency Preparedness* has agreed to allow me to accompany the OEP in public outreach activities concerning flu pandemics during the Fall, 2008. A third, and important reason for choosing Edmonton, Alberta as the site for this research is the presence of a single health-care provider system, Capital Health. Because of the absence of competing health-care provider systems I will be able to focus on one source of agency-provided information.

Project Personnel Other Than the Applicant

The project requires that the PI and a graduate research assistant perform the first phase (Fall, 2008) of data collection. The second phase (Spring, 2009) will require the assistant of a half-time graduate assistant (10 hours per week) for transcribing interview and focus group, and analysis (10 hours per week) by the PI.

Budget

Funding for time spent in the Edmonton area will be provided by the Faculty Development Leave. Additional resources (Phase 2 course compensation for the PI, graduate student assistance, recording equipment, travel to the research site, and research materials) are currently being sought.