

Crisis Communication:

How to Do Risk Comparisons

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Why risk comparisons are problematic:

1. *Risks vary on many dimensions at the same time.* Three are particularly important in crisis communication:
 - How dangerous is it to the individual member of the public right now?
 - How dangerous is it in other ways? Does it threaten health care systems, economies, or social stability? Is it wreaking havoc somewhere else? Is it potentially devastating in the future?
 - Even if not dangerous, how upsetting, terrifying, or infuriating is it? Does it run afoul of "outrage factors" such as dread, familiarity, trust, control, responsiveness, and memorability?
2. *Risk comparisons normally focus on only one of these dimensions.* Most common is the "reassuring" comparison that insists X is less dangerous to the individual right now than Y ... so we are foolish to ignore Y and obsess over X. This ignores the other two dimensions of risk, on which X may actually be far worse than Y.
3. *Risk comparisons of this sort tend to backfire.* Even if the comparison is accurate as far as it goes, it is likely to feel patronizing and deceitful to the public. Instead of reassuring people, it leaves them alone with their fears.

Two ways to make risk comparisons work better:

1. *Compare risks on multiple dimensions.* X is less serious as Y in this way. But it is more serious than Y in that way.
2. *Bracket the risk.* X is less serious than Y (on the dimension we're discussing now), but it is more serious than Z.

These approaches work better because they feel like efforts to inform our judgment, not coerce it; to enlighten us, not corner us.