Comprehending the Role of Message Convergence for Consistently Effective Message Design in Pre-Crisis and Crisis Situations

Timothy L. Sellnow
University of Central Florida

With support from:
Kathryn Anthony, Alyssa Grace Millner, Emina Herovic,
Robert Littlefield, Deanna Sellnow, & Bethney Wilson
This research was developed under DHS Science And Technology Assistance Agreement No. (#P001955409) awarded by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It has not been formally reviewed by DHS. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The Department of Homeland Security does not endorse any products or commercial services mentioned in this publication.
Perceived Risk and Actual Risk
Best Practices of Risk and Crisis Communication

Continuously Evaluate and Update Crisis Plans

**PLAN AHEAD**
- Plan Ahead for a Prompt Response
- Establish a Crisis Communication Network
- Accept Uncertainty

**COMMUNICATE RESPONSIBLY**
- Form Partnerships with the Public
- Acknowledge Public Concern
- Be Open and Honest

**MINIMIZE HARM**
- Be Accessible to the Media
- Communicate Compassion
- Provide Suggestions for Self-Protection

Acknowledge and Account for Cultural Differences
Today’s Journey

✓ Foundations of Message Convergence Theory
✓ Recent studies
✓ Future Directions
Convergence Theory

Arguments from distinct sources, on any given topic, are “in constant interaction.”

Interaction produces points of convergence—not just divergence.

Convergence is compelling.

“Risk communication can be characterized as interacting arguments.”
Perelman expanded “the domain of reason to encompass a rhetorical rationalism that allows for a pluralism of values and a multiplicity of ways of being reasonable” (Dearin, 1969, p. 214).
Multiple bodies of knowledge with multiple points of convergence
When two opposing sides of an issue offer CONFLICTING ARGUMENTS, there is rarely a complete distinction between them.
Central Propositions of

Message Convergence Theory

Audiences are able to recognize the plurality of views within issues *that concern them.*
As discussion of a contested issue evolves, the strength of converging arguments may change.
Recent Studies in 4 Health Settings

[Image of a cow and animal disease precaution bags]

[Image of a pregnant woman silhouette]

[Image of a school lunch tray with a juice box and fruit]

[Image of an earthquake warning system]

www.theguardian.com

www.dreamstime.com

whatsforschoollunch.blogspot.com

Data Set

✓ **Eight focus groups** (Little Rock, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; Washington D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Silver Springs, Maryland; Detroit, Michigan; Dearborn, Michigan; and Lexington, Kentucky)

✓ **42 to 63 minutes each**

✓ **Multi-city approach** (to attain geographic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity among participants)
Procedures

1) Identify points of **convergence** in the simulation;
2) Discuss the degree to which each point of convergence was **influential**;
3) Discuss the perception of convergence and its persuasiveness in their **daily lives**; and
4) Identify points where **divergence** or disagreement occurred in the three stories.
Interpretation

1) The focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and edited to remove all identifying information of the participants.

2) The scholars analyzed the transcripts through the framework analysis technique (Ritchie & Spenser, 1994), an approach that allows for an inclusion of both a priori as well as emergent concepts during the data analysis phase.
Proposition 1: **Distinct Sources**

Participants explained that they were exposed to information from one source, such as a national television network, and as a result **sought additional information** from other sources such as:

- national television networks
- local television networks
- National Public Radio
- local radio station,
- family members, friends
- family physicians
- supermarkets
- local churches
Proposition 1: Distinct Source Preference

✓ Participants generally preferred federal regulatory agencies over other types of information sources.

“I would believe the FDA, whatever they say before I would believe the poultry people. Just because they’re the FDA. That’s the way my mind thinks.”
Proposition 1: Distinct Source Distrust

✓ Participants were skeptical of information shared by agencies they perceived as having a vested interest.

“And I think that when I hear the Poultry Association making a statement, I might listen to that with a little more, well, they have a vested interest in this. That would be something that, ‘okay, I hear what they’re saying, and we’ll just see.’”
Proposition 2: Perceived Significance

✓ Participants are more likely to take action when they perceive significance among multiple convergent arguments.

“I am going to listen to what I’m hearing the most. You know, like what is common between what everyone is saying. So if I’m watching ten different things and eight people are saying “Wash your hands every five minutes,” then I would probably be more prone to wash my hands every five minutes.”
Proposition 2: Perceived Significance

✓ Participants seek convergence via messages they find on multiple social media sites.

“On YouTube, everyone’s a reporter now. So if I go on YouTube and I’m seeing these videos popping up, I might watch one and pay attention to where they’re getting their information from. And then ... get on Facebook or Twitter, and usually you’ll see something that correlates to what you saw on YouTube. And then go to the headlines and you’ll see a headline that correlates with all three.”
Proposition 3: Reflection

✓ Participants actively assess the significance of convergent and divergent arguments.

“...don’t believe everything you hear. If you switch the stations over, you’ll find contradictions. You turn to different stations, you’ll get 20 different forecasts... so somewhere between the exaggeration and the sensationalism, you’ll find the truth. You have to discern it ultimately for yourself.”
Proposition 3: Reflection

✓ Participants may change their minds as arguments evolve over time.

“I seek out the information and look for a common thread, but with the knowledge that maybe the whole story isn’t in yet. I would tend to be a little more careful until we know a little bit more.”
Proposition 3: Reflection

✓ Participants sense contrived convergence.

“They want us to feel this way. They want us to feel like little sheep running back and forth, and I began to resent it. So don’t tell me about terrorists unless it’s something you know because otherwise I feel like I am being manipulated.”
Discussion and Implications

1. Audiences recognize that they receive multiple messages from multiple sources.
2. Audiences actively critique source credibility.
3. Audiences consciously seek convergence among multiple sources.
4. Audience assessment is ongoing and may change based on new information, arguments, and rebuttals.
Current & Recent Research

The Perils of Congruence

Warning Messages

ADB-CAP Risk Communication

Ebola Risk Communication
QUESTIONS?