

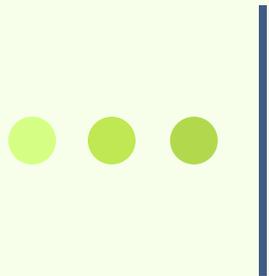


Emerging Contaminants in the Media: Informing Risk Communication Strategy

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Aqua Vitae

● ● ● | Pharmaceuticals Why the Attention?

- Low levels, detected through better technology
- No documented human health effects
- Modern water treatment *has improved* public health
- Competing concerns of infrastructure, known health effects, new regulations



Risk Communication Perspective

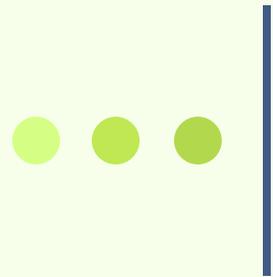
What perceptions drive audience reaction?

- Involuntary risk
- Very familiar vs. “exotic”
- Understand some, not all aspects of a risk
- Trust
- Scare words: toxic, convulsive, sex hormone



Risk Communication Perspective

Perceptions are valid and must
be addressed *equally* in relation
to scientific data



AP Article Overview

- Developed as new “Investigative” initiative in AP
- National scope , utilities in all states queried
- Appearance of “scientific” review of data
- Highly promoted with AP subscribers



AP Risk Communication Analysis

- Applied Risk Perception Principals
- Used review method developed for AwwaRF 2776
- Reviewed 800+ media items



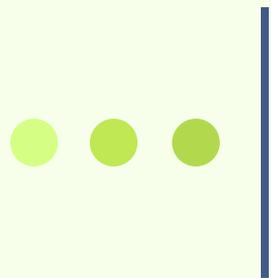
AP Investigation Method

- Review hundreds of scientific reports, analyzed federal drinking water databases,
- Site visits, interviews with officials, academics and scientists.
- Surveyed 50 largest US cities, other major water providers, and smaller community water providers.



AP Article Analysis

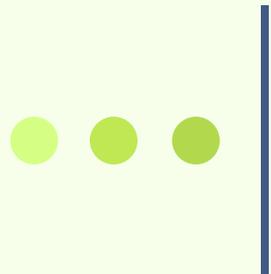
- Reviewed 800+ Articles using method developed for AwwaRF 2776
- Pressured utilities for data
- Knew story had elements of “outrage”
- Promoted concerns rather than solutions



AP Article Analysis Limitations

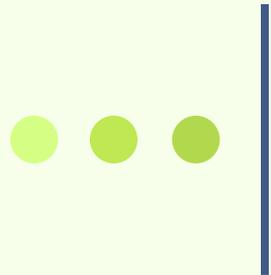
Did not explain or acknowledge:

- Why some utilities testing for unregulated contaminants
 - Why other utilities do not
- The differences in data collection from utility to utility
- Competing priorities



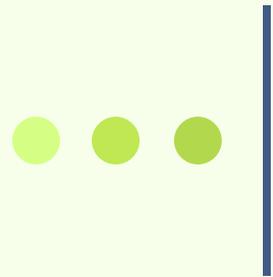
AP Article Analysis Opportunities

- Sparked awareness of drinking water quality
- Initiated important policy and risk discussions
- Created a public awareness of the link between source water, drinking water and wastewater



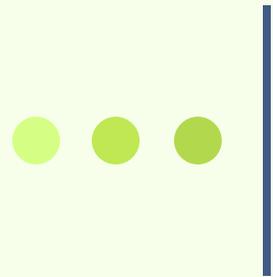
AP Article Analysis Effects

- Decisively created the biggest drinking water story of the year
- Set a precedent for future stories
- Underscored the need for stronger risk communication strategies and relationships with public health, health care providers, and other organizations



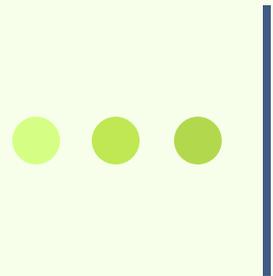
Immediate Reactions

- Large volume of public comments relative to other drinking water stories
- Health department inquiries
- Utilities surveyed received few calls



Public Comments

I don't understand how utilities claim that their water is safe when clearly not enough testing is done in this aspect



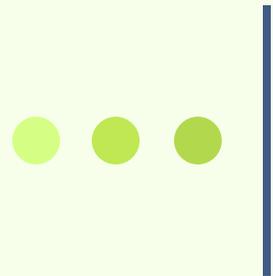
Public Comment Summary

- Concern, not panic
- Questions what to do
- Questions bottled water
- Outrage greater when utility had long standing water quality or public trust issues
- Question drug disposal/return problems and actions



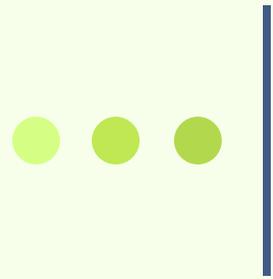
National Media

- Did not print full series of AP articles
- Did not interview utility/water experts, but academics or public officials.
- Published follow-up articles with details
- Often added links, multi-media and other information to put risk into perspective



State and Local Media

- Spoke directly with local utility
- Used local “experts”
- OpEds and letters:
 - Used the term “wake-up call”
 - Supported source water protection and infrastructure improvement
 - Noted bottled water is not an answer



Continued Coverage

- Sporadic reports as utilities and states release test results
- Hearings reported prior, but results are not widely covered after



Legislative Reactions

- Congress - Senate hearing, bills in both houses
- New York City, Philadelphia City Council Hearings
- New Jersey, Massachusetts Legislative Hearing
- Texas State Attorney General request
- Illinois - State mandated sampling



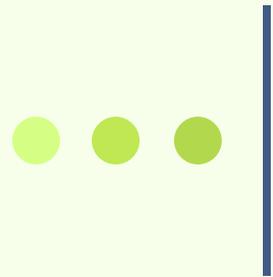
What Worked

- Proactive strategy
- Open about uncertainty and results
- Trust within the community
- Consistent Messages



What Didn't

“revealing the name (of the pharmaceutical) in the post-9/11 world could cause a terrorist to intentionally release more of the drug, causing harm to residents”



What Didn't

- “The public won't understand”
- Citing regulations
- “The water is absolutely safe”
- Reactive testing

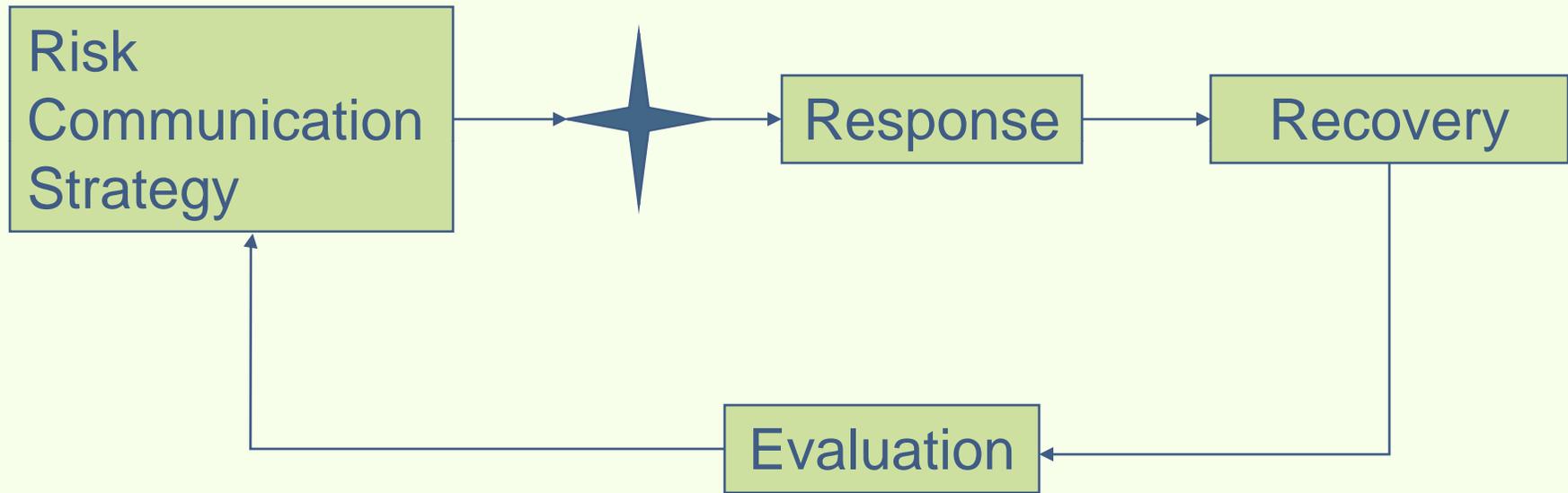


Understanding Audiences

- “Publics”
- Boards
- Regulators
- Elected Officials
- Media



Summary



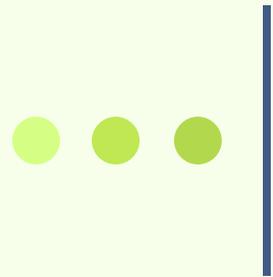
 = Media Event Concern unknown



Summary

Key to positive outcome from story?

Trust



What next?

- Recognize there will be another event
- Concern of the may not be expected or understood
- Proactive, strategic approach essential
- Develop relationships to build trust
- Identify both opportunities and challenges



Final Thought



Special thanks to PWD, GWU, the Water and Health Work Group and numerous other utility and public health colleagues

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