



The University of Texas at Austin  
Center for Health Communication  
*Moody College of Communication*

# Public Engagement on the Implications of Built Environment Microbiomes: **Risk Communication and Information Seeking**

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# Today

- Risk and mass communication research
- My research related to MOBE
- Risk information seeking and audiences
- Where I think the MOBE risk com research needs to go next



# Risk defined, simply

## risk

/risk/ 

*noun*

noun: **risk**; plural noun: **risks**

Certainty is elusive in science...

1. a situation involving exposure to danger.

"flouting the law was too much of a risk"

- the possibility that something unpleasant or unwelcome will happen.

"reduce the risk of heart disease"

*synonyms:* chance, uncertainty, unpredictability, precariousness, instability, insecurity, perilousness, riskiness [More](#)

*antonyms:* safety, impossibility



## The Question: Is coffee **good for you?**

[Irish Times](#) - Jun 17, 2016

Health guidelines are notoriously fickle, as the accumulation of evidence changes scientific thinking. Who can keep track of the latest ...



## Nap time! Researchers say sleeping twice a day is **good for you**

[Today.com](#) - Jun 16, 2016

It turns out when it comes to sleeping, we're like the new parent who enters from the other side of the carpool lane or the people who apply ...

# Mass communication defined

- **Who (Source)**
- says what (Message)
- **to whom (Audience)**
- via which channel
- with what effect (change in attitude, knowledge or behavior)
  - Intended and unintended

**= lots of moving parts when we communicate with the public!**

# You as source

- My team interviewed 79 U.S. scientists who study built environments – most of whom self-identified as microbiologists.

# You as source

- Majority have talked to lay audiences about their work (e.g. the media, public audiences, etc.).
- Often asked about aspects of their work directly relevant to public – human health, air quality, mold, etc.
- Many interviewees felt efficacious in talking to the public.
  - but a number did struggle to explain their research to the interviewers in lay terms.
- A third of the sample explicitly referenced that difficulty.
- Some explicitly lamented a lack of science education in the US.

# Example how com difficulty plays out

- Conference at UT nursing focused on *The Physical Environment's Influences on Health*.
- Faculty and students but also City of Austin employees, medical practitioners, law makers, community members.
- One of the panelists talked about her work on crib mattresses and SVOCs.
- Practitioners wanted to know what to tell patients. *What can new parents do? What do we tell them?*
- The director of a clinic catering to low income patients posed the question and there were lots of nods in the room.



# Example

- The researcher does not study public health – she works in a lab and she is a new assistant professor.
- She studies SVOCS from mattresses, not what the public should do about them.
- She talked from her own experience – “I put the mattress in the garage in the hot summer to bake off the gasses.”
- The clinic director was short with her – “*my patients don’t have garages – they live in crowded apartments. What do I tell them?*”
- The exchange was uncomfortable. And it felt tone deaf on both sides.

# Example

- The scientist was not prepared to issue a directive to the general public, at least not yet.
- The clinic director was looking to improve his patient's lives, they are vulnerable to so many risks.
- As a mass comm scholar I was frustrated because I thought about the SIDS “back to sleep” campaign...

# Action → Reaction

- For every action, there is a reaction.
- Every message we put out there will elicit a reaction.
- We must be prepared for the reactions.
- We must target our messages carefully and meaningfully.
- Risks must be carefully selected for amplification.

# Mass Communication is an amplifier

- Message is carried far.
- Message gains status when media focus on it.
- Reporters are trained to ask questions and will work to make the risk relevant to readers and viewers.
- Source cannot control the message once it is released.
- So need to balance public's right to know with the realities of mass communication.

## Qs you need to answer

- Who is vulnerable to the risk?
- What is the impact?
- What is the likelihood?
- What action can be taken to alleviate risk?
- What is gained with that action?
- What is lost with that action?
- What is the cost for acting vs. not acting?
- What can we assume people already know or believe?
- What will make the risk relevant and compelling (especially to those vulnerable)?
  - Ideal sources?
  - Ideal channels?
- What partnerships can help get messages out and respond to questions over time?

# Focusing on the audience(s)

- Every risk message has multiple audiences.
- The personal and social implications of a risk help segment the audiences meaningfully.
  - Two vulnerable audiences – elderly and (parents of) infants. When I talk to them about carpet...I need to think about competing risks...

# Information seeking framework

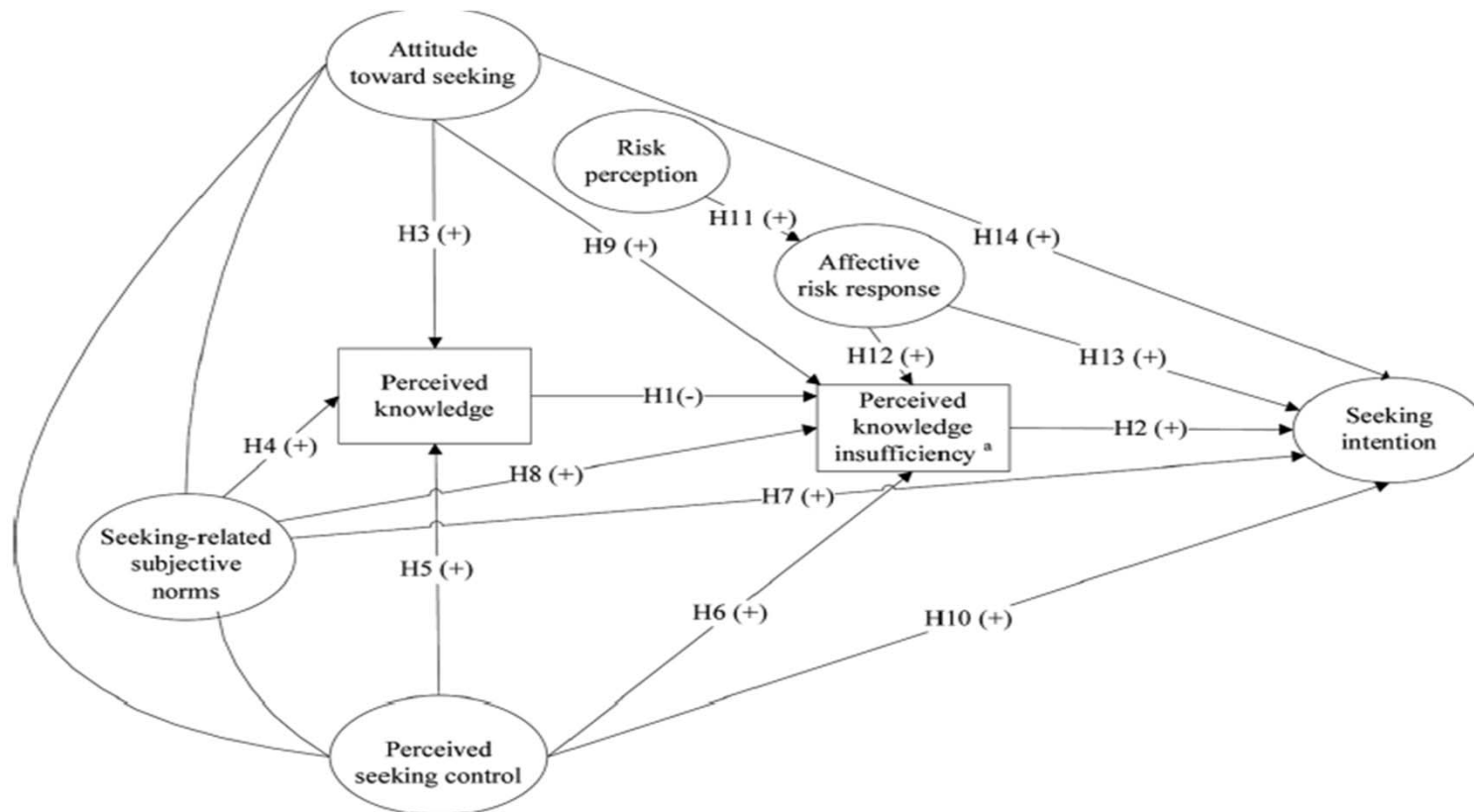
- I tend to think about audiences in terms of how likely they are to seek information about a risk.
- I ask what factors into the tipping point...*“I need to know more about this risk.”*
  - People do not just absorb the info we put out there.
  - They must engage (cognitively, even physically) to process and make meaning in a way that makes sense personally.
- The goal is to make the information enticing without losing its integrity.

# Risk information seeking framework

When they do actively seek risk information...

- They are motivated by:
  - perceived risk
  - existing knowledge
  - how much knowledge they think they need
  - beliefs about seeking information
  - beliefs about ability to get/process info
  - social norms related to being informed about the risk\*\*\*





**Figure 1. PRISM (Kahlor, 2010).** <sup>a</sup>Perceived knowledge insufficiency is conceptualized as the gap between perceived knowledge and knowledge needed.

# Source to Audience

- We are a privileged group.
- So we need to remind ourselves, often:
  - Only 29% of adults 25+ have a 4-year degree.
    - But the other 71% can make important decisions about their homes and their health and their family's health on a moments notice when they have to.
  - 43% live in rental housing, and are limited in actions they can take...

# Audiences

- 15% live in poverty.
  - Which means they can't afford much in the way of remediation or lifestyle change.

poverty   
*noun* | pov·er·ty | \ˈpā-vər-tē\

## Simple Definition of POVERTY

Popularity: Top 20% of words

: the state of being poor

: a lack of something

# Audiences - plural

- There is no monolithic audience.
- You have many audiences.
- They need to be reached uniquely.
- In ways that respond to their resources & values, and that understand the competing threats to their health, safety and quality of life.

# Where the research needs to go next

- We need a better understanding of how ordinary people think about their homes, their workplace, their car – the environments in which they spend so much time.
- We need to understand the schemas – the pre-existing information, habits and competing needs that people will apply to any risks we want to share.
- We need to use this information to locate meaningful audiences – groups of people for whom a particular risk message will resonate in a specific way.

# Where the research needs to go next

- Training (e-module?) that can be shared with microbiologists and features.
  - Ordinary people discussing what they need to know, what matters to them when it comes to the built environment.
  - Concrete ways to bridge the gap between “remaining true to the science” and making the science relevant outside of the lab.
  - A case study of how people and the media will respond to a risk once you present it. (Hint: It may not go as planned.)

# In sum...for MOBE risk communication

- We need MOBE researchers to be trained as info sources.
- We need to carefully construct our risk messages.
- We need to work harder to understand our audiences.
- We need to plan for intended and unintended consequences.



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WHAT STARTS HERE CHANGES THE WORLD

**THANK YOU**