Inoculation as Assertive Risk Communication

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Assertive Risk Communication

“Actively and continuously anticipating and preempting counter-arguments.”
— (NCFPD)
Assertive Risk Communication in Complex Competing Messages

- Individuals are constantly exposed to hundreds of risk messages.
  - Media
  - New Media
  - Social Media
  - Interpersonal Relationships

- Making sense of this deluge of information is complicated by the fact that many messages contradict one another.
Inoculation as Strategy for Achieving Assertive Risk Communication

1. Inoculation Against Counter Arguments
2. Two-Sided Persuasion
3. Threat
Inoculation as Exposure to Counterarguments

1. Inoculating messages foster resistance to counterarguments.
   - “Beliefs are more easily maintained if persons are strategically exposed to counterargument.”
Inoculation as Two-Sided Persuasion

2. Two-Sided persuasion increases resistance
   - “Forecasting provides more defense-provoking beliefs than not disclosing the imminence of counterarguments.”
Threat

3. Threat is the counter argument against the inoculation / persuasion message

- “Inoculation messages can make listeners resistant to subsequent attacks.”
The Experiment

1. Baseline measurement of Confidence in DHS and TSA for both control and treatment groups.
2. Inoculation message to the treatment group.
3. Exposure to announcement of a terrorist event.
4. Measurement of Confidence in DHS and TSA for both control and treatment groups.
5. Repeated measure of control and treatment groups.
Inoculation / Two-Sided Persuasion

...The publicity that these stories earn give the impression that such occurrences are frequent and that DHS and our government are not fully up to the task of protecting you against a terrorist attack...The goal of the terrorists is to generate fear and doubt in the ability of DHS and our government to prevent and minimize the impact of terrorist attacks...

...DHS has detected and prevented numerous terrorist plots. All of these plots have been thwarted by a combination of intelligence work, policing, and citizen participation...DHS teams of intelligence and disaster response officials, including those from the private sector, collaborate...
253 DEAD AS AIRLINER EXPLODES OVER NEVADA: Department of Homeland Security Says Explosion Likely Terrorist Attack

Yesterday at 8:37am a commercial airliner carrying 253 passengers from Los Angeles to New York exploded 70 minutes into flight leaving no survivors. Air traffic control lost radar contact with the plane and within minutes local officials in Nevada began receiving reports from witnesses who saw debris falling from the sky. Rescue workers were first on the scene and described the sight as horrific. Experts speculate a bomb, possibly located in the baggage hold of the plane, was detonated midflight.
The Department of Homeland Security immediately called for the grounding of all domestic flights leaving Los Angeles until baggage onboard aircraft and in Los Angeles International was reexamined. No evidence of bomb materials was discovered. Thousands of passengers across the country were stranded as they and their families anxiously awaited news. Flights have now resumed, but all U.S. airports are on high alert.

Secretary Napolitano has issued a public statement that the Department of Homeland Security is treating this as a terrorist attack. All baggage will be subject to additional screening and a massive investigation is underway. Travelers are being warned to expect delays on all flights due to heightened security measures. One public official speaking with anonymity said “This is the Pan Am Flight 103 disaster all over again except now in our own country!”
Longitudinal Experiment: Measures of Confidence (Scales 1-7)

Prevent: DHS can prevent terrorist attacks

Respond: DHS can minimize impact of terrorist attacks

DHS: DHS is capable of handling national crises

TSA: TSA is capable of handling national crises

Flying: Feel favorable toward flying on a commercial airline

Skill: Past terrorist attempts have been unsuccessful because of skill of security officials

Adjust: Can adjust to terrorist threat (scale 1-5)
Longitudinal Experiment: **Sample Characteristics** (4 surveys)

*Sample Size: 354 Completed all 4 Surveys*

*Gender: Male 53% Female 47%*

*Age: Median 43 yrs.*

*Education: College Graduate 46%*

*Political Party: Repub. 24% Dem. 37% Ind. 22%*

*Political Attitude: Liberal 47% Conservative 53%*

*Regions: 43 States and District of Columbia*
Longitudinal Experiment: Data Collection Schedule

Monday April 23: Pre-measures $n = 439$
Friday April 27: Inoculating Risk Message $n = 387$
Monday April 30: Attack Scenario $n = 373$
Monday May 7: Follow-Up $n = 354$

Note: News released on May 7 that CIA had foiled an attempt to bring bomb on commercial airliner bound for U.S. This story may have influenced response to survey 4.
Differences in Initial and Post Attack Confidence: The Effect of Risk Communication

\[ \text{Decrease in Confidence} = \text{Post Attack} - \text{Pre-measures} \]

Based on 1-7 scale

All group differences significant at \( \alpha = .05 \)
Preventing Terrorist Attacks: Change in Confidence

Notice rebound to pre-crisis levels
Flying on Commercial Airline: Change in Confidence

Day 1   Day 5   Day 8   Day 15

Confidence in Flying

Pre-Measures   Risk Message   Attack Scenario   Follow-Up

No Risk Message   Risk Message

1   1.5   2   2.5   3   3.5   4   4.5   5   5.5
What Concerned You the Most About the Attack?

“The fact that the luggage was initially screened but yet the explosives were missed. The uncertainty of what the cause of the explosion was. The fact that I will be flying with my children in a month's time.” Male, 43yrs, Idaho

“The factor that concerned me most was that a bomb was able to get on the plane as luggage. It makes me feel that Homeland Security is reactive rather than proactive.” Female, 34yrs, Virginia

“Simply that lives were lost and there is no truly effective way to prevent such occurrences without significant reduction of personal privacy and dignity, and a great increase in the time, cost, and overall inconvenience of air travel.” Female, 29yrs, Illinois
What Actions Could DHS Take in Response to this Attack that Would Reassure You the Most?

“Immediate investigation and response with frequent updates.” Female, 23yrs, Oregon

“More checks of everything that get onto a plane.” Male, 52yrs, California

“I'm not sure that any actions they take after the fact would reassure me if they didn't stop it in the first place. It seems that there are already way too many actions taken to "prevent terrorism" that are in reality just eroding the freedoms of our country.” Female, 35yrs, Washington

“Well, according to the article, the DHS were grounding all flights and checking baggage more thoroughly. I think just the extra action of grounding all flights to re-check baggage reassures me.” Male, 30yrs, New York
Would Your Reaction Differ if Instead a Flight Leaving London Bound for New York Exploded Over England?

“I would feel safer traveling out of the US with our homeland security checks, instead of traveling out of London where I know nothing about their security.” Female, 47yrs, Minnesota

“No difference in reaction -- I believe airport screenings in the UK are comparable to those in the US. If a bomb can be placed and successfully detonated in a plane starting out in London, we're still vulnerable in the US.” Male, 41yrs, New York

“I would still refuse to fly but I think I would have less anxiety over my personal safety and that of my family since the event originated in a different country. Somehow that point of origin makes a significant difference to me because - true or not - I suggest that the attack wasn't aimed at USA.” Male, 40yrs, Missouri
Conclusions

1. Inoculation messages move individuals in the desired direction—initially enhancing confidence.

2. Inoculation messages enhance resistance to counter-arguments in high-risk circumstances.

3. Using inoculation messages fortify what is known about best practices for risk and crisis communication.
Recommendations

1. Include inoculations in application of the best practices:
   – open and honest
   – acknowledge public concern
   – accept uncertainty

2. Incorporate “success stories” to balance discussion of challenges or failures.
Recommendations

3. Routinely incorporate two-sided persuasion into public conversation at all levels.
   - Press Conferences
   - Communication Campaigns
   - Public Interviews

4. Continue message testing to determine the generalizability of inoculation across crisis type.
In Practice

• The Department of Homeland Security said it had "no specific, credible information regarding an active terrorist plot against the U.S. at this time, although we continue to monitor efforts by al-Qa'ida and its affiliates to carry out terrorist attacks, both in the Homeland and abroad."

VS.

• “In addition to this event, DHS has detected and prevented numerous terrorist plots. All of these plots have been thwarted by a combination of intelligence work, policing, and citizen participation.”
Questions and Discussion

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