

rely mainly on a technocratic rationale assuming the triangle of sender-message-recipient sharing information. The reality of communication and information though has already been transformed. The public is no longer (and maybe never has been) a passive entity to be given recommendations and guidelines to follow by institutions which are to be trusted. This technocratic communication model is insufficient in explaining how human communication builds a modern society.

This talk introduces and discusses current concepts and approaches and develops the argument for a new paradigm of risk communication that is reflective and based on capacity and relationship building. A paradigmatic shift in the understanding of risk communication could lead to a different practice of public health officials. The implications of changed practice will be addressed in the moderated panel discussion.

Introducing a new risk communication paradigm

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Risk communication and crisis communication differ in many aspects and there is terminological and epistemological ambiguity in international fora and discussions regarding definitions and approaches. As a working definition we use time, method and content to distinguish between risk communication and crisis communication. Risk communication differs from crisis communication as risk communication starts before a crisis, is less directive, has more time to explain even difficult and contradicting scientific positions. It also has the time and opportunity to offer diverse approaches to bridge the gap between the scientific assessment of health risks (risk analysis) and public perceptions of health risks (risk perception). Crisis communication is the communication during an outbreak when people need to know exactly what to do if they feel unwell and how to protect themselves and others. During an outbreak, time is short and crisis communication therefore needs to be concise and often unidirectional.

Risk communication is not just about the communication of risks. It is important to go beyond the understanding of risk communication as timely provision of outbreak information and behaviour advice and to focus on building the capacity of the general public – to enable, encourage and empower the public – to understand and act upon health risks. Current communication models and approaches still