



Government communication and literacy

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Government communication, literacy and citizenship

In September 2000, the Canada Information Office (CIO) released the findings from a study, entitled **Issues and Challenges in Communicating with Less Literate Canadians**. They gathered data from over 4000 surveys, 8 discussion groups and 46 individual interviews with adults who had less than grade nine education. This group of citizens find most government documents too difficult, use television as a main source of information, distrust the Internet and want more human contact with officials. [See [BOX](#)]. The findings lead the CIO to host a one-day National Forum in November when 200 participants including government communicators, policy and program officers, met with literacy representatives from various organizations to develop a deeper understanding of the issue.

In January 2001, the CIO, in collaboration with the Privy Council Office, organized a national Government Communicators Conference in Ottawa. They devoted a plenary session to the subject of Literacy and Government Communication. Sponsored by Canada Post, Linda Shohet gave this presentation to several hundred communicators from federal department offices across Canada. The conference was the first time in more than a decade that this group had met, and the registration of 500+ reflected strong interest and need. Organizers summarizing the two days pledged another conference in April 2002. Many presentations focused on sophisticated web-based communication strategies in an on-line world. In contrast were presentations on literacy and risk communication. All presentations were one hour long. Summaries from three of them capture some of the contradictions and challenges that face government communicators.

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Characteristics of Less-educated Canadians: Summary of findings

Issues and Challenges in Communicating with Less Literate Canadians

General Considerations

- They are less optimistic, less self-confident and find change difficult.
- They are critical of government performance.

Information Needs

- They want to be informed, but are not always sure about what.
- They have the same priorities as other Canadians, that is, health care, education and unemployment, but they are not familiar with initiatives that have already been undertaken.
- They are more focused on day-to-day concerns and want information on matters that are important to their daily lives.

Perceptions relating to Government Communications

- They have greater difficulty understanding information and recognizing information sources.
- They are ambivalent about whether the information they receive meets their needs.
- They are uncertain about whether they can fully rely on the information provided
- They contact the Government of Canada less frequently.
- They rely heavily on others to obtain information (relatives, friends, professionals).

Communications Vehicles

- They watch a lot of television (especially in the evenings) that is their main source of information.
- They are apprehensive about new developments in information technology, including the Internet.
- They want to be informed through government advertising, as much on television as in print.



(Source: *Issues and Challenges in Communicating with Less Literate Canadians*, Canada Information Office, 2000)

Available in print or CD-ROM (call 613-992-8545) and at www.cio-bic.gc.ca. The document also analyzed the weaknesses of current government communication practices and suggested alternative strategies.

Risk Communication

Report and comments on a presentation by Vincent T. Covello, Director of the Center for Risk Communication at Columbia University and currently President of the Society for Risk Analysis (SRA). Covello gave a workshop at the CIO's January 2001 conference.

Anyone working in the field of literacy who listens to Vincent Covello will discover that, like Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme who recognizes that he has always been speaking "prose," we have been doing "risk communication" without knowing it.

Vincent Covello, internationally renowned as a writer and consultant on the topic, defines risk communication as communication about high concern issues that are sensitive or controversial. A relatively new and growing field that boasts over 8000 peer-reviewed articles, risk communication is increasingly demanded in a world of instant communication, media sound bites, rapid travel, environmental disasters, superbugs, and terrorism. While much of his experience has been in occupational and environmental medicine, Covello is now training people to negotiate with terrorists and kidnappers. For government communicators, he summarized a complex theoretical literature using clear language, humorous examples and strong visuals. He suggests communication strategies to respond to each of the theories. For example, to overcome limited processing, he counsels limiting the number of messages (three is the magic number, "the answer to everything."); limiting the time for the message; and repeating the message. He also noted that if a critic is perceived to be credible, a good communicator must respond. Those who believe that "facts" are on their side often do not prepare their messages well enough.

Covello outlined four theories of risk communication, all of which need to be taken into account:

THEORY	MAIN CLAIM
Mental noise theory	Upset people have difficulty processing information. Processing (hearing, understanding remembering) can be reduced by 80%.
Risk perception theory	Perception = reality What determines perception is multi-faceted. Among 27 factors, the least important are empirical facts.
Trust determination theory	Upset people tend to be highly distrustful
Negative dominance theory	Upset people tend to assume the worst

Two critical strategies involve non-verbal communication and visual communication. Covello referred to research by Dr. Paul Ekman at the University of California on non-verbal communication in situations of low trust and/or high concern. Ekman has found that non-verbal communication provides from 50 – 75% of message content, that it is noticed intensely by audiences, often interpreted negatively, and that it overrides verbal communication. Communicators need to practice the non-verbal skills, i.e. if they are telling the truth they need to look as if they are. Covello acknowledged that this strategy “is a double-edged ethical sword” since it can also be used by liars to spin messages and propaganda.

Risk perception theory
Perception = reality
What determines perception is multi-faceted. Among
27 factors, the least important are empirical facts.

– Vincent Covello

On the use of visuals, Covello recommends the work of Edward Tufte on Visual Explanations. Word pictures, visual analogies and metaphors, two-dimensional graphics all enhance a message, and make it memorable. Covello recommended that anyone exploring the subject use university sites where there is a credible research base.

As a concise introduction to the subject, Covello, in collaboration with Frederick W. Allen, Associate Director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has written a pamphlet for the EPA entitled *Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication*. While acknowledging that there are “no easy prescriptions for successful risk communication,” Covello and Allen claim general agreement on seven cardinal rules that apply equally well to the public and private sectors. They also note that while these “may seem obvious, they are continually and consistently violated in practice.”

From *Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication*

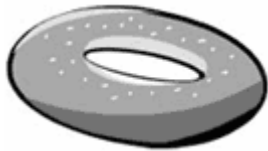
From a pamphlet by Vincent T. Covello in collaboration with Frederick W. Allen, Associate Director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). With each of the seven rules, they offer some “points to consider.” Here are a few:

- The goal of risk communication in a democracy should be to produce an informed public that is involved, interested, reasonable, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative; it should not be to diffuse public concerns or replace action.
- There is no such entity as “the public;” instead, there are many publics, each with its own interests, needs, concerns, priorities, references, and organizations.

- Different risk communication goals, audience, and media require different risk communication strategies.
- Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain. Once lost, they are almost impossible to regain completely.
- Few things make risk communications more difficult than conflicts or public disagreements with other credible sources.
- The media are frequently more interested in politics than in risk; more interested in simplicity than in complexity; more interested in danger than in safety.
- Regardless of how well you communicate risk information, some people will not be satisfied.
- If people are sufficiently motivated, they are quite capable of understanding complex risk information even if they may not agree with you.

Source: "Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication." It is available at www.ci.sf.ca.us/puc/wqfs/risk.htm with an invitation to respond.

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The Bagel Effect

Power and control moving from the centre

Report and comments on a presentation by Paul Hoffert, Director of CulTech Collaborative Research Centre, York University, Toronto, and Executive Director of Intercom ON.

Paul Hoffert is a mathematician, physicist, university professor, and entrepreneur, remembered by those old enough as the founder and keyboard player of the 1970s rock band Lighthouse. He currently directs a centre at York University studying the interplay of culture and technology. On his web site, he bills himself as a "Technology Visionary," a role he cultivates in his presentation.

Hoffert's talk was based on his 1998 book *The Bagel Effect - A Compass to Navigate the Wired World*, (McGraw-Hill Ryerson), an up-beat analysis of the wired world in which we often feel ourselves entangled today. The Bagel Effect is the term he has coined to describe a major trend in our world— that power and control are rapidly moving from the centre of systems to the edges, leaving a hole in the middle.

To communicate in this new world, Hoffert says that decision-makers must be on-line. Information itself will have no value when it is free on the internet. The value will lie in the management of knowledge. Right now, he says, we are doing a poor job. People need less information, but more pertinent information for their own purposes. Communicators are still using a 20th-century mass communication strategy in re-purposing print materials

on-line. In the future, we will have to target clients with messages wrapped in relevant context, and give them only what they want, quickly.

Hoffert has high hopes for a future that lies not in a global village, but in local communities, which he argues can be restored through digital networking. The “global village” is a myth, he says. Who cares about billions of people? We know, on average, 1000 others; keep in touch with only 150, and trust only 20. In the 21st-century, he predicts that communications will allow us to combine physical and on-line communities, re-establish local support structures, and create friendlier neighbours and closer families. He used the example of an experiment carried out in Stonehaven, a suburb north of Toronto, to illustrate the promise.



Despite the seductiveness of the vision and the outcomes from the Stonehaven experiment, it was hard not to imagine what other services and supports might have been provided for the \$100,000,000 spent on the project.

In addition, would anyone have invested that amount to wire a working-class community? What assumptions about community and family underlie this vision? And what kinds of literacy are required to participate?

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Accommodation: The other side of literacy

Literacy and government communications

Notes and comments from a presentation by Linda Shohet, Director of The Centre for Literacy of Quebec

IALS data show that almost half the Canadian population may have some difficulty with simple written document reading and quantitative calculation. This is obviously not a homogenous group of people. It includes people who are undereducated, speakers of languages other than English or French, and people with various physical and learning disabilities that interfere with communications. Diverse groups are disproportionately represented in these categories, among them aboriginal people, seniors, immigrants, and the poor, to name a few.

The challenge for government today is how to communicate with all its citizens, how to ensure that the chosen means of communication does not further exclude the excluded. A recent study by the Canada Information Office of the information needs of less literate Canadians reveals distrust of the sources and the media used by government

communicators. They read little, watch a lot of television, listen to radio, and do not generally use the internet. The characteristics and perceptions uncovered by the study match many described by Vincent Covello as characteristics that call for “risk communication.” [See [Risk Communication](#)] Covello’s seven cardinal rules for risk communication require minimal adaptation to be applied to communication with citizens who have weak literacy skills, keeping in mind that they are not a single audience.

While governments and other agencies move increasingly to web-based communications, in the mistaken assumption that everyone is on-line or soon will be, they have an obligation to adopt a variety of strategies to provide essential information to all citizens. Accommodation is not a charitable gesture. It must be a hallmark of inclusive democracy.

Literacy organizations argue for a sustainable system of adult basic education in every province and territory to make learning available to those who want it. While this is a laudable and necessary goal for a country that claims to be committed to the concept of lifelong learning, it will not answer the immediate, or even all the longer-term, needs around government communication. Even if equitable basic skills provision were available today, it would be years before large numbers could be brought to a level of high school equivalency; and there will always be those who do not choose to, or cannot, learn. Despite the experience of communities like Stonehaven, Ontario, just as there are people at the beginning of the 21st-century with minimal print-literacy in industrialized countries, there will continue to be those who lack both print and electronic literacies. There will be people who choose not to be on-line for the immediate future, and possibly longer. They are still citizens, with rights — often the citizens most in need of information relating to health, security, and resources.

While governments and other agencies move increasingly to web-based communications, in the mistaken assumption that everyone is on-line or soon will be, they have an obligation to adopt a variety of strategies to provide essential information to all citizens. Accommodation is not a charitable gesture. It must be a hallmark of inclusive democracy.

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