

Study of altruism during the Ebola outbreak suggests good intentions are in the details

January 14 2016, by Bert Gambini



A study of risk communication as it relates to altruistic behavior has found that portraying an event as a distant risk, despite highlighting its importance and potential progression, fails to prompt altruistic behavior intention among the U.S. public. Results of the study by Janet Yang, a University at Buffalo expert on the communication of risk information related to science, health and environmental issues, suggest that holding a collective, communitarian belief system contributed to altruistic behavior, while those who hold more individualistic values are less likely to be altruistic regardless of how much risk is triggered.

Yang's study, recently published in the journal *Risk Analysis*, manipulated [risk perception](#) to determine what factors might influence [altruistic behavior](#), which she measured as support for family and friends if they were to go to West Africa as Ebola responders.

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa gained substantial media momentum during the final three months of 2014. In October, a Liberian man visiting family in Texas became the first diagnosed Ebola patient in the U.S. to die from the disease. Public health officials announced three other confirmed cases later that month. Around the same time, President Barack Obama spoke of the unlikelihood of an Ebola epidemic in the U.S., a powerful reassurance echoed by the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The messages calmed domestic fears, but they also translated into minimal assistance from the U.S. public to the affected region, at least

compared to American responses to other recent crises or disasters, such as the Haitian earthquake, according to Yang, associate professor of communication in the UB College of Arts and Sciences.

"It was a great opportunity to study a risk communication issue," she says.

Yang says statistics at the time confirmed the issue's importance to the American public, but she wanted to examine the variance between what's important to a news consumer and what's personally relevant in terms of that same person being affected, or the country being affected.

The National Science Foundation, recognizing the opportunity to gain groundbreaking insight on risk communication in a public health crisis, funded the study with a special grant for Rapid Response Research, a mechanism for quickly studying urgent issues.

In a nationally representative sample involving more than 1,000 adults, Yang assigned two experimental conditions to the subjects: a high-risk article about Ebola modeled after one that appeared in a major newspaper that mentioned two confirmed cases in the U.S., and a low-risk version with the detail about the domestic cases omitted.

The content in both conditions was equally dire, mentioning Ebola cases possibly climbing into the millions.

"Even that subtle change triggered different levels of risk perception," Yang says.

"When we manipulate risk perception, we see that two factors influence altruistic behaviors across the two conditions," she says. "One is issue salience or the perceived importance of the Ebola outbreak. The other is how deeply the message is processed."

In the high-risk condition, the perceived importance of the issue was much more effective in getting people to feel more altruistic, but there is no such correlation in the low-risk condition. Meantime, those who reflected deeply on the message reported much more altruistic behavior intention, something not present in the low-risk condition, says Yang.

Emotions also played a significant role. Yang measured anger, empathy, fear, panic and sadness. Participants reported sadness and anger most often, but the two had significant yet opposite effects.

"Those who reported sadness were much more likely to support family and friends responding to the crisis," says Yang. "Sadness might make participants feel more sympathetic toward the victims."

Anger, however, she says, was often antagonistic, directed at international health organizations. Participants also reported significant

levels of fear, but that didn't engender altruistic intention since the emotion is often managed by avoiding the issue, according to Yang.

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Study of altruism during the Ebola outbreak suggests good intentions are in the details (2016, January 14) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-altruism-ebola-outbreak-good-intentions.html>

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