

SPPH 552 – The Mission, the Message, and the Medium: Risk Communication in a Complex World (3 credits)

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Course Description: We live in an increasingly complex, fast-paced, and volatile world. The stakes have never been higher and it is no longer sufficient for scientists to throw information into the public sphere and hope that someone is able to understand and apply it. Indeed, it is now clear that scientists have a moral obligation to spend as much time, thought, and effort in the communication of their knowledge products as they do in the generation of the knowledge itself. If scientific voices are to be heard above the din, and, more importantly, used for personal, public, and political decision-making, then efficient and effective communication is essential. However, science communication, and particularly the communication of risk in the scientific context, is difficult to do well, particularly without the appropriate training.

In SPPH 552, students will be introduced to the principles of science communication as well as the theory and practice of risk communication, specifically. The ultimate goal of the course is to provide students with the knowledge, practice, and mentorship required to develop and implement impactful risk messages for a variety of scenarios and applications. The course will cover the three main pillars of risk communication: 1) the 'mission' (e.g., communications objectives, identifying, understanding, and adapting to the target audience and context, ethical implications of risk communication, etc.), 2) the 'message' (e.g., use of different communication theories and frameworks, such as the Hazard vs. Outrage framework, nudge theory, and narratives, to craft a risk message), and 3) the 'medium' (e.g., how to select and implement a variety of communications tools, including social media, pitches, press releases, briefing notes, art, etc.).

Course Format: This course will take place within a **blended learning environment**. The online platform will be used to introduce topics, transmit information, and provide opportunities for preparation, practice, and feedback. There will be **4 x four-hour classes dispersed throughout the term**. The classes will be reserved for structured activities that will allow students to synthesize, apply, and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the concepts presented online, to work with and learn from their peers, and to receive mentorship from the course instructors and from communication experts.

Learning Outcomes:

Over the course of SPPH 552, student will learn to:

- Design a risk communication plan that demonstrates understanding, integration, and application of the principles of science and risk communication presented throughout the course.
- Identify and critically analyze real-world examples that help to elucidate the principles of science and risk communication.
- Demonstrate how to select and implement different communication tools depending on the communication objective, audience, message, etc.
- Express themselves clearly, efficiently, and impactfully using different kinds of oral, written, and visual communication.
- Provide insightful and effective feedback to their peers.
- Use feedback and interactions with peers, instructors, and guests to demonstrate an evolution in their learning.

Course Requirements: There are no prerequisites or required textbooks.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading: SPPH 552 is graded on a percentage basis and includes five assignments and a participation mark. There are no examinations in the course. An overview of the evaluation is provided below:

Assignment	Value
1 – Risk communication plan: You will develop a risk communication plan for a topic of your choice. The final plan will represent the culmination of your learning in SPPH 552 and should demonstrate your understanding and ability to integrate and apply the concepts presented throughout the course.	30 marks
2 – Elevator pitch: You will use a two-minute oral presentation to pitch your communication plan idea to the class using the concept of the elevator pitch. This type of clear, concise, and catchy communication was first developed by screenwriters hoping to sell their ideas to Hollywood executives. They would jump on the elevator with the executive and have the time from the ground floor to the office level to communicate their idea. Hey, it worked for Alien (“Picture Jaws in space!”).	10 marks
3 – Peer teaching: You be assigned a set of concepts presented through the online platform. Your job will be to delve deeper in those concepts using external resources, and to identify real-world examples that can aid in understanding and application. You will then communicate what you have learned to your peers using the online and/or face-to-face platforms.	10 marks
4 – Adaptive writing: You will produce both a press release and a briefing note based on an academic publication provided by one of your peers in order to clearly demonstrate how you can adapt your writing to target different audiences.	10 marks
4 – Public perceptions assessment: You will be assigned an issue and audience by one of your peers. Using the principles established by Peter Sandman’s Hazard vs. Outrage framework,	15 marks

<p>you will assess the audience's baseline perception of the issue. You may choose to assess this in any way you like – web scraping, social media, public survey, etc.</p>	
<p>4 – Participation: A holistic assessment of degree to which you demonstrate your engagement in the online and face-to-face components of the course (i.e., the quantity, but, more importantly, quality of your participation). We believe that this is the most important component of the evaluation because, within a blended learning environment, a student's level of participation be the primary determinant of their own learning, as well as that of their peers.</p>	<p>25 marks</p>