



Developing pandemic communication strategies: how do different audience segments respond to preparedness and prevention messages?

Sandra C. Jones, Louise Waters, Don Iverson
Centre for Health Initiatives, University of Wollongong
Omnia Holland (OmniCom)
John Bevins (John Bevins Pty Ltd)

University of Wollongong



- The influenza A (H5N1) virus is currently the focus of the world's attention
- While avian flu viruses are not known to infect humans, there have been recent cases where H5N1 has spread human to human (Butler 2006; Ungchusak et al. 2005; Wulandari & Lyn 2006)
- Concern about a possible pandemic is based on a number of factors including:
 - potential for virus to be transmitted from migratory birds to domestic poultry;
 - absence of demonstrated effective treatment options or vaccine;
 - lack of collaboration in the planning of responses between neighboring countries

- Communication in media regarding bird flu can serve to accurately and effectively inform the public OR misinform & contribute to panic and undesirable behavioural responses
- The Australian Government has time to develop communication strategies including specific messages, media vehicles, spokespeople, & images, that can effectively convey desired information at different stages of the anticipated pandemic
- This project was designed to develop communication strategies that government, medical authorities, NGOs & other relevant organisations can use to increase the public's understanding of the risk

- This research project is part of a larger project that was developed to:
 - gain an understanding of the knowledge and perceptions of Australians about bird flu
 - to develop and pretest messages (public service ads) that the Australian government could use in the event of a pandemic
 - develop broader communication strategies to produce effective communications and to respond to misinformation that is expected to appear in the public arena

Ad development and testing



- Using the results from the focus groups and the CATI surveys a leading Australian advertising agency prepared two different campaign concepts for testing
- The ad agency undertook the campaign development as two independent teams, each developing an alternative approach
- This resulted in two very different campaigns for testing:
 - a presenter approach
 - a non-presenter approach



Presenter Approach – ‘Spokes People’:

- Utilised *a team* of trusted medical/ scientific professionals, each eminently qualified to speak to a specific phase of any pandemic – impending, happening or ending
- Campaign was designed to be flexible and to balance empathy with gravitas
- A team approach was used to reduce reliance on one spokesperson, an important consideration in a pandemic crisis

Non-Presenter Approach – ‘Paper people’:

- The visual theme for this concept was cut-out paper people which were used to provide a very flexible, and immediately recognisable vehicle for the campaign
- The idea of people joined together was proposed to work in two ways:
 1. a virus is transmitted most easily when we are all together, thus it is our closeness that makes us vulnerable
 2. the concept works as a metaphor for cooperation – we need to work together to minimise the potential dangers of bird flu
- ‘Paper people’ was seen as a way to represent *all* people in Australia

- The ad concepts (story boards and print ads) were tested using focus groups by two independent market research companies (in two Australian states) in July 2006
- Generally speaking, across both campaigns (but particularly for the Spokes People campaign), people weren't left feeling prepared or secure after seeing the Phase One communication.
- While all participants appeared to take bird flu more seriously after exposure to the campaigns, there was a spectrum of responses:
 - people with families (especially those with young children) were the most alarmed;
 - older people tended to be more fatalistic;
 - younger, single people tended not to believe the messages.

- The most effective elements of each of the concepts were combined to develop a final public communication campaign, for two phases of a pandemic:
 - Phase 1 for pre-pandemic communications
 - Phase 2 for communications in the event of bird flu cases in Australia
- Within each phase a set of print ads and TV storyboards were developed

- Key factors and strategic thinking behind the modification of the ad concepts:
 - Bird Flu is not really on the public radar
 - The three actions which are actually most likely to reduce the spread of Bird Flu hardly make it onto the population’s “high priority actions” unprompted (wash hands 3.5%; wear face mask 5.5%; use disposable tissue 0%)
 - Yet, once reminded of them, they generally embrace each action as do-able (with almost 90% prepared to increase hand washing and use disposable tissues, and 70% prepared to wear a face mask)

Phase 1 campaign



- Phase 1 needs to restore levels of public awareness while concurrently maintaining the level of public confidence
- It needs to heighten their awareness of habits which represent their first line of defence
- The focus needs to be on inculcating three simple habits as a personal regime and positive action against the spread of the Bird Flu infection.
- The main change to the 'Paper People' campaign was to include 'the three Ws of preventive behaviour': WASH, WIPE and WEAR
- The aim is to provide people with simple, tangible behaviours to adopt for the prevention of the spread of the germ



Phase 2 campaign



- In Phase 2 we need to take it to another level
- This campaign needs to be direct and honest; providing clear and concise advice and directions from an accepted authority figure
- We need to emphasise the partnership which can be brought into being and which will be essential if the Bird Flu threat is to be contained
 - i.e. we (the health establishment, etc.) are doing THIS *but you (the public) also need to do THAT!*
- Thus, Phase 2 features the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) in a series of pre-produced television and radio commercials



Method



- The overriding objective of the current research was to evaluate the revised communication pieces
- Focus groups were conducted in October 2006 in two Australian states (Victoria and New South Wales) by two experienced commercial research companies, with four distinct consumer segments:
 - Young Adults/Travellers – males and females aged 18-40, with no children, including some frequent international travellers
 - Mothers –women with children aged 0-16 years
 - Older Adults – males and females aged 50+, purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of some smokers
 - Regional Community – adult males and females living in regional areas



Results



- Consistent with previous phases, Bird Flu remained an issue quarantined in the public's mind with 3rd world Asian countries:
 - *“It only happens overseas”*
 - *“Disease infection overseas in 3rd world countries”*
 - *“China, birds in cages”*
- It was evident that the level of concern was directly proportional to the last recalled time of media coverage, leading to participants becoming increasingly complacent:
 - *“Like it doesn't affect me, so don't think about it much”*
 - *“Not very worried as it's not in Australia and the media coverage has died down now, so it must not be too bad”*



Responses to Phase One



- Overall, Phase 1 of the Campaign served to remind participants that Bird Flu is not off the radar and, as such, they should not be complacent
- The main ‘take-away’ message was that there are things *one* can do and it is best if *we* work together
- The Phase One ‘Paper People’ are an effective communication device as they symbolize the ‘everyman’ (no-one is offended or left out), emphasise connection & co-operation, and are a simple visual device that everyone can understand
- As intended, the focus was on ‘action’ rather than on ‘threat’

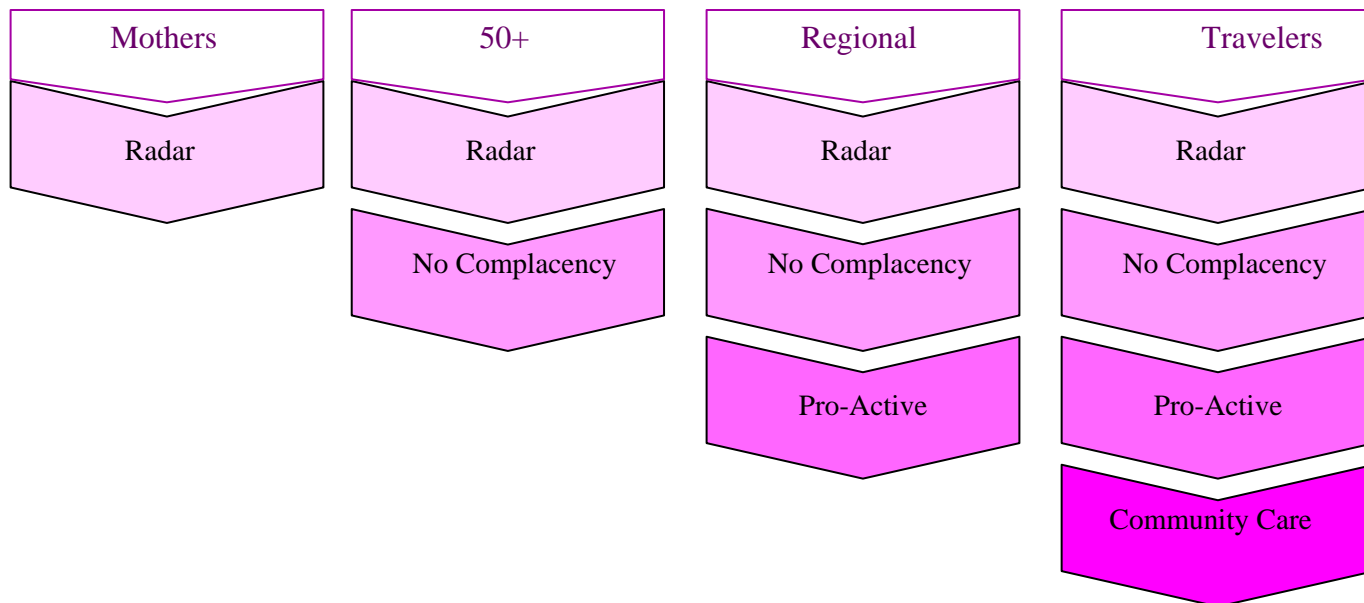


- The use of the colour red to indicate germs is an immediately noticed and easily understood device
- The ‘Wash, Wipe, Wear’ message is simple, easily remembered, and was often played back by focus group participants
 - *“Consistent, informative, catchy terms wash, wipe, wear”*
 - *“What a clever advertisement”*
 - *“The www idea co-related with the internet address to make the message memorable”*
- The suggested actions were accepted as appropriate behaviour in the event of a pandemic (although there was misunderstanding around the handwashing concept and some participants balked at the idea of wearing a face mask)

- The ‘wipe’ message take-out was correct for the majority of the participants
- The ‘wear’ message take-out was similarly correct for the majority of the participants (although there was a clear sense among the focus group participants that they would not be prepared to engage in this behaviour)
- As with the previous phase, the ‘wash’ message was not correctly comprehended by the participants:
 - message take-out was a reminder to wash hands, not to *thoroughly* wash hands or *frequently* wash hands
 - some participants found the ‘wash’ message confronting and interpreted it as a suggestion that they were unhygienic.
 - “*I am in the garden a lot – I do wash my hands thoroughly*”
 - “*I don’t need to be told to be hygienic*”

- However, there were clearly different levels of association depending on target audience.
- For ‘Mothers,’ Phase 1 of the Campaign served solely to remind them that Bird Flu is not off the radar:
 - *“I did not realise we were preparing for a pandemic – more awareness”*
 - *“Much more serious than I thought”*
- For ‘Older Adults,’ Phase 1 of the Campaign served to remind them that Bird Flu is not off the radar and encourage them not to be complacent:
 - *“This could happen to us”*
 - *“It is out there, so be careful, keep yourself clean at all times”*

- ‘Regional Community’ groups, remind them that Bird Flu is not off the radar, encourage them not to be complacent, and persuade them that there are things one can do:
 - *“This is controllable to some degree”*
 - *“I am a little more aware of the implied danger and how to prepare against contracting the virus”*
- ‘Frequent Travellers,’ remind them that Bird Flu is not off the radar, encourage them not to be complacent, persuade them that there are things one can do and that it is best if we work together
 - *“I now think of preventative measures – hygiene and education and government – and community responsibilities”*
 - *“Possible outbreak in Australia and globally, but can be prevented or minimised if we all do our part”*



- The revised Phase One is now much more effective
- The campaign still results in people taking the issue a lot more seriously and becoming considerably more anxious about the threat
- However, the big difference from the testing of the original concept is that people now ask fewer questions, and are left feeling personally less scared and more prepared and more confident about the Government's response

Responses to Phase Two



- Prior to exposure to Phase Two, participants were shown a series of mock newspaper headlines to demonstrate a hypothetical scenario in which a bird flu pandemic had occurred
- Phase Two was effective in providing clear *actionable* information and reinforcing what had previously been communicated
- Participants' responses also suggested that Phase I and Phase II successfully linked together
- Phase Two made the participants confident in themselves and their ability to cope with the situation:
 - *“If this did happen, I would be well informed and prepared”*
 - *“The information was good and to the point”*
 - *“I felt better having the information and knowing there are basic things I can do to protect my family”*



- Phase Two Campaign was perceived as credible, non-alarmist and providing clear direction
- Importantly, spontaneous compliance was elicited – with focus group participants expressing the view that they would willingly engage in the recommended actions:
 - *“It sounds serious, I better do what they say – it’s important”*
 - *“I should do more, must check my habits”*
 - *“This is a real concern now, all measure should be taken, people are being advised in very clear terms through the media”*
 - *“One has to do everything suggested”*

- Focus groups participants accepted that Bird Flu is a serious & relevant issue, that we're ready if it arrives in Australia, and were fairly confident about the recommended actions
- However, there are some remaining issues which need to be resolved
- The most significant of these is the key question 'Why now?' – with participants in all groups wanting to know why the government would launch this campaign now, and what that means
 - Therefore, the campaign's launch would need to be accompanied by a relevant trigger, such as when Australia moves to being on Bird Flu alert, or when the alert level rises, to give it a reason for being

- Other key questions and knowledge gaps include:
 - what does ‘pandemic’ mean? (perhaps the term ‘worldwide epidemic’ would be more readily understood)
 - how likely is it/how long would it take to develop a vaccine or cure?
 - how do you catch it?
- Importantly, given the process required within the focus groups to bring participants to the point where they would even *consider* the hypothetical scenario of bird flu arriving in Australia, a key area to target (for this and any other pandemic) would be the perception that we are safe in Australia!

Conclusion



- Inoculation theory (Anderson and McGuire 1965; McGuire 1970) suggests that if people are given the worst-case scenario when there is only a hypothetical risk of catastrophe they will process it less dangerously, come to terms with it, and be less likely to panic should it occur than if they were to remain in an uninformed state
- The current research suggests that in the early stages of a pandemic communications should focus on increasing awareness of the disease and communicating important, but simple, protective behaviours to reduce the risk of transmission
- In later stages of a pandemic, communication campaigns need to effectively communicate the key messages for each stage and motivate the public to engage in the correct preventive actions without engendering unnecessary panic in the community

