



## Changing Perceptions of Security and Interventions

A collaborative project in the 7th EU Framework Program

CPSI Deliverable:

**Culture-sensitive Communication Guidelines to Prevent or Reduce Gaps Between Citizens' Actual and Perceived Security**

Deliverable of CPSI Work Package: 4.4

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## 1 Introduction

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While it is undebatable that public communication and the formation of public opinion about risk and security issues should be seen as results of socially negotiated and constructed sense-making that takes place in cultural contexts, as in particular the school of risk communication maintains (Falkheimer and Heide 2006), culture involves the self-referentiality of arguments and interpretation, risking cognitive and argumentative closure and gaps. This risk of closure and gaps also brings about the (at first sight paradoxical) risk of fragmentation of the public through communication-based interventions. Strictly speaking, culture should even render discourse between members of different cultural communities as improbable as an exchange of views on different concepts of security and related values.

The theoretical background of this assumption is that culture as an analytical concept refers to people's assumptions about the world. It provides the background for (re)cognition and forms the cognitive as well as value-laden basis for so-called 'taken for grantedness' (Adler 1997). These anthropological conceptual bases have been picked up in quite diverse fashions by a variety of disciplines. Looking for a common, cross-disciplinary denominator of different concepts, culture can be defined as a mindset that reduces complexity not only in perception but also in decision-making, constraining the factual choice of options to behave. The classical concept of political culture, as established by Almond and Verba (1963), falls into that scope as it centres on norms and values guiding citizens' assessments, expectations and behaviour consequences.

The "cultural theory of risk" advanced by Douglas and Wuthnow (1982) even assumes that different perceptions and disputes about risk and security can be linked to competing worldviews: conceptions of risk, security and solutions to security problems vary according to the organization of political and social relations. Risks and security threats are selected as important because this reinforces established interpretations and relations within a culture, thus reproducing the symbolic foundations of a community.

Consequently, from a cultural communication perspective, it has been argued that public risk and crisis communication will sustain, if not reinforce existing gaps between actual and perceived security if it lacks contextualization (Lee 2005). The question is if cultural contextualization can be reached by communication-related interventions. This is typically denied. As a study by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme has concluded, "the perception of insecurity in cities depends largely upon the substantial amount and constant flow of information that urban residents receive from many sources." UNHABITAT (2007: 19) Effectiveness criteria for risk communication thus have to take into account complementing intrapersonal processes, the social context of personalization as well as tendency of individuals to seek social support for their assessment of risk messages and their truth.

Risk research even assumes that communication will virtually ever produce gaps between factual and felt security and thus is no strategy on which security-enhancing interventions should be based. Risk research argues that psychological, social, cultural and political factors in their interaction lead to an "amplification of risk" in public perception/opinion (as compared to the expert rating of a given risk) and that this amplification is triggered by the "signal value" that especially media information about risk contains (Kasperson 1988). A signal value is a communicated frame of reference by which citizens structure their perception of a reported risk situation in a way that it provides new information about the likelihood of future risks of the same kind.

## 2 Catalogue of differences between actual and perceived security

The following **Table 1** represents the state of the art from risk research about drivers that move people's perceived security away from actual security.

<b>Personal control/efficacy beliefs</b>	
<p>People usually accept considerably higher risk if they feel themselves in a position to decide about it.</p>	<p>People are less prone to accept unconditional collective risk, e.g. as communicated by public authorities.</p>
<p><b>“Overconfidence” (optimistic self-overestimation)</b> (e.g. Oskamp 1965). This effect describes a systematic cognitive error in assessing risks (namely assessing them too low) that are amenable to people's own influence, such as car driving, mountaineering but also walking alone in the dark, a typical (street) crime-related public opinion poll indicator of felt security.</p>	
<p><b>“Homeostasis”</b> effect: This effect describes the experience that an <b>increase in technological solutions for risk reduction</b> in the long run results in <b>same risk levels</b> because <b>people adopt riskier behaviour</b> by making use of new technical means. This effect has particularly been known from car drivers.</p>	
<p><b>“Reflective fear”</b>: Resulting from a common type of psychological effect of warnings: alerting rather than calming people and thus reducing instead of increasing resilience, along with imbalances between felt and actual threat. Reflective fear stands especially in contrast with overconfidence, although both are based on assumptions about selectiveness in human information processing. However, whereas overconfidence describes the effect that from a certain point in time of a risk perception process, a person stops processing new information and relies on this information it has plus its (exaggerated) self-efficacy beliefs, <i>reflective fear describes the effect of discriminate information retrieval: Reflective fear, as the name already suggests, means that a person, over-thoughtfully, processes new information about risks and threats, leading to an increase in vigilance and a personal need for reassurance to overcome the unpleasant emotional state.</i> The search for reassurance however can lead to self-confrontation with even more information.</p> <p><i>The reflective fear axiom also includes assumptions about discriminative perceptions, which also allow to link it up with the overconfidence axiom: What we have to expect is a combination of discriminative vigilance (seeking such information that reinforces the threat perception and ignoring other) and discriminative (self-)reassurance, including overconfidence.</i> The model of reflective fear normatively argues for a compromise attitude between vigilance and reassurance, but when a person fails to develop such a balanced attitude, it is expected to either fall into indiscriminate hyper-vigilance (resulting in a generalised feeling of dangerousness that creates a gap between felt and factual security) or into indiscriminate reassurance based on the individual development of exaggerated self-efficacy beliefs. The latter can result either in overconfidence or in homeostasis, as the following example illustrates:</p> <p>Newspaper reporting about recurrent physical assaults in Subways can raise citizens' awareness when moving in the subway systems, including increased perception of video surveillance in place underground and its framing as a specific protective measure against assaults. This again may increase awareness for subsequent newspaper reporting on physical incidents in subways (including video surveillance footage) and lead to the development of beliefs of overconfidence/reassurance (such as “I am young and female and talk to no one while riding on the subway, but photos from video surveillance as published in the newspapers show that only elderly and male engaging with unruly passenger who have a migration background have been attacked”).</p>	
<p><b>Social status and wealth.</b> When risky contexts that provide people with the opportunity for affluence, the risk tends to be ignored, as risk ignorance in earthquake-prone areas has shown from ancient Pompeii in the Roman Empire to Los Angeles and San Francisco. In the case of natural risks, or risks that citizens perceive as out of their ability to change, we can expect citizens to discount or even discharge risk by compensating social contexts, leading to a gap between felt and factual security (Parfit 1998).</p>	

**Acceptability of risks to people is proportional to the perceived benefits**, which also supports the hypothesis that socially accepted benefits can lower citizens risk perception below the level of the respective actual risk (Slovic/Fischhoff/Lichtenstein (2000).

**Psychometry:** social, cultural and political factors lead to an “amplification of risk” in public perception/opinion (vs. the expert rating of a given risk). This amplification is triggered by the “*signal value*” that especially media information about risk contains (Kasperson et al. 2000).

- A signal value is a communicated frame of reference by which citizens structure their perception of a reported risk situation in a way that it provides new information about the likelihood of future risks of the same kind.
- **Overamplification Effect** (Slovic 1986): This axiom holds that mass media reporting often sets such signal values, highlighting the memorability of an event and equating it with the imaginability of future events of the same kind. Thus heavy media coverage of single events can be expected to push up public risk/threat perception for a whole class of comparable events, leading to citizens’ overestimation of insecurity. The amplification effect can be assumed to be strongest in cases where citizens have direct experience of risk and insecurity and are dependent on information and external first interpretation that often mobilises latent fears (cf. Kasperson et al. 2000: 241).

**Table 1: Drivers that move people’s perceived security away from actual security.**

### 3 Culture-sensitive media strategies to prevent or reduce gaps between citizen's perception of security and actual security

Several principles of effective communication strategies with strong probability to reduce those differences between actual security and the perception of security should be considered. Relevant conceptual foundations of the role of cultural factors in communicating (in)security are explained in Chapter 6 (“Communication and the perception of security”) of **CPSI Deliverable 4.4: Report on Cultural Issues. Changing Perceptions of Security Requires European Cultural Sensitivity**. This paper builds upon that and concentrates on practical ramifications and guidelines. Based on the cultural contexts of communication-based interventions identified in **Deliverable 4.4**, this section combines existing communication guidelines (available both for crime-related and crisis-related issues and incidents) with findings on gaps between actual and felt security and centers on the following question:

*How much “factual information” on any given (security) issue is the “public” prepared to accept and integrate in existing worldviews?*

Baumgärtner (2005) argues that in order for an organization to effectively communicate risks to broader society, it must not solely rely on the delivery of factual information (which, more often than not, might even exacerbate existing distortions of perception), but rather adapt an organization's communication strategy by taking into account that communication is first of all a participatory action in the public discourse arena where “risks” have to be seen as socially mediated and negotiated phenomena. An organization would be ill-advised to dismiss what is not factual information in the strict sense as irrational and as a consequence ignore it.

*Crisis and risk communication management is part of a participatory public and open discourse about societal values and symbols. Taking in only the “factual” and dismissing the rest as irrational would be counter-productive.*

The first – operative – aspect is concerned with tools and guidelines on how to effectively communicate risks or crises and has already been amply covered in literature. Rhetoric plays an important role at this level, as will be addressed later. From our work in CPSI culture analysis (as reported in Deliverable 4.4), the following basic strategic concepts for culture-sensitive communication strategies derive:

#### 3.1 Basic Strategic Concepts

- Risk communication needs to support citizens' search for security under a condition of absence of reliable information. Public communication therefore must provide relevant information that helps citizens to reactivate their earlier experience with risk and crisis.
- Effectiveness criteria for risk communication have to take into account complementing intrapersonal processes, the social context of personalization as well as tendency of individuals to seek social support for their assessment of risk messages and their truth. For risk communication and warnings to be effective (to result more often than not in citizen behaviour change), they need to spark ego-involvement on the basis of real and credible information
- Issue-specific experts are relevant in helping to develop demystifying strategies to communicate security issues without risking to contribute to the gap between actual and perceived security.

- In countries with a social fear of crime culture, communication-based interventions typically lower citizens perception of (in)security, and this type of gap between actual and perceived security is mainly due to styles of social meaning making as rooted in the social context.
- In countries with a personal fear of crime culture, communication-based interventions typically increases citizens perception of (in)security, and this type of gap between actual and perceived security is mainly attributable to disproportionate media reporting.

Cultural descriptors on the national level of the relationship between actual and perceived security, such as “social fear of crime culture” and “personal fear of crime culture” are explained and illustrated in **Deliverable 4.4** and also in the **Summary of CPSI Country Case Studies**.

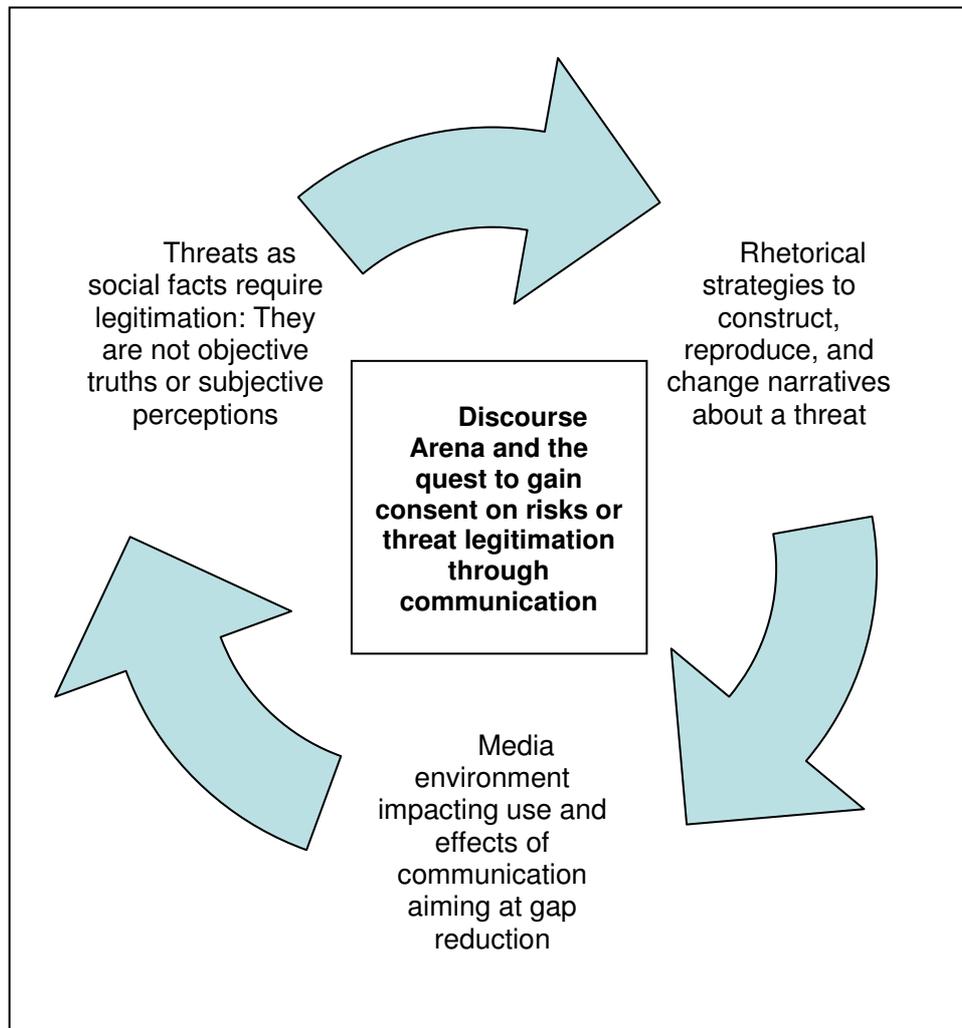
Combined with the state of the art of risk communication referred to in the introduction, the following factors that effective public communication about citizen security needs to cover can be identified (**Figure 1**). As shown there, effective communication strategies to reduce gaps between actual and perceived (in)security will, even before a choice of tools to be applied, determine the **cultural context** in which the communication-based intervention is to be implemented and take into account whether personal fear of crime or social fear of crime is the predominant societal context.



**Figure 1: Relevant factors effective public communication about citizen security needs to cover.**

Lusk (2007) studied the process of gaining public consent about a security threat, or threat legitimation. According to him, threats require legitimation because they are ‘social facts’ and not objective truths or subjective perceptions. Threat legitimation occurs in the public discourse through rhetoric. Political and social actors deploy rhetorical resources and strategies to construct, reproduce, and change narratives about a threat. The influence and power of rhetoric depends on the media environment. The first section of his paper outlines threat legitimation and the role of rhetoric and the media environment. The second section investigates four cases within two different media environments, radio and television. Through these four cases, the paper demonstrates the importance of rhetorical strategies for threat legitimation and how the media environment affects the use of rhetoric. The following model cycle of the construction of a

discourse arena in which disruptions between actual and perceived security are institutionalised derives (Figure 2):



**Figure 2: Discourse Arena and the quest to gain consent on risks or threat legitimation through communication.**

### 3.2 Contradictions

While there is one school of thought (e.g. Baumgärtner 2005) explicitly recommending to involve any kind of information background into communication interventions, thus extending the scope of strategies to meet the “irrational” and move beyond mere mediation of factual information, this is by far not the only approach to conceive of effective (i.e. gap-reducing) and culture-sensitive communication strategies.

Adherents of the “cultural criminology” (e.g. Ferrel and Sanders 1995) approach express the contrary, they are concerned with media construction of crime and justice and its cultural representations, which it sees mainly exemplified by labelling. Cultural criminology sees a main task of social scientists in providing fact-based information to clarify debates about criminal subcultures, threats and violence.

Feilzer (2007), through a two-year experiment, illustrated that interest in, take-up, and **retention of factual information on crime and criminal justice is not as high as previous**

**empirical research has suggested.** While this seems to be in favor of what could be called a “holistic” approach to information and communication management as proposed by Baumgärtner, it to future possible applications of CPSI findings to assess the validity of models referred to here. While CPSI does not offer to resolve this antithesis, it does offer a frame of reference for future research.

The analysis conducted in **CPSI Deliverable 2.3: Citizen Journalism and Public Opinion** suggests that new sources of media give a voice to both members of the public and officials. Nevertheless, **Citizen Journalism** was predominantly found to reinforce the agenda set by the mass media. The key challenges that may result from Citizen Journalism reports of security related events are the segmentation of communication and spread of rumours and conspiracy theories. Since the CPSI project started, public experience and interaction with new forms of media have significantly changed, and now play a significant role in influencing public opinion and perceptions of security.

### 3.3 State of the Art: Existing communication guidelines

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As far as existing guidelines for communication in risk, crisis and security contexts address cultural factors, they typically do so in a normative sense. For example, the World Health Organisation (WHO 2005) argues for **legitimacy as a major principle** to be covered in media and risk communication issues and lists several factors to be covered by effective communication management in emergency situations:

- building, maintaining or restoring trust and credibility;
- improving knowledge and understanding of the event;
- guiding and encouraging appropriate attitudes, decisions, actions and behaviours;
- avoiding unnecessary damage to the economy and minimizing political unrest;
- encouraging collaboration and cooperation;
- proactively framing the story rather than waiting until others have defined the story and then reacting;
- establishing an agency as the main source of information and expertise;
- establishing the agency as the lead authority in charge, even under conditions of uncertainty;
- easing public anxiety;
- establishing ongoing connection with the public through the media;
- gaining support for policies and plans;
- ensuring informed decision-making;
- addressing rumours and misinformation;
- encouraging appropriate behaviours;
- encouraging constructive dialogue among stakeholders;
- engaging the public;
- reducing the threat of panic.

While these guidelines focus on situations where the incident already has materialised, they reflect much of the rules that risk communication has to follow. Essentially, there would have to be a shift, from mere tackling and managing the situation, to prevention, preparation and possibly enhancement of resilience as the main fields risk communication has to engage in. This is also true for culture-sensitive communication efforts aiming at reducing the gap between risk perception and objective security. The above listed guidelines could be implemented by framing them under the relevant paradigms (personal control/efficacy beliefs, overconfidence, homeostasis, reflective fear, psychometrics).

Comparing and assessing activities along specific thematic axes, the WHO (2005) handbook derives a set of antagonistic factors influencing public risk perception as summarised in **Table 2**. They can be read as manifest ingredients of a communication strategy aiming to reduce gaps

between actual and felt security that result from the drivers summarised in **Table 1: Catalogue of differences between actual and perceived security.**

<b>WHO: Factors influencing people’s risk perception</b>	
<b>1. Voluntariness</b>	Risks from activities considered to be involuntary or imposed (e.g., exposure to chemicals and radiation from a terrorist attack) are judged to be greater, and are therefore less readily accepted than risks from voluntary activities (e.g. smoking, sunbathing or mountain climbing).
<b>2. Controllability</b>	Risks from activities considered to be <b>under the control of others</b> (such as the release of nerve gas in a coordinated series of terrorist attacks) are judged to be greater, and are less readily accepted than those from activities considered to be <b>under the control of the individual</b> (such as driving an automobile or riding a bicycle).
<b>3. Familiarity</b>	Risks resulting from <b>activities viewed as unfamiliar</b> (e.g. travel leading to exposure to exotic-sounding infectious diseases) are judged greater than risks resulting from <b>activities viewed as familiar</b> (such as household work).
<b>4. Fairness</b>	Risks from <b>activities believed to be unfair</b> or to involve unfair processes (e.g. inequities in the location of medical facilities) are judged greater than <b>risks from “fair” activities</b> (such as widespread vaccinations).
<b>5. Benefits</b>	Risks from activities that seem to have <b>unclear, questionable or diffused personal or economic benefits</b> (e.g. proximity to waste-disposal facilities) are judged to be greater than risks resulting from <b>activities with clear benefits</b> (e.g., employment or automobile driving).
<b>6. Catastrophic potential</b>	Risks from <b>activities associated with potentially high numbers of deaths and injuries</b> grouped in time and space (for example, major terrorist attacks using biological, chemical or nuclear weapons) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities that cause deaths and injuries scattered (often apparently randomly) in time and space</b> (e.g. household accidents).
<b>7. Understanding</b>	<b>Poorly understood risks</b> (e.g. health effects of long-term exposure to low doses of toxic chemicals or radiation) are judged to be greater than <b>risks that are well understood</b> or self-explanatory (e.g. pedestrian accidents or slipping on ice).
<b>8. Uncertainty</b>	<b>Risks that are relatively unknown or highly uncertain</b> (e.g. those associated with genetic engineering) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities that appear to be relatively well known to science</b> (e.g. actuarial risk data related to automobile accidents).
<b>9. Effects on children</b>	<b>Activities that appear to put children specifically at risk</b> (e.g. drinking milk contaminated with radiation or toxic chemicals or pregnant women exposed to radiation or toxic chemicals) are judged to carry greater risks than more-general activities (e.g.

	employment).
<b>10. Victim identity</b>	Risks from <b>activities that produce identifiable victims</b> (e.g. an individual worker exposed to high levels of toxic chemicals or radiation, or a child who falls down a well) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities that produce statistical victim profiles</b> (e.g. automobile accidents).
<b>11. Dread</b>	Risks from <b>activities that evoke fear, terror or anxiety due to the horrific consequences of exposure</b> (for example to HIV, radiation sickness, cancer, Ebola or smallpox) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities that do not arouse such feelings or emotions regarding exposure</b> (for example to common colds or household accidents).
<b>12. Trust</b>	Risks from <b>activities associated with individuals, institutions or organizations lacking in trust and credibility</b> (e.g. <b>chemical companies or nuclear power plants</b> with poor safety records) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities associated with trustworthy and credible sources</b> (e.g., regulatory agencies that achieve high levels of compliance from regulated industries).
<b>13. Media attention</b>	Risks from <b>activities that generate considerable media attention</b> (e.g. anthrax attacks using the postal system or accidents at nuclear power plants) are judged to be greater than risks from <b>activities that generate little media attention</b> (e.g. occupational accidents).
<b>14. Accident history</b>	<b>Activities with a history of major accidents or incidents</b> , or frequent minor accidents or incidents (e.g. leaks from waste-disposal facilities) are judged to carry greater risks than <b>activities with little or no such history</b> (e.g. recombinant DNA experimentation).
<b>15. Reversibility</b>	The risks of <b>potentially irreversible adverse effects</b> (e.g. birth defects from exposure to a toxic substance or radiation) are judged to be greater than <b>risks considered to be reversible</b> (for example, sports injuries).
<b>16. Personal stake</b>	<b>Activities viewed as placing people or their families personally and directly at risk</b> (e.g. living near a waste-disposal site) are judged to carry greater risks than <b>activities that appear to pose no direct or personal threat</b> (e.g. the disposal of waste in remote areas).
<b>17. Ethical and moral status</b>	Risks from <b>activities believed to be ethically objectionable or morally wrong</b> (e.g. providing diluted or outdated vaccines for an economically distressed community) are judged to be greater than the <b>risks from ethically neutral activities</b> (e.g. the side-effects of medication).
<b>18. Human versus natural origin</b>	<b>Risks generated by human action, failure or incompetence</b> (e.g. negligence, inadequate safeguards or operator error) are judged to be greater than <b>risks believed to be caused by nature or “acts of god”</b> (e.g. exposure to geological radon or cosmic rays).

**Table 2: Factors influencing people’s risk perception (source: WHO 2005).**

The application of these principles has to be complemented by strategically positioning them in an overarching analysis of the cultural situation: Is it a personal fear of crime/risk culture or a social fear of crime/risk culture? If the goal is to reduce perception gaps then keeping people safe alone is not enough, instead, focus must also be on making them feel safe. The signal value of an event deserves special attention in this relation, having the tendency to move future risk perception significantly away from actual security. One essential consequence of this is that existing measures and programmes (whose effectiveness in risk reduction or containment is proven) might lose legitimacy because their merits are not felt, and funds might be re-allocated to other instruments, following public perception but not what actual security situation suggests. CPSI Work Package 2.3 (Morphological Analysis) and 4.4 (Culture Analysis) results provide foundations for assessing specific national cultural contexts for contextualization of official communication related to citizen security.

## 4 CPSI cornerstones for culture-sensitive media strategies

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*“[R]isk communication is a process and not an act. Communications that result in more accurate public perceptions of risk and public behaviour in proportion to the risk that is faced typically have been comprised of multiple communications, arranged in a programmatic format, that take a variety of communication variables or factors into account, for example, source consistency, accuracy, clarity, certainty, guidance, frequency, location, communication channel, and so on. Public warning response is best understood and planned for if it is viewed as a series of related sequential factors: hearing warnings, understanding what is said, believing what is heard, personalizing what is believed as may be appropriate, deciding what to do, and then engaging in response behaviour.”  
(Fitzpatrick/Mileti 1994: 82)*

Culture-sensitive communication strategies have to build upon empirical findings on threats/risks perception, whose media representation does not necessarily correspond with citizens' risk perception. Planning for societal security and effective emergency management concerns identification of risks and threats, but also demands understanding of how people perceive and react.

Drawing from various parts of CPSI work, the following cornerstones of culture-sensitive, effective (media) communication strategies to close gaps between actual risks and citizens' perceived security can be identified:

**Cornerstones of culture-sensitive, effective (media) communication strategies to close gaps between actual risks and citizens' perceived security**

1. Effective communication strategies to reduce gaps between actual and perceived (in)security need – even before a choice of concrete tools or measures – to determine the **cultural context** in which the communication-based intervention is to be implemented and organise planning according to whether personal fear of crime or social fear of crime is the predominant societal context, for instance:
  - In countries with a **social fear of crime culture**, communication-based interventions typically lower citizens' perception of (in)security, and this type of gap between actual and perceived security is mainly due to styles of social meaning making as rooted in the social context.
  - In countries with a **personal fear of crime culture**, communication-based interventions typically increase citizens' perception of (in)security, and this type of gap between actual and perceived security is mainly attributable to disproportionate media reporting.
2. If a measure or programme is found to reduce risk effectively (and thus improve actual security), ensure its **future legitimacy**: The cultural framework determines whether these measures are in line with citizen perception of risk (and vice versa), e.g. through the signal value of an event.
3. Effectiveness criteria for risk communication have to take into account **complementing intrapersonal processes**, the social context of personalization as well as tendency of individuals to seek social support for their assessment of risk messages and their truth. For risk communication and warnings to be effective (to result more often than not in citizen behaviour change), they however also need to spark **ego-involvement** on the basis of real and credible information.
4. Therefore, communicate not only about risks as such (e.g. statistical likelihood of occurrence, impact, etc.) but also how this relates to citizens as being **part of a social and cultural network**, and, above all, as being "human": Sorting out all "irrational" is likely to increase chances for failure of a media strategies. For example, tackle rumours, urban legends etc.
5. **Public communication needs to support citizens' search for security under a condition of absence of reliable information.** Public communication therefore must provide relevant information that helps citizens to reactivate their earlier experience with risk and crisis. Build up trust and avoid the impression of "covering up" circumstances, facts or information.

**Table 3: Cornerstones of culture-sensitive, effective (media) communication strategies to close gaps between actual risks and citizens' perceived security.**

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