

More talk, less agreement: Risk discussion can hurt consensus-building on science/technology

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When it comes to public issues pertaining to science and technology, "talking it out" doesn't seem to work. A new study from North Carolina State University shows that the more people discuss the risks and benefits associated with scientific endeavors, the more entrenched they become in their viewpoint – and the less likely they are to see the merit of other viewpoints.

"This research highlights the difficulty facing state and federal policy leaders when it comes to high-profile science and technology issues, such as stem cell research or global warming," says Dr. Andrew Binder, an assistant professor of communication at NC State and lead author of the study. "Government agencies view research on these issues as vital and necessary for the country's future, but building public consensus for that research is becoming increasingly difficult."

The researchers set out to see how people talk about risks associated with unfamiliar science and technology issues, Binder explains. "Most people, when faced with an issue related to science and technology, adopt an initial position of support or opposition," Binder says. "Our results demonstrate very clearly that the more people talk about divisive [science and technology](#) issues, the less likely the two camps are to see the issue in the same way. This is problematic because it suggests that individuals are very selective in choosing their discussion partners and hearing only what they want to hear during discussions of controversial

issues."

In the study, the researchers focused on public debate related to the National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF), which the federal government discussed building in one of six sites around the country. Some members of the public opposed building a facility housing highly infectious animal diseases in their community. The six proposed sites were Athens, Ga., Manhattan, Kan., Plum Island, N.Y., Butner, N.C., Flora, Miss., and San Antonio, Texas. Manhattan was ultimately selected as the site for the NBAF.

The researchers conducted surveys of residents living near the proposed sites to collect data on people's perceptions of the potential risks and benefits associated with NBAF. Specifically, the results showed that, among people who opposed the facility, the more an individual discussed the issue with other people in their community, the more firmly entrenched he/she became in his/her perception of greater risks and fewer benefits. Conversely, among those who supported the facility, increased discussion led to an increased perception of benefits and a decreased perception of risks.

This research was done as part of an overarching grant project funded by the National [Science](#) Foundation, which is aimed at understanding the public opinion and policy dynamics surrounding site-selections for federal research facilities.

"This work will likely inform future decision-making on how federal agencies engage the [public](#) in regard to large-scale research initiatives," Binder says.

More information: A paper describing the research, "Interpersonal Amplification of Risk? Citizen Discussions And Their Impact On Perceptions Of Risks And Benefits Of A Biological Research Facility,"

has been published online in the journal *Risk Analysis*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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