

**RISK REPORTING AND SOURCE CREDIBILITY:  
TRYING TO MAKE THE READERS INTERESTED**

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

An experiment with 98 participants was conducted to explore the effects of government versus multiple sources on *perceived credibility* and *interest* when applied to the same risk stories. It also analyzed the effects of source treatment on participants' assessment of government credibility and source reasonableness. The study investigated the effects of demographic characteristics of participants (age, gender, media use) on the same variables, and tried to determine if there was any statistical correlation between the two dependent variables of credibility and interest. It also analyzed the effects of human-interest reports on credibility and interest.

Overall, the study found that participants who read stories with multiple sources (government, industry, expert), perceived the risk stories (two about HIV epidemic, and two about coastal erosion in Louisiana) as more credible and more interesting than the participants who received only government sources. Age appeared to affect the two dependent variables, as well as media use and the anecdotal (human-interest) frame. The study also found that participants liked and believed the health stories more than the environmental stories.

## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

The price of progress includes an ever-growing array of risks (Grima, 1989). Human activity degrades nature and the degradation process approaches a level where it can no longer be calculated or accurately predicted (Biocca, 2004). The threat of hazards, catastrophes, and epidemics is ubiquitous. We live in what the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) called a “risk society.” The media play an essential role in this gloomy picture. They are the mediator between people and the decision factors. They are the gatekeepers. They can construct, amplify, dramatize or minimize risks.

Most risks cannot be known directly. People get information about this second-hand reality from the press and sometimes fail to grasp its significance and impact on their lives. Risk communication presents therefore some risks itself. Ignorant or cynical readers are just as “dangerous” as paranoid or panicking audiences.

Preventing risks is as important as handling risks. Risk communication plays a fundamental role in equipping the public with the knowledge and understanding necessary to make sound decisions. What is peculiar about health and environmental risks is that there is no space or time beyond nature, in as much as there is no position from where journalists can observe “objectively.” Everybody is affected and involved in health and environment issues, but from different positions of power. And information is power. That is why sometimes, bewildered by contradictory discourses advancing different truths or interests, people end up not trusting the media reality and its more or less credible and legitimate voices.

This study aims to determine what kind of risk sources resonate with the public and make it find risk communication more credible and be more interested in what often

can be life and death issues. It also analyzes if age, gender and media have effects on trust and interest in risk news stories.

## **1.1 What Do We Know About the Topic?**

Risk communication deals with what might happen (Sandman, 1994). It informs, persuades, or warns people about health and environmental risks; it analyzes problems and circulates findings on new knowledge (Leiss & Krewski, 1989). Interested parties include government agencies, corporations and industry groups, unions, the media, scientists, professional organizations, public interest groups, and individual citizens (Covello et al, 1986). Risk communication usually occurs within a context of fear and uncertainty (Plough & Krimsky, 1987). Nuclear radiation, toxic wastes, AIDS, asbestos, and other hazards invoke a range of responses in the scientific, regulatory, and lay communities.

Slovic (1986) championed a perspective that understands perceived risk as a perfectly legitimate counterpart to technical risk. In this light, risk reporting is seen to provide a means for bridging the gap between experts' and lay persons' views of risk.

Research shows that the chief obstacle to effective risk communication is the public's inability or unwillingness to grasp the meaning of the concept of risk itself and, flowing from this, the public's unrealistic standpoint on acceptable risk (Leiss, 1989).

Most studies looked at how journalists and news sources evaluate coverage of health and environmental risks, but few evaluate the public perception and reaction to risk news. According to the LA Survey, 2004, only 6% of respondents think that environment is one of the most important problems facing Louisiana, and only 5% think the same about coastal erosion/ wetlands loss. 1.9% would increase spending on

environmental protection (3.5% on coastal restoration), whereas 11% would cut spending on it (13.7 on coastal restoration). The same survey shows public lack of confidence that state government officials will effectively address what they consider the most important problems of Louisiana.

## **1.2 What Do We Want To Know About the Topic?**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of news sources on the readers' perceptions of health and environmental risk issues in the context of the theories of social learning and source credibility. Using messages built around government sources or multiple-source stories (expert, industry, government), this research wants to explore what sources make risk communication more effective, in terms of credibility and interest. It also aims to see if there is any relationship between message credibility and people's interest in the story, as well as between readers' media use, age or gender and their level of interest in risk issues.

## **1.3 How Can We Know It?**

An experiment was conducted to see to what extent news sources, when applied to the same news story, are capable of influencing the public's perception of message credibility and its interest in health and environmental risks. It consisted of writing the same stories (two on the seriousness of the coastal erosion problem and two on the HIV epidemic) in different ways. Half of the participants in the study, LSU faculty and students, received stories that relied on diversified sources and the other were presented with stories that used only government sources. Several studies criticized the media's tendency to cover primarily official sources (Berkowitz, 1986, Entman and Rojecki, 1993, Gans, 1980), for their authoritativeness and availability, but with less success in

being credible (Baxter and Elliott, 1999) or interesting. Only one story in the set of four was constructed around a personal account (human-interest or anecdotal frame), and the study explored if this influenced participant's interest in the risk story.

#### **1.4 Why Is It Important and Relevant to Know?**

People form their opinions and attitudes regarding risks according to the messages they usually find in the media. This study builds on previous studies about source framing and public opinion and brings more insight into a vital and sometimes controversial domain (risk communication has to control deeply rooted fears and still convey the facts in a way that ensures effective risk management). This study may help journalists write more engaging stories, which may eventually help the public understand a challenging aspect of their lives and the society at large cope with its problems.

The current study also addresses the issue of credibility, which is fundamental in risk communication. It tests to what extent specific sources impact the public's trust in the story and the risk it presents.

This research will try to show how effective specific sources are in alerting people to risk. Messages aimed at building the audience's sense of efficacy may also be effective in motivating action about risk. Engaging the public is essential in reporting health and environmental risks. Fatalism and cynicism make apathy rational; if you are convinced that nothing you can do will help, why bother?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 The Importance of Risk Communication**

Risk communication is the exchange of information about health and environmental hazards among researchers and technical experts, industry, government regulators, interest groups, and the general public (Leiss & Krewski, 1989). It informs individuals about the existence, nature, form, severity, or acceptability of risks (Plough & Krimsky, 1987). It addresses decisions, actions, or policies aimed at managing or controlling health or environmental risks (Covello et al, 1986). The main objective of risk communication is to convey to the relatively unsophisticated members of the public the rational-technical knowledge content that is inherent in scientific risk assessment.

Risk communication occurs whenever the news media depict dangers – potential, imminent, or existing – that could place at least some readers in a health risk (Willis & Okunade, 1997). These dangers range from personal health problems, public health concerns (such as the spread of AIDS), and environmental concerns (such as the deteriorating ozone layer) to accidents involving hazardous materials. Risk reporting can extend to stories about natural disasters, acts of terrorism, impending weather crises, or depictions of mental, nervous, or emotional problems.

Because the media deal with these issues of public health and safety, the way they report on them affects the public's behavior concerning these perceived threats, therefore the media's responsibility to present an accurate picture of the problems is vital.

What is at stake is the ability of citizens to have substantive input into the decisions that affect their lives (Leiss, 1994). In addition, there are huge costs involved in

providing adequate remedies for polluted environments and in protecting people from exposure to various types of hazards.

## **2.2 Assessing Personal Risk**

It has frequently been observed that trust in industry and government is an important factor in people's assessment of risk and acceptability of hazards (e.g. Bord and O'Connor 1992; Slovic 1993). Slovic (1993) noted the importance of trust in risk communication and risk management by drawing a distinction between public reactions to industrial and medical technologies based on the use of chemicals/radiation. He noted that medical technologies based on the use of chemicals/radiation are seen as having high benefit and low risk, and are accepted by the public. On the other hand, the perception of industrial technologies based on the use of chemicals/radiation is of low benefit and high risk, and they are not accepted. He argued that a crucial factor in this distinction is the fact that, generally, physicians are trusted but government and industrial risk regulators are not.

Early research (Hovland et al., 1953) identified two psychological dimensions which defined credibility of information sources and had some influence on whether attitude change occurred after information was received by an individual. These were expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to the extent to which a speaker is perceived to be capable of making factual assertions, while trustworthiness refers to the degree to which an audience perceives the assertions made by a communicator are honest. There is evidence that a perception of trustworthiness in an information source will result in the argument they are advocating being persuasive. In contrast, expertise, without trustworthiness, results in less persuasion (McGinnies & Ward 1980).

Literature suggests that risk is socially constructed; that is, risk perception is not just a matter of sensory perception, but is influenced by the characteristics of the individual evaluating the risk (e.g., their attitudes and expectations) and the context in which the risk is evaluated (Sjoberg 2000). Risk perception, therefore, is rooted in daily experience and mediated by friends and family (Phillimore & Moffat 1994). It is not surprising, then, that differences exist between the risk perceptions of experts and those of the lay public. The general public typically incorporates qualitative factors (such as dread, unfamiliarity, and catastrophic potential) into risk assessment, while scientific experts focus on quantitative assessments of potential mortality and morbidity (Fischhoff, Slovic, and Lichtenstein 1983).

### **2.2.1 The Role of Risk Perception**

Perception has been defined as the process by which we interpret sensory data (Lahlry, 1991). Selective perception is the term applied to the tendency for people's perception to be influenced by wants, needs, attitudes, and other psychological factors (Severin & Tankard, 1997). Therefore, people might react differently to the same message.

Risk as measured and analyzed by scientists is complex enough; perceived risk is even more complicated (Grima, 1989). It involves more than the digesting of technical information and includes emotive features such as the role that fear plays in risk taking and acceptance. Whereas analysts handle catastrophes by discounting their consequences by their rare probabilities, many lay people concentrate instead on the possibility of disasters and their threat and paint gloomy pictures of disaster scenarios (Keeney & von Winterfeldt, 1986). The implication of this brief and selective treatment of risk perception

is that risk analysis is in effect incomplete. Studies have shown that individuals' perceptions of risk are imperfect (LaFountain, 2004). People tend to overestimate small risks and underestimate large ones. For instance, people are concerned about airline safety because airplane crashes are spectacular, rare events. On the other hand, car accidents are less frightening because, to the general public, they are less catastrophic, more commonplace events. Although the risk of death from a car crash is considerably larger than that from an airplane crash, far more attention is paid to the latter.

Public perception of risk is important because it affects the decision-making process, where rationality, facts and scientific certainty should lead the debate (Grima, 1989). Therefore, improving risk information transfer would result into more realistic risk perception and ultimately into better risk management.

Biased risk perception can be costly (LaFountain, 2004), causing misallocation of resources. If the media present the risks in the right frame and also win the trust of their public, people may be stimulated to perceive risk with less bias and will be more likely to support sound risk policies instead of wasting resources preventing minuscule dangers (LaFountain, 2004).

### **2.2.2 Ways to Change Perception – Social Learning Theory and Source Credibility**

Hovland's research on attitude change during World War II showed that offering the draftees details about the events that caused America's entrance into the war increased factual knowledge and led men to accept and understand more easily the situation and the transition from civilian life to that of a soldier (Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield, 1965). Although conveying more factual information had no effect on motivation to serve, it was somewhat effective in changing specific opinions about the

war. Indeed, the media can play the three functions necessary, according to Bandura's social learning theory (1977), to affect cognitive behavior: the informative, the motivational, and the reinforcing function. For these functions to be successful, however, the stimuli must be able to arrest interest – “engaging qualities are sought out, while those lacking pleasing characteristics are generally ignored or rejected” (Bandura, p. 24). The level of responsiveness depends on the stimulus or the model (the person whose words/actions are taken as an example in the learning process), and these can serve as instructors, inhibitors, disinhibitors, facilitators, and emotion arousers.

Incentives play an important role in social learning and an interesting story or event has better chances of arousing attention than boring ones. Fear or threatening stimuli, however, induce more cognitive change than neutral ones (Bandura, 1977). Hovland continued the research on how to increase message effectiveness and social learning and found in an experiment that source credibility is a key element in attitude change (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). The dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness were found important in terms of effective impact on perception and attitude.

The main effect of source increases when a highly credible source is identified early in the message (Ward & McGinnies, 1974), and use of evidence can increase the influence of low-credibility sources (McCroskey, 1970). In addition, the effectiveness of source credibility has been found to be moderated by some receiver characteristics including the locus of control, authoritarianism, involvement, and extremity of initial attitude (Haley, 1996). For instance, highly authoritarian people tend to be more influenced by high-credibility sources, whereas individuals highly involved with the issue are relatively immune to the effect of source credibility. In other words, people with low

involvement may simply accept or reject the message on the basis of source without carefully examining the arguments. Dholakia & Sternthal (1977) found that people with initial positive attitudes toward the advocated position were more influenced by a less credible source and people with initial negative attitudes toward the advocated issue were more persuaded by a more credible source.

Frewer et al. (1996) combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to understand what was driving public perception of trust in information sources communicating specifically about food risks, and whether these perceptions were in any way qualitatively different to those causing distrust. It was found that trusted information sources were associated with being truthful, having a good track record, accuracy and factual reporting of risk information, feeling a responsibility for public welfare, and being knowledgeable about the risks. Distrust was associated with information sources distorting information, having been proven wrong in the past, and being biased. Some sources were moderately trusted, but still not perceived to be useful sources of information, as they were believed to be over-accountable to others, to be self-protective, and to have a vested interest in promoting a particular view. Other sources were, in contrast, perceived to sensationalize or amplify risk information.

The majority of studies report low ratings of trust in government information sources (Frewer et al., 1996; Frewer & Shepherd, 1994). A consistently high degree of credibility has been reported for health professionals, consumer organizations and environmental organizations; in contrast, the rating of credibility of private companies and the food industry tends to be low (Frewer & Shepherd 1994; Frewer et al. 1996).

Research has found that the less we trust the people who are supposed to protect us, the more afraid we will be (Ropeik & Slovic, 2003). The same applies to the degree of trust we place in the people exposing us to the risk in the first place or to the people telling us about the risk.

Interest is also closely related to learning (Schiefele, 1991). It allows for correct and complete recognition of an object, leads to meaningful learning, promotes long-term storage of knowledge, and provides motivation for further learning. This is precisely what risk communication aims for. The opposite of interest - also referred to as “involvement” or “engagement” (Schiefele, 1991), is boredom. A way to prevent it, according to Flesch (1991), is to make stories more dramatic, more personal. The present study tested this by including a human-interest story among the other more technical risk stories. It also took into consideration Valkenburg & Semetko’s finding (1999) that the human interest news frame can have negative consequences for recall, as it clouds the importance of the larger issue.

To sum up, this study used the social learning theory framework and its elements (credibility and interest) and applied them to risk communication, in order to see ways of improving readers’ perception of risk stories, to get them more involved.

### **2.3 The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of Risk**

Research shows that mass media, usually the first sources of new risk information, often fail to include information that will help people properly assess risk. They can misrepresent the gravity of a hazard, heightening the risk perception bias (LaFountain, 2004). This bias in risk assessment often leads to misallocation of

resources. Large amounts are spent to eliminate relatively small risks, while significant dangers are ignored.

When reporting on a risk, journalists often frame stories as “accident stories” or “human interest stories,” as opposed to “risk stories,” thereby omitting relevant risk information (Dunwoody, 1992). Statistics and highly technical information may be avoided for fear of putting readers to sleep, although they may be vital to sound decision making.

Research on large media organizations has shown that the volume of coverage of a hazard is related to the rarity, exceptional nature, novelty, or “human interest,” associated with a hazardous event (Spencer & Triche, 1994) and not to its public-health importance (Ader, 1995). This is not surprising, given that the primary role of journalists is not risk communication per se. Nevertheless, research shows that human-interest accounts or anecdotal case reports contribute about one-third of the published literature on health risks (such as adverse drug reactions and interactions), but are regarded as providing poor-quality evidence (Aronson, 2005). However, they can occasionally provide proof of cause and effect, and there are many other reasons for publishing them. Because an anecdote is a narrative, narratological paradigms from literature, art, and music can show how we can make evidential use of anecdotes. Useful paradigms are the comprehensive catalogues, and pattern formations (Aronson, 2005). In addition, the extent of the research conducted for stories is constrained by journalists’ deadlines and access to expertise (Klaidman, 1990). These constraints can result in reliance on a small number of (potentially inaccurate and/or biased) sources (Beckett, 1995).

Some theorists suggest that the media—along with individuals and other institutions (e.g., environment ministries, health care agencies)—can amplify (or attenuate) individual and social perceptions of risk (Renn et al. 1992). In particular, the importance of media coverage to risk perception may be influenced by the credibility the public attaches to various media. Key stakeholders - including the proponent and involved government officials - are rarely trusted (Baxter & Elliott 1999). Given the complexity of the subject matter and its role in promoting a healthier world, health and environmental reporting deserves a closer examination.

### **2.3.1 Health Reporting**

Health is a central aspect in the life of a community and should also become a guiding criterion for policy decisions – social, environmental, economic, etc. (Biocca, 2004). Eating, drinking, jogging, or even breathing the air can be hazardous to human health. People react to these public health risks that they hear about in the media in different ways, ranging from panic to ignorance. Good health reporting can increase the audience’s knowledge and awareness of a health issue, problem, or solution; influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that may change social norms; prompt action; demonstrate or illustrate healthy skills; show the benefit of behavior change; refute myths and misconceptions (Freimuth & Quinn, 2004).

Abstruse language and jargon used in health communication create communication barriers that obstruct the public’s clear understanding of diagnoses, medication instructions, and disease prevention recommendations, according to two recent reports about health literacy from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), cited by Young (2004). Based on

assessments of adult literacy in the United States, about 47%, or 90 million, of American adults have literacy skills that test below a high-school level and are unable to read complex texts, including many health-care-related materials, both reports noted. In this context, effective, credible and engaging risk communication becomes a must.

In their study about media messages and health behavior regarding smoking, Flay et al. (1993) show that it is difficult to promote health, as the people likely to change are those already motivated to seek information about their problem, whereas the others who should be persuaded ignore these kind of messages when they encounter them by accident.

### **2.3.2 Environmental Reporting**

Dealing with one of the most politicized and controversial areas of science (West, 1995), environmental reporting is a specialized area whose impact can be decisive in hazard assessment and decision making. It requires certain training, expert sources and knowledge in handling risk communication without becoming an advocate or a panic nucleus (Detjen, 2002). Effective environmental communication has high stakes for industry, government, and society (Salomone et al, 1990) and that is why research on environmental risk reporting is important.

Environment is directly connected to health, because environmental risks often threaten human health. A healthy environment is essential to public health. Therefore, good environmental reporting is essential in creating awareness and readiness among the audiences.

Several studies have been conducted to determine the quality of environmental reporting. Most have employed traditional methods of content analysis, beginning with

Tankard and Ryan's (1974) study of the accuracy of science news. Most of these studies, including those that looked specifically at environmental stories (e.g., Witt, 1974) found much to criticize, such as high levels of errors, serious omissions of information, misleading presentations of information, and minimal background in related sciences.

Most research looks at how journalists and news sources evaluate coverage of environmental risk, but few evaluated the public reception of environmental news. Media shape attitudes people have about environmental issues and should help them understand and make decisions. Environmental reporters are turning heavily to traditional sources, such as government officials and environmental activists, rather than on such alternative sources as academic or independent scientists (Covello, 1989).

The public has essentially five sources from which to obtain information on environmental deterioration (Rubin & Sachs, 1973). The scientific and academic communities provide the greater part of the database on which decisions with environmental implications are made by government and business. But too much of their work is unintelligible to the public and available only through professional journals. Three other information sources are government, the private business community, and citizen groups (many of which do not have at their disposal the public relations staffs employed by government and private business). The news media, although wary of information that does not have an "official" look about it, are becoming more and more important (Rubin & Sachs, 1973). Journalists pick sources their readers will believe are credible. Research points to three credibility factors: (1) mainstream status, (2) administrative credentials, and (3) previous contact with the media (Dunwoody, 1986).

Whereas politicians, for instance, actively cultivate journalists because media visibility is vital to their survival, scientists generally do not have this communication experience.

Research has suggested that the problems with environmental reporting are due to lack of trust and credibility of the principal sources of information about environmental issues – government agencies and industry (Covello, 1989). Some factors that explain this public perception include beliefs such as: government agencies are unduly influenced by industry; government agencies are inappropriately biased in favor of promoting technologies that people perceive to be hazardous; health and environmental protection programs of government agencies and industry have been mismanaged; and officials and industry have lied or made serious errors in the past (Covello, 1989). Sandman et al. (1987) looked at sources as a predictor of alarming versus reassuring content about environmental risks, and found that reporters didn't balance their sources in an article. Their study showed that journalists often relied on governmental officials, industry spokespersons or environmental activists as sole sources and recommended reporters to seek out expert sources who are comparatively uninvolved in a particular environmental controversy.

Most studies looked at the problems of environmental reporting by analyzing news content. But, as Wimmer and Dominick (2000) explained, content analysis is not a good tool for making statements about the effects of content on an audience. Interviews with environmental reporters about the several newsroom-related constraints did not bring light on public perception either (Detjen et al, 2000). Additional research is necessary to make assertions about what the public evaluation, perception and reaction to environmental news are.

## **2.4 Credibility**

### **2.4.1 Building Credibility**

Mass media credibility should not be defined and studied only as an attribute of message sources, but as a relational variable – an audience response to media content (Gunther, 1992). When examined as a receiver perception, credibility becomes a situational assessment, stemming from interest in issues. Trust in media treatment of a particular issue declines, for example, when the issue is seen as more controversial or as bad news (Stone and Beell, 1975). These two situations are characteristic for risk communication, which therefore has to do a great effort to convince the skeptical public.

Credibility, along with liking, quality, and representativeness, is one of four criteria that influence attitudes toward news stories (Sundar, 1999). Media experts define a credible source as one that is seen as providing correct information and as willing to release that information without bias (Hass, 1981). Ibelema and Powell (2001) cited expertise and trustworthiness as the most important elements of credibility. A source is perceived to be an expert when it displays “correct knowledge” (Hass, 1981, p. 143). Information from sources rated as high in expertise leads to the greatest attitude change among those receiving the message; low-expertise sources typically produce no changes in attitude (Milburn, 1991). The trustworthiness of the communicator is as important to message acceptance as is the expertise of the communicator (Milburn, 1991). If a source is seen as biased or as communicating the message for a purpose other than information, the credibility of the source is harmed (Hass, 1981). Greenburg & Miller (1966) found that when a source is seen as low in credibility, individuals are more resistant to persuasion.

Perceived credibility also depends on the type of evidence a news report brings. Hoeken (2001) found in an experiment that statistical evidence is more convincing than the anecdotal and causal evidence. Although the latter two evidence types were equally unconvincing, the anecdotal evidence was perceived as less credible than the causal evidence.

### **2.4.2 Demographics and Credibility**

As previous research shows, media use could be a predictor of media perceived credibility. Schweiger (2000) examined not only how credible users felt various outlets were, but also whether experience with a certain outlet indicated likelihood to consider that outlet more credible. The study found that people put more faith into outlets they use most (Schweiger 2000). For example, if someone uses a newspaper most often, they are likely to consider the newspaper the most credible source of information. This finding suggests a relationship between what one uses and what one sees as credible. Therefore, as the present study uses newspaper articles, it is likely that the participants that are heavy newspaper readers will perceive the materials as more credible. Nevertheless, media use trends show that newspapers are losing their appeal to media users. Mayer (1993) found that from 1959 to 1992, use of TV for news rose from 51% to 69%, while usage of the newspaper for the same purpose fell from 57% to 43%. Moreover, the emergence of the Internet brought users a totally new type of media access. Johnson & Kaye (1998) found that online newspapers were seen as more credible than traditional newspapers, and that a user's rating of credibility for an outlet is related to their reliance on that outlet. In other words, a person generally feels that the outlet they use is credible (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Two years later, however, Flanigan & Metzger (2000) surveyed 1041

undergraduate students to get their feelings on the credibility of various media outlets and found that newspapers were perceived to have the highest credibility among the population, followed by a close grouping of TV, radio, magazines and the Internet (Flanigan & Metzger 2000).

Media use is also connected to age. Henke (1985) found that college students' news use rises by year in school. Building on this finding, Basil and Vincent (1997) applied uses and gratification theory and found that media use did indeed rise as year in college rose. Some other findings included the fact that those who were more likely to seek entertainment were more likely to use TV news as their source of information, and those who felt bored with the news media were least likely to get their news from a print source (Basil & Vincent 1997).

### **2.4.3 The Media's Tendency to Cover Official Sources**

The choice of messengers is often as important as the message itself (Bales, 2001). Trustworthiness and perceptions of a source's knowledge on a topic can greatly influence the way a message is perceived. Additionally, a messenger can influence the perceived scope of message. For example, the use of individual children and families in communicating about an issue can imply that the issue is personal, rather than general, societal (Bales, 2001).

Gitlin writes that "of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness—by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity" (1980) The further an issue is from the elite group's core interests and values, the more likely it is that it will be overlooked by the media. Entman and Rojecki (1993) noted the same hegemonic processes within

journalism's reliance on elite sources. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman (1988) state that the American media conform to a propaganda model. As a propaganda machine, the press controls and creates an apathetic public, by relying heavily on elite sources. Berkowitz (1986) found institutional sources are used significantly more frequently than individual sources. Gans's study (1980) indicated a reluctance of editorial staff members who were unfamiliar with or distant from a news event to use sources other than high level of official sources. News becomes an official story of official sources, rather than a multi-level story. Gans argues that their articulateness, reliability, availability, past suitability and authoritativeness makes the public officials the most frequent and regular sources.

However, Austin and Dong (1994), in an experiment to determine the effects of message type and source reputation on judgments of credibility, discovered that experimental subjects based judgments of news credibility more on the apparent reality of the message content than on source reputation. In other words, a newspaper is simply a newspaper, and a story stands or falls largely on its merits, regardless of whom is quoted in the story.

The Louisiana Survey (2004) as well as previous research showed that people tend to be apathetic to official sources. According to Cappella and Jamieson (1996), the journalists' strategic framing of government activity led to a spiral of cynicism, in which not only government officials and media don't trust each other, but also the public lacks confidence in both the media and the politicians. A possible solution would be to attempt to bring more experts and "real people" into the stories, to cover complicated issues from the viewpoints of average citizens whose everyday lives are involved in the issues.

In summary, the use of certain sources can increase or decrease the reader's level of trust and interest in the story, which are important elements in risk perception and assessment and also in the social learning process. Society needs not only knowledgeable people, but also engaged, less cynical people. Interesting and credible stories could be a good predictor of such constructive behavior.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

#### **3.1 Overview**

This study investigates to what degree news sources enhance credibility and interest in risk stories, focusing on the official versus multi-level sourcing dichotomy. The traditional sources for risk stories are government, expert and industry voices (Salomone et al., 1990). However, extensive criticism has been brought to risk reporting for covering mainly governmental sources, on the expense of the other two (Tankard and Ryan, 1974, Salomone et al., 1990). That is why this study chooses to transform the government source into an independent variable. Further more, this research study investigates whether media use, gender and age are predictors of readers' interest in risk stories and their assessment of story and risk credibility. Out of the four stories, only one was built around a human face. The first story about the HIV epidemic tackled the case of an infected person, whose account was then supported with government sources or multiple sources, depending on the group. This study hypothesizes that this story, regardless of the subsequent sources, will be perceived as the most interesting, although, according to the credibility literature, it might be perceived as less trustworthy – for its obvious bias ad low expertise (Hass, 1981, Greenburg & Miller, 1996).

#### **3.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This study seeks to investigate the following hypotheses and research questions:

**H1:** The stories with multiple sources will be perceived as:

- a) more credible than the ones using only government sources.

- b) more reasonable in terms of source choice than the ones using only government sources.
- c) having more credible government sources than the ones using only government sources.

**H2:** a) The stories with multiple sources will be perceived as more interesting than the ones using only government sources.

b) The readers of multiple-source stories will be willing to pay more taxes than the participants who received only government sources.

c) The readers of multiple-source stories will find the issues more vital and the threats more real than the participants who received only government sources.

**H3:** The human-interest stories will be perceived as more interesting than the ones without personal accounts, regardless of the sources.

**H4:** Heavy newspaper users will perceive the stories (which are newspaper stories), regardless of their sources, as being more credible, than the heavy users of other media outlets.

**RQ1:** a) Is there a difference in the interest between male and female respondents?

b) Is there a difference in interest between younger and older respondents?

**RQ2:** a) Is there a difference in perceived credibility and reasonableness between male and female respondents?

b) Is there a difference in credibility and reasonableness between younger and older respondents?

**RQ3:** Is there a correlation between perceived story credibility and the participants' interest in the stories?

## **CHAPTER 4 METHOD**

### **4.1 Instrument**

An experimental design was used to assess credibility and interest in the issues of HIV epidemic in Baton Rouge and coastal erosion in Louisiana. The experimental method is the best in establishing causality (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003) and allows control over the numbers and types of variables manipulated. It also allows subject exposure in varying degrees to the independent variable, which, as the stimuli (specific sources) in this experiment are different for every group under investigation, is very useful in predicting what element of a story was more effective in shaping public attitudes.

Experimental research is criticized for low external validity given the artificiality of the respondents' reading and evaluating the stimulus material on demand, but it is superior in an attempt to investigate effects of key independent variables (de Vreese, 2004).

Two groups of participants were presented with two story versions of each of the two risk issues – one environmental and one health-related. To obtain statistical significance, Bausell (1994) suggests a number of 50 respondents per group. For this study, due to the short time in which it was conducted, the experiment was administered to 98 people, with n=49 for the group who received multi-source stories, and n=49 for the group who received only government-source stories. Although a statewide survey would have been ideal, in view of the amount of time required to complete the study, the cost of finding willing participants, and the fairly large number of questions to code, the respondents were confined to college students and university faculty and staff. A

convenience sample of mass communication students at Louisiana State University, who were offered extra credit, ultimately took part in the study. 25% of the respondents were faculty and staff at the same university. The questionnaires were administered during three weeks in February and March 2005. They took an estimated twenty minutes to complete. The respondents were separated from one another during the experiment and also received different versions (in terms of story order and source treatment) of the questionnaire.

## **4.2 Stimulus Material**

Newspaper articles used in this study were constructed on the basis of news coverage of coastal erosion and the HIV threat in Louisiana. The issues have received considerable public attention and have been the subject of elite media and political discourses. Every year, Louisiana loses about 25 square miles of land. Some (costly) efforts are underway to minimize the loss. It will take billions of dollars and widespread support to fix it. As for HIV, Baton Rouge ranks second in a national top of infected population, according to the Federal Center for Disease Control.

The news stories were produced, according to journalistic standards, rather than selected as being representative of a particular frame, thus ensuring full control over the stimulus material. To avoid tiredness and maturation, the stories were presented in a consistently different order, so that each story had an equal chance of being read first, somewhere in the middle, or last. The order varied as follows: abcd, bcda, cdab, dabc.

This experiment used T-tests to see the differences between the two groups defined by the source treatment:

- Group A read two different stories about HIV and two different stories about coastal erosion (a total of four stories), all of them using government sources exclusively.
- Group B will read the same stories, but with multiple sources (expert, industry and government).

In order to ensure significance (that respondents did not evaluate the story or the sources in a specific way by chance) the study used two stories for each risk under investigation. For the AIDS issue, one story reported some personal accounts of infected people, how they can get medication, and how the state takes care of them. This was the only story with a human-interest (anecdotal) angle and represented the dependent variable for the third hypothesis (The human-interest stories will be perceived as more interesting than the ones without personal accounts, regardless of the sources). Although Hoeken (2001) found anecdotal evidence to be the least credible, thus study takes in consideration the hard digestibility of the subject matter (risk communication) and hypothesizes that human-interest will have apposite impact on credibility. The other health story covered the alarming 2<sup>nd</sup> place Baton Rouge occupies in the national ranking of infected population. For the coastal erosion issue, one story addressed its consequences on the oil industry, and one the threat of a hurricane striking Louisiana areas, how coastal erosion might magnify its damages, and ways to prevent them.

### **4.3 The Questionnaire**

Media credibility has been measured with several different indicators, most of which suggest credibility is a multidimensional construct. (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988). This study measured perceived credibility of the message, in a statistically reliable five-question index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.901) with three commonly identified

items oriented toward the content of the information: accuracy, believability, and factualness (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988). These indicators were measured with Likert-type items ranging from a score of 1 (e.g., not at all believable) to a score of 5 (e.g., extremely believable). Interest in the story was measured in this study using elements of Zaichkowsky's (1985) Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) scale (Bearden et al., 1999). These items assessing interest were presented in an index (Cronbach's alpha = 0.827) using a five-point Likert scale to measure the relevance of the messages to each reader.

The questionnaires included several sections with a total of 16 questions. Each story was followed by a questionnaire; therefore the participants had to answer to  $4 \times 16 = 64$  questions, plus 4 demographic questions at the end. Besides the index that assessed the perceived *credibility* of the story, one question specifically addressed the credibility of the government sources and another assessed how reasonable the respondents found the choice of sources for the story. These two questions were meant to force the participants examine more closely the nature of sources in the stories they received. The answers on the scales ranged from 1- *Not at all* to 5- *Extremely*.

The index that asked respondents to provide answers about the level of their *interest* in the story looked at whether they found it interesting, important, would read more about the issue, would recommend the story to a friend and would get more involved as a result of reading it.

A demographics section asked routine questions about gender and age (dependent variables for the first two research questions that look at the interaction between demographics and treatment and their effect on credibility and interest).

Participants were also asked about their main source of news and how often they read a traditional or online newspaper, as well as watch television or listen to radio (on a five-point Likert scale from 1-*Daily* to 5-*Never*) to see if there is any correlation between media use and their perception of the health and environmental risks reported in the stories. The participants whose primary source of information were newspapers and who read news on a daily basis or every other day were operationalized as heavy users of newspapers. The same was done for the other outlets, in order to be able to test the fourth hypothesis (Heavy newspaper users will perceive the stories -- which are newspaper stories, regardless of their sources, as being more credible, than the heavy users of other media outlets -- television and internet).

A question asked if the participants considered the issue in the article vital to society and one checked if they thought the issue represented a real threat. Two questions, meant to test their interest and involvement, asked if they would favor increase of state funding to prevent the two problems and whether they would pay more taxes.

This study is important because it suggests ways to improve risk news framing so as to meet higher levels of trust and interest among audiences. However, it is important to consider individual differences and pre-existing attitudes about concepts and to use this information to segment audiences, creating more targeted messages.

Experiments are intended to determine whether the independent or stimulus variable generates a difference in response on some dependent or outcome variable (Buddenbaum & Novak, 2001). In this study, t-tests were used to compare means and assess statistical significance, and descriptive analysis (frequencies, means) was useful in indicating independent variables' characteristics. Multivariate Analyses of Variance were

used in order to see whether there were significant differences between stories with multiple sources and stories with government sources on the four dependent elements (overall credibility of story, credibility of the government sources in the stories, interest, and reasonability of source choice) while protecting against Type I error due to multiple tests.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

Of the 98 participants who completed the study, 71% were female and 29% male respondents. The average age was 26, with a minimum of 18 years old and a maximum of 62 years old. In the end, there were 70 younger participants (18-26 years old) and 28 older participants (over 26 years old).

Newspapers were the main sources of information for 23.5% of participants; 42% got their news primarily from television, and 35% from the internet. None said magazines or radio were their main source of information. This supports the literature, which says people get most of their news, especially risk-related information, from television.

68% of media users say they go to their main source of information on a daily basis, 21% every other day, and 10% once a week or less.

One-sample t-tests ( $p = .001$ ) indicated that health stories (about HIV) were perceived as both more interesting ( $M = 3.8, sd = .7$ ) and more credible ( $M = 3.6, sd = .5$ ) than the coastal erosion stories (*Interest*  $M = 3.3, sd = .8$ , *Credibility*  $M = 2.8, sd = .6$ ).

Hypothesis 1, with its sections a), b), and c) which assessed the effects of multiple sources on story credibility, reasonableness and government credibility, was supported. The three DVs (story credibility, government credibility, and reasonableness of source) were first entered together in a multivariate analysis of variance with story treatment as a fixed factor (results shown in Table 1). Using four algorithms, Wilks, Pillai, Hotelling and Roy, the analysis showed a significant difference in levels of credibility by story type ( $F = 4.34, df = 1, 96, p = .04, \eta^2 = .043$ ). The analysis also showed a significant effect for the government credibility variable ( $F = 3.64, df = 1, 96, p = .05, \eta^2 = .037$ ) and the reasonability variable ( $F = 16.008, df = 1, 96, p = .001, \eta^2 = .143$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
Differences in credibility by type of source obtained with multivariate tests

	<b>Government sources</b>	<b>Multiple sources</b>		
	<u>Mean (sd)</u>	<u>Mean (sd)</u>	<u>F value (df)</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Story credibility	3.6 (.5)	3.9 (.5)	4.34 (1,96)	.04
Government credibility	3.5 (.7)	3.8 (.4)	3.64 (1,96)	.05
Reasonability of source choice	3.3 (.7)	3.8 (.5)	16.008 (1,96)	.001

N=98

Hypothesis 2, section a), stories with multiple sources will be perceived as more interesting than the ones using only government sources, also was supported. An independent samples t-test ( $F = 1.427, df= 1,96, p =.03$ ) found that the stories with multiple sources were considered significantly more interesting ( $M = 3.2, sd=.7$ ), than the government stories ( $M = 2.9, sd=.7$ ). For H2, b), participants who received multiple sources ( $M= 3.6, sd =.7$ ) said they were slightly but not significantly ( $p =.10$ ) more willing to pay additional taxes to control/prevent the two risks reported in the stories than the ones who received the government stories ( $M =3.3, sd=.8$ ). For section c), the independent samples t-tests found no significant difference between the two groups in terms of considering the two issues (the HIV and coastal erosion risks) vital to society or real threats (Table 2).

For Hypothesis 3, human-interest stories will be perceived as more interesting than the ones without personal accounts, regardless of the sources, the paired sample t-test showed a significant difference ( $p <.001$ ) in interest level between the stories with a human angle ( $M = 3.5, sd=.7$ ) and the other more scientific and technical stories ( $M = 2.9, sd =.7$ ).

**TABLE 2**  
Differences in interest by type of source obtained with multivariate tests

	<b>Government sources</b>	<b>Multiple sources</b>		
	<u>Mean (sd)</u>	<u>Mean (sd)</u>	<u>F value (df)</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Interest	2.9 (.7)	3.2 (.7)	1.427 (1,96)	.03
Would you pay more taxes?	3.3 (.8)	3.6 (.7)	.043 (1,96)	.1
Is the issue vital to society?	3.9 (.6)	4.1 (.6)	.412 (1,96)	.3
Is the threat real?	4.0 (.6)	4.1 (.6)	.931 (1,96)	.3
N=98				

Hypothesis 4, heavy newspaper users will perceive the stories (which are newspaper stories), regardless of their sources, as being more credible, than the heavy users of other media outlets, approached significance ( $p = .06$ ). The heavy users of newspapers considered the stories to be more credible ( $M = 4.0, sd = .5$ ) than the other media users ( $M = 3.7, sd = .5$ ).

For the first research question, section a), about whether there is a significant difference in interest between male and female respondents, the multivariate analyses of variance found no significant differences between the two genders ( $F = .297, df = 1,96, observed\ power = 0.84, p = .5$ ).

As for section b), which asked about differences in interest between age categories, the analysis found a significant difference between younger and older participants ( $F = 4.258, df = 1,96, \eta^2 = 0.043, p = .04$ ). The use of multiple sources made a greater difference in older participants' assessment of how interesting the stories were, as compared to the younger participants, as shown in Table 3. There was a

significant interaction between age category and story treatment ( $F = 19.39$ ,  $df = 1,96$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.171$ ,  $p < .001$ .)

**TABLE 3**  
Differences in interest, credibility and reasonableness by age and type of source obtained with multivariate ANOVAS

	18-26 years old		Over 26 years old		F value (df)	Interaction Sig.
	Multiple sources <u>Mean</u> (sd)	Government sources <u>Mean (sd)</u>	Multiple sources <u>Mean (sd)</u>	Government sources <u>Mean</u> (sd)		
Interest	3.0 (.6)	3.0 (.5)	3.9 (.6)	2.7 (.7)	19.39 (1,96)	.001
Credibility	3.7 (.4)	3.8 (.4)	4.2 (.4)	3.3 (.5)	21.31 (1,96)	.001
Reasonableness of sources	3.7 (.5)	3.5 (.6)	4.2 (.4)	2.9 (.5)	13.31 (1,96)	.001

N=98

For the second research question, section a), about whether there is a significant difference in story credibility and reasonableness between male and female respondents, the MANOVAS found that the gender variable and the gender-source interaction produced no significant differences ( $p_{gender} = .4$ ,  $observed\ power = .199$ ,  $p_{gender \times source} = .3$ ,  $observed\ power = .216$ ).

For section b), which measured the differences between younger and older participants, the two DVs (story credibility and reasonableness of source) were first entered together in a multivariate analysis with age category and story source as the fixed factors and obtained the significant differences shown in table 3. Using four algorithms, Wilks, Pillai, Hotelling and Roy, the analysis showed a significant effect for the independent variables considered together ( $F_{credible} = 21.317$ ,  $df = 1,96$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .185$ ;  $F_{reasonable} = 16.312$ ,  $df = 1,96$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .148$ ). In other words, source

diversity made a bigger difference for the older participants than it did for the younger ones.

For the third research question, about whether there is a correlation between perceived story credibility and the participants' interest in the stories, the Pearson correlation coefficient of .495 showed a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) and positive relationship between credibility and interest accounting for 24.5% of the variance.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **6.1 Overview**

This experiment explored the effects of government versus multiple sources applied to the same risk communication stories on the perceived credibility of and interest in the story. It also analyzed the effects of source treatment on participants' assessment of government credibility and source reasonableness. The study investigated the effects of demographic characteristics of participants (age, gender, media use) on the same variables, and tried to determine if there was any statistical correlation between the two dependent variables of credibility and interest.

Chapter 5 presented the results of the study, the statistics that were run and data analysis. This chapter presents key findings of the study, implications, limitations, recommendations, conclusions and directions for future research.

#### **6.2 Key Findings and Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study point to several notable theoretical and practical implications. Overall, the findings suggested that the different source manipulation in the study resulted in significant differences in message reception. The differences between subgroups (younger and older participants, different media users) are also important, as they suggest ways of tailoring risk communication according to age.

Of the independent variables, the use of multiple sources affected the credibility variable as this study hypothesized. As the results section showed, participants who read stories with multiple sources (government, industry, expert), perceived the stories and the government sources in these messages as more credible than the participants who

received only government sources. This finding is interesting as it not only indicates the need for journalists to balance their stories (as opposed to their routine of covering primarily government sources), but it also suggests that when other sources confirm the information provided by government officials, the latter gain in trustworthiness. When they have no non-government sources to confirm the accuracy of government sources, people tend to doubt officials' credibility more. Moreover, there is a significant difference in readers' assessment of the source reasonableness in the two types of stories. People who read stories with multiple sources evaluated the choice of sources as more reasonable than the other group. In other words, readers are not ignorant to this aspect and are aware of what a good report should offer them. These findings are important for risk communication practitioners, as they show that a more richly sourced story not only increases readers' trust, and thus the chance of learning and persuasion. It also increases the credibility of the government sources in particular which are so favored by media and criticized by media critics. Therefore, government sources should not be avoided, as they are not in themselves a problem – they are necessary in risk stories but not sufficient.

As for the second dependent variable, interest in the story, the use of multiple sources as opposed to government sources created significant differences as well. When offered a plethora of testimonies from a variety of sources, the participants rated the stories as significantly more interesting. This finding suggests that source diversity should be a compulsory ingredient when risk communicators want to attract the public's attention and involvement. This also rejects Austin and Dong's (1994) experiment conclusion that a newspaper is simply a newspaper, and a story stands or falls largely on its merits, regardless of whom is quoted.

The other questions that tested the participants' interest, their willing to pay more taxes to prevent the risks and how vital the issue was to society, did not meet statistical significance. This may be because the two age categories were not represented equally (this was not a probability sample), and that college students outnumbered the older participants, who are usually in the position of paying taxes. Other questions meant to test attitudes, better tailored for all age categories, might have produced higher, more significant scores.

The finding that the human-interest stories were perceived as more interesting than the ones without personal accounts, regardless of the other sources, suggests the need for journalists to bring more real people into their stories. People relate better to dramatic, personal stories than to cold, factual reports. However, personal accounts should not be presented without the support of other sources – as the results of this study show, source diversity positively affects story credibility and interest.

Heavy use of newspapers did not make a significant difference in the credibility scores, but approached significance at  $p = .06$ . Future research should examine this in more depth; a study dedicated to this question may produce explanations. For example, the television and internet users, accustomed to more interactive and graphic media, might have found the same stories translated for television or internet more trustworthy. The use of visual elements could also have changed their perception. Overall, this study adds empirical evidence to the argument that people trust more the outlets they regularly use. In order to strengthen the finding that media use affects credibility and interest, further study should analyze how participants perceive similar risk stories presented on the internet or television.

From a demographic perspective, this study found that gender is not a driving force behind perceptions of credibility and interest. The findings, however, lend support to previous research showing that age does matter in the same perceptual processes. The older participants showed a better ability in distinguishing between the two kinds of story treatment, and their credibility rate and interest were higher for the multiple-source stories. This finding is important because it indicates the need to better tailor risk messages for young audiences. Their lack of interest, considering the fact that they are the ones likely to suffer more from the risks of today, is a reason to worry and to take action. An explanation for this tendency comes from further analysis of data. Only 16% of the young respondents use newspapers as their primary source of news, thus explaining their lack of interest and trust in a medium they don't normally use. There is a significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) between younger and older participants in terms of interest for the human-interest stories. The participants under 26 years old showed more interest in these stories than in the others. What follows from here is the recommendation for risk communicators to adapt risk stories for television and internet, in order to reach more of the young audiences, and to frame the risk stories in more personal terms, as young people relate better to this type of stories.

As for the correlation between interest and credibility, although this study found that there is a direct relationship that occurred by something other by chance, the link between the two variables is too weak to ignore other variables that might intervene. Indeed, as the level of credibility increases, so does the level of interest, but there are other elements that might determine the variance in the level of interest. In other words, although the two dependent variables are somehow related, it may not be a cause and

effect relationship. If a story is credible, that does not necessarily make it interesting and vice versa. Nevertheless, risk communication practitioners could use this finding and associate more credible sources to a story in order to make it more interesting.

This study shows that source choice does matter when participants assess credibility and level of interest. Multiple sources, when combined with personal accounts, produced the highest levels of interest and credibility. Source type interacts with age, explaining significant variance, but all variables also matter independently. More research and multivariate models are needed to sort out the independent and intersecting influences of source, age, and media use.

The finding that health stories were perceived as more interesting and credible than the environmental stories is also worth noting. This result may be because health is a first-hand reality, whereas environment risks *may or may not* affect health. People are more often in contact with health experts (their doctors), than with environment experts (scientists, academics), hence explaining the difference in interest and credibility. Moreover, when it comes to environmental threats, more politics and industry interests are involved, which may explain the low credibility level (the coastal erosion was extremely politicized, even at a federal level, and the oil industry is one of the most affected by the threat).

### **6.3 Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

A great deal can be learned from this study that can be applied in future research. These lessons also illuminate some limitations of the study, mostly related to sampling and instrumentation procedure.

The findings of only one study should be considered suggestive rather than definitive. More research that replicates these findings with different participants in terms of age and media use is needed.

This study analyzes the effects of a one-time exposure to risk stories. It is evident that in order for an effect on perception to transpire, different sources would likely need to be presented multiple times, over a longer time period. The study does not address how participants would actually react when presented with similar risk stories in a less artificial context -- the limitation of all experiments. There is no evidence that these participants would normally read this type of stories. Moreover, this was a between-groups design. It would be interesting to see differences within groups, or how the same people react when presented with different kinds of sources, when participants could act as their own controls.

The instrument used in this study (see Appendices A & B) was fairly long. This was considered necessary in order to get reliable data and incorporate both environmental and health stories. This meant asking repeatedly the same questions, which might have become tiresome or made participants think less of the answers for the last stories, in anticipation of the questions.

The use of the human-interest stories could be better controlled in future studies. In the present one, the personal accounts were presented either with government or multiple sources. In other words, they were supported with additional testimonies. If presented isolated, they might suffer in terms of credibility and interest.

The peripheral finding that health stories were perceived as more credible and interesting than the environmental ones should also drive some future research. The

literature review indicates that they are both important and critical elements of risk communication, and if it is harder to produce interesting and credible environmental stories, risk communicators and managers should act accordingly. Further research, alternating the environmental issue (not only coastal erosion) or its frame (episodic, thematic, anecdotal, with different sources, etc.) could test if these findings were accidental or representative.

Other variables, such as preexisting attitudes and education should be analyzed in future research, as they may offer explanations for the way participants perceive certain sources and types of stories. Open-ended questions, where participants could freely express their perceptions and attitudes, could ask participants what exactly they did not like in the stories – and thus provide cues for possible variables to be manipulated in further research. A thought-listing would also help uncover ideas the researcher didn't think of. No single experiment can adequately measure every influence on credibility and interest and still maintain control over the various dependent variables. A body of work is needed to understand all the important influences on perceptions of credibility and interest in risk communication and their relationships. This study hopes to begin just such a vast body of work.

## **6.4 Recommendations for Practitioners**

This is the most important part of this study, as it answers to the critical question “So what?” The findings of this experiment are useful to risk communication practitioners, as they suggest ways to positively affect perceptions of risk stories, in terms of credibility and interest. The main suggestion that follows from this study is for media to overcome their tendency to cover only official sources (subchapter 2.4.3.), as source

diversity appears to be more agreeable and trustworthy in participants' perception, than the government version. Moreover, even the favored government sources gain in credibility and interest when balanced with other voices. When presented in isolation, government sources produced the highest levels of cynicism, which is what risk communication tries so hard to avoid. However, in order to reach the younger public, risk communicators should complement source diversity with human interest and adapt stories for outlets that are more popular to youth – television and internet, for example, in order to reach this important segment of the public. Therefore, segmenting audiences for the purpose of targeted communications may be based on age or type of media.

Practitioners should bear in mind that source credibility is somehow related to interest in the story and not ignore the importance of bringing more valuable sources in their news.

## **6.5 Conclusions**

Research about how to improve risk communication is extremely important and needs continuous redefinition in a general context where the array of risks is ever-growing, where the incentives for other types of communications distract audiences from the important issues, and new types of media emerge and alter the public's routine of looking for information. This study adds to this vital knowledge by showing that source diversity and human interest are ways to increase risk communication credibility and readers' interest. It also indicates that age and media use are essential variables that have to be considered when targeting risk messages. As gatekeepers, journalists can construct, amplify, dramatize or minimize risks. As the literature review shows, it is not easy to be a risk communicator, but this is not an excuse for bad reporting. The responsibility is huge

and the public's perception of risk stories is essential in effective risk management.

Health and environmental issues affect everybody's life and good risk communication is a barometer of how society is capable of solving its problems. Interesting and credible risk messages hence become the ultimate goal.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE STORIES WITH GOVERNMENT**  
**SOURCES\***

\* The stories are arranged in an abcd order. Other versions were in the bcda, cdab, and dabc orders.

**Consent form**  
**COVERING LOUISIANA’S PROBLEMS**

This study is being conducted to learn more about what characteristics of news stories help people understand better and remember more about the issues journalists cover. It is being conducted by Raluca Cozma, master degree candidate at theanship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University, as part of her degree thesis.

Your participation is voluntary and your answers will be kept confidential. You don’t have to answer all of the questions, and you may withdraw from participation at any time. You will not be penalized in any way. You must be 18 or older to participate.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact Dr. Renita Coleman, major professor in the thesis committee, (225-578-2045), Robert Mathews, IRB Chair, (225-578-8692), or Raluca Cozma, master degree candidate, (225-343-9164).

If you would like to continue with the study, **please sign this form** and go on with reading the materials included and answer the questions following each article. Thank you for your participation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your participation in this study about how reporters cover some of Louisiana's problems.**

**Please read each of the four articles thoroughly and then answer the short questionnaire following each story. This should take no more than 30 minutes.**

**There is no right or wrong answer, and your information will be kept confidential. If you have any comments, please write them down on the bottom of this page.**

## BATON ROUGE OFFICIALS CONCERNED ABOUT HIV EPIDEMIC

BY NICOLE BUCKLEY

Mildred McDonald was getting her annual physical in 1995 when the nurse asked whether she would like to be tested for HIV.

McDonald laughed.

"I was in a relationship with a man I loved dearly," McDonald recalls. "I was like, 'Lady, please, you must be joking ... but, sure, come on with it.'"

McDonald, 30 at the time, was working the switchboard for a Jackson cleaners when someone from the state Department of Health called and told her she had tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS. She thought it was one of her friends pulling a prank.

"But then the person said, 'Would you believe me if I read you your Social Security number? 428 ...'" McDonald says, the memory glazing her eyes. "When I heard those numbers, my world shattered. I was in a committed relationship. How could this happen to me?"

McDonald's partner, who eventually died from the disease, unknowingly passed it to her.

McDonald is one of a growing number of African-American women who have been infected with HIV. About 50 percent of those with HIV will develop AIDS within 10 years.

Recent statistics reveal African-American women represent almost 70 percent of new HIV cases in the United States each year. In Louisiana, African-American women represent about 25 percent of the new HIV cases, health officials said.

Baton Rouge is tied with Miami for the nation's second-highest AIDS case rate, according to new figures from the federal

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New Orleans occupies the seventh spot on the list, which is based on AIDS diagnoses in the last three years.

Many Americans are oblivious to the problem. Vice President Dick Cheney said during an October debate he was "not aware" of the toll AIDS is taking on African-American women.

"Believe me, if I got it, nobody's safe," says McDonald, who has a teenage daughter. "People want to label folks with HIV as nasty. If you tell them you got it from your mate, they don't want to hear that."

"It's either you were out on the street, sleeping with five or six men a night, or you were doing (intravenous) drugs. The truth is too boring, or it hits a little too close to home."

"HIV touches everybody's world. The only way it doesn't is if you don't have sex - period," she said.

McDonald, meanwhile, married about a year ago. She found her husband in an HIV support group. He, too, has the virus.

"At the medical center where I work now, one day, this woman was crying and screaming and I asked her what was wrong," McDonald says. "She said, 'I just found out I'm HIV positive.' I said, 'So am I. Now dry them tears and let's start learning to cope.' She was shocked to find out I had it."

"People think if you've got HIV, you're some ol' broke down somebody, not able to work. I've got a 401K and I'm saving for the future. I'm a God-fearing woman who is enjoying life with my hus-

band and daughter."

While no cure has been found, medication can prolong the lives of those infected. McDonald takes nine pills and two shots a day. The medicine is paid for through the state Health Department's AIDS Drug Assistance Program.

The program, which serves about 1,100 Louisianans, helps indigent people afford the costly drugs used to fight HIV. Those eligible don't have private insurance, are not eligible for Medicaid or Veterans Affairs benefits and make less than about \$34,000 yearly.

"Most people don't understand the difference in HIV and AIDS," says McDonald, sitting at a table inside a Baton Rouge convenience store. "Let's say this room is full of water. If a person has full-blown AIDS, the water is all the way up to the ceiling. My medication keeps the water at floor level."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40% of Americans with AIDS live in the South, and 46% of new HIV/AIDS cases are reported there, primarily among African-American, Latinos, and women.

State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise said 1,400 Baton Rouge area residents have AIDS and 1,600 have died from it. "The rates of new cases of AIDS have reached an alarming rate," he said, "not only in Louisiana but particularly in Baton Rouge." Cerise said cases are growing in the heterosexual population.

Monday, January 10, 2005

Thank you for your participation in this study. This is the first of four short questionnaires. Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**1. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**2. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in preventing and protecting you or other people against the HIV risk?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**3. Would you read more about the HIV issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**4. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**5. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**6. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**7. Would you pay more taxes to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**8. Do you think HIV is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**9. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**10. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**11. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**12. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**13. Do you think there is a real threat of HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**14. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**15. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**16. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

Thank you. Now please go on reading the second story.



## COASTAL EROSION THREATENS OIL INDUSTRY

BY STUART SILVERSTEIN

Louisiana's coast is the home of a major segment of the country's oil and gas industry. About \$100 billion of energy infrastructure, including critical oil reserves, is linked to the coast of Louisiana. Cities and ports in south Louisiana support and supply the rigs working the gulf's massive oil and gas fields. Hurricane Ivan reminded officials what this offshore production means to the nation: even the short interruption of supply caused by the hurricane forced a spike in already-high oil prices. At the beginning of this year, Governor Blanco met with state officials to discuss coastal restoration plans and the future of oil industry.

"Louisiana wetlands protect thousands of miles of pipelines carrying oil and gas from offshore rigs along with interstate pipelines supplying consumers of every stripe and size across the nation. Allowing the erosion to continue would first constrict, then strangle, this flow of energy to homes, cars and businesses," she said.

Louisiana dodged a massive natural disaster in September when Hurricane Ivan, which seemed on course to hit New Orleans, veered away at the last minute. The near miss was a dramatic reminder of what could happen.

"Had Ivan hit New Orleans, the toll in lives lost and property destroyed would have rivaled anything in recent U.S. history. With barrier islands and thousands of square miles of marsh lost to erosion, there was little left to buffer Ivan's winds and waves. Even with the massive evacuation, thousands could have died in the

storm surge, trapped in a city that is largely below sea level", Blanco said.

No government has the power to stop -- or turn -- even a small hurricane. But in Louisiana's case, government does have the power to reverse federal policies that have led to the loss of Louisiana coastline.

Ivan destroyed some of the few remaining barrier islands. But even without a hurricane's ravages, much of the state is washing away day by day, posing a threat to people's lives and to the nation's economy. "And, of course, it is not just Louisiana's problem; it is a national problem requiring a national solution. This is America's Wetland," said Gerald Duszynski, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources acting assistant secretary.

The picture is bleak, but not hopeless. The roots of the erosion problem lie in the unintended consequences of federal efforts to provide for the nation's needs. High, strong levees were built to keep commerce flowing on the Mississippi River and to protect residents in its broad, rich valley from floods. Navigation canals were cut through marsh and swamp to allow development of oil and gas reserves.

Unfortunately, levees kept silt-laden floods from replenishing the land, and canals channeled damaging saltwater into fragile freshwater marshes.

"Over the past 14 years, we've learned to work with a network of five federal agencies, from the Corps of Engineers to the Commerce Department's National Oceanographic and Atmospheric

Administration. We know that the past approach of a project here and an effort there will not work. Only a comprehensive effort across all our diverse coastline will succeed," Blanco added.

More federal help is needed. Louisiana asked for \$1.2 billion in the pending Water Resources Development Act to begin coastal protection. Unfortunately, this federal funding is tied up in the U.S. Senate. But even if the act passes with money for Louisiana intact, it's only an authorization. The source of real money to help stop the loss of America's Wetland lies offshore. "Securing our fair share of federal proceeds from oil and gas produced on the outer continental shelf off the Louisiana coast would provide a continuing and dependable investment in projects to help stem the ongoing loss," said Blanco.

Oil and gas production off Louisiana's coast pumps an average of \$5 billion into the federal treasury. Dedicating just a fraction of the federal revenue from Louisiana offshore production could stop the loss of this regional wetland.

Without a major effort to restore barrier islands that now act as speed bumps for such waves, much of the coast's fragile wetlands that protect inland oilfield facilities will disappear in 30 years. Though President Bush submitted a 2005 budget that included \$8 million for the restoration project, only about \$5.5 million of that money will be released for use on the program this year. State officials, however, say that more federal help is needed to make a difference.

Monday, January 10, 2005

Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**1. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**2. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in environmental protection?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**3. Would you read more about the coastal erosion issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**4. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**5. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**6. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent wetland loss?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**7. Would you pay more taxes to prevent wetland loss?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**8. Do you think coastal erosion is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**9. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**10. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**11. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**12. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**13. Do you think coastal erosion represents a real threat?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**14. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**15. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**16. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5



## MORE FUNDING NECESSARY TO FIGHT THE GROWING RATE OF HIV CASES

BY ADAM STONE

Baton Rouge is tied with Miami for the nation's second-highest AIDS case rate, according to new figures from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New Orleans occupies the seventh spot on the list, which is based on AIDS diagnoses in 2004.

In other AIDS-related news, Louisiana has received about 9 percent more federal money than last year to help low-income infected people get life-prolonging antiviral drugs.

Baton Rouge's high ranking, falling right behind New York, is based on per capita figures, which are found by dividing the total number of cases by a city's population and multiplying that number by 100,000.

Baton Rouge reported 49.5 cases per 100,000 residents in 2004, and New Orleans reported 39.1 cases per 100,000 residents.

Both rates were far above the national average among similar-sized cities, which for New Orleans' category is 19.3 cases per 100,000 residents and for Baton Rouge's category is 9.1 cases per 100,000 residents.

Despite the availability of

HIV drugs that can delay full-blown AIDS, the number of AIDS cases statewide rose by 21 percent in the last three years, said Amy Zapata, surveillance manager for Louisiana's HIV/AIDS program.

The number of diagnoses in Baton Rouge increased steadily during that period, she said, while New Orleans' year-by-year totals were relatively stable.

Health officials said there are several possible explanations for the increases, such as:

- People finding out they are infected too late to benefit from treatment that can keep them healthy longer.

- Some medicines losing their effectiveness.

- Lack of access to care.

- Lack of information about the ways the virus is spread.

For this fiscal year, the federal government gave the state \$13.8 million, up from \$12.7 million last year, to help needy Louisianians get antiviral drugs. Among the amendments approved is the restoration of \$720,000 to a condom distribution program that brings in federal cash for HIV/AIDS treatment.

And even though Louisiana

is receiving more money for prescriptions, the money is for HIV drugs alone and not for medicine that fights AIDS-related infections such as thrush and *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, health officials said.

The appropriation also does not cover programs such as the dental center at Charity Hospital's HIV outpatient clinic and task force services like the food bank and meal-delivery program. Grant money for those activities is expected to be announced soon, said Zapata.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40% of Americans with AIDS live in the South, and 46% of new HIV/AIDS cases are reported there, primarily among African-American, Latinos, and women.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco set up programs to spread information about the disease. Activities such as forums and informational fairs will take place at Southern University, Louisiana State University and Baton Rouge Community College as part of the spotlight on HIV/AIDS awareness.

Friday, January 14, 2005

Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**1. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**2. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in preventing and protecting you or other people against the HIV risk?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**3. Would you read more about the HIV issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**4. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**5. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**6. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**7. Would you pay more taxes to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**8. Do you think HIV is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**9. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**10. Did you find the story convincing?**

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1	2	3	4	5

**11. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

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1	2	3	4	5

**12. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**13. Do you think there is a real threat of HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
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**14. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**15. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**16. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5



## HURRICANE THREAT MAKES A CASE FOR ACCELERATING COASTAL RESTORATION

BY JENNIFER MOORE

The Federal Emergency Management Agency lists a hurricane strike on New Orleans as one of the most dire threats to the nation, up there with a large earthquake in California or a terrorist attack on New York City. Even the Red Cross no longer opens hurricane shelters in the city, claiming the risk to its workers is too great.

Congress and federal officials should look at the disruption of oil and gas production caused by Hurricane Ivan and Tropical Storm Matthew and consider the consequences of continued delays in beginning the federal-state effort to restore Louisiana's coastal wetlands, state and local officials said at the beginning of this year.

Louisiana's wetlands are home to thousands of oil and gas wells, production facilities, and facilities that service the huge offshore oil-production industry in the Gulf of Mexico. But many of those facilities were built long before the state's coastline was tattered by erosion and can no longer be expected to withstand the effects of storm surge and waves accompanying a major hurricane or even a small tropical storm, said Governor Kathleen Blanco.

Though President Bush submitted a 2005 budget that included \$8 million for the restoration project, only about \$5.5 million of that money will be released for

use on the program this year, said Gerald Duszynski, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources acting assistant secretary. The state will match that money, he said.

Congress failed to approve a water resources bill that included authorization of the \$1.9 billion coastal restoration program before adjourning in December. It's not expected to take up a new version of the bill until at least March, officials told the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Restoration and Conservation. The \$8 million Bush included in the budget for Louisiana represents about 10 percent of all Army Corps of Engineers money to be spent on planning of environmental projects nationwide.

Corps and state officials expect to use part of the money to establish a science and technology program and hire its director. The program will provide independent scientific information about the potential success of proposed projects and of the techniques to be used to restore various types of marshes and coastline.

Officials hope to complete a feasibility study for rebuilding a series of barrier islands and shoreline beaches along the southeast Louisiana coast. The study would be used to push for money for the rebuilding project, either as part of the federal Louisiana Coastal Area plan, or

in a separate authorization request to Congress.

Money also will be used to continue studying the best way of reducing the environmental effects of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet. The Corps has a study under way to determine whether the shortcut from the Gulf of Mexico to the Industrial Canal in New Orleans should be reduced in depth or whether locks or other structures should be built along its length to limit erosion and the effects of hurricane storm surge.

Officials hope to have money left to pay part of the cost of three projects that would eventually be moved into the Louisiana Coastal Area program.

More federal help is needed. Louisiana asked for \$1.2 billion in the pending Water Resources Development Act to begin coastal protection. Unfortunately, this federal funding is tied up in the U.S. Senate. But even if the act passes with money for Louisiana intact, it's only an authorization. The source of real money to help stop the loss of America's Wetland lies offshore. "Securing our fair share of federal proceeds from oil and gas produced on the outer continental shelf off the Louisiana coast would provide a continuing and dependable investment in projects to help stem the ongoing loss," said Blanco.

Friday, January 14, 2005

This is the last questionnaire. Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**1. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**2. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in environmental protection?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**3. Would you read more about the coastal erosion issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**4. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**5. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**6. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent coastal erosion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**7. Would you pay more taxes to prevent coastal erosion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**8. Do you think coastal erosion is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**9. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**10. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**11. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**12. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**13. Do you think coastal erosion represents a real threat?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**14. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**15. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**16. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**17. What is your primary source of news?**

Newspapers	Magazines	Television	Internet	Radio
1	2	3	4	5

**18. How often do you read/watch/listen to the news?**

Daily	Every other day	Once a week	Sometimes	Never
1	2	3	4	5

Your age:\_\_\_ Gender: Male\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_

**THANK YOU!**

**APPENDIX B**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE STORIES WITH MULTIPLE**  
**SOURCES\***

\* The stories are arranged in an abcd order. Other versions were in the bcda, cdab, and dabc orders.

**Consent form**  
**COVERING LOUISIANA'S PROBLEMS**

This study is being conducted to learn more about what characteristics of news stories help people understand better and remember more about the issues journalists cover. It is being conducted by Raluca Cozma, master degree candidate at theanship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University, as part of her degree thesis.

Your participation is voluntary and your answers will be kept confidential. You don't have to answer all of the questions, and you may withdraw from participation at any time. You will not be penalized in any way. You must be 18 or older to participate.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact Dr. Renita Coleman, major professor in the thesis committee, (225-578-2045), Robert Mathews, IRB Chair, (225-578-8692), or Raluca Cozma, master degree candidate, (225-343-9164).

If you would like to continue with the study, **please sign this form** and go on with reading the materials included and answer the questions following each article. Thank you for your participation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your participation in this study about how reporters cover some of Louisiana's problems.**

**Please read each of the four articles thoroughly and then answer the short questionnaire following each story. This should take no more than 30 minutes.**

**There is no right or wrong answer, and your information will be kept confidential. If you have any comments, please write them down on the bottom of this page.**

## BATON ROUGE HIV CASES GROWING AT ALARMING RATE

BY NICOLE BUCKLEY

Mildred McDonald was getting her annual physical in 1995 when the nurse asked whether she would like to be tested for HIV.

McDonald laughed.

"I was in a relationship with a man I loved dearly," McDonald recalls. "I was like, 'Lady, please, you must be joking... but, sure, come on with it.'"

McDonald, 30 at the time, was working the switchboard for a Jackson cleaners when someone from the state Department of Health called and told her she had tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS. She thought it was one of her friends pulling a prank.

"But then the person said, 'Would you believe me if I read you your Social Security number? 428 ...'" McDonald says, the memory glazing her eyes. "When I heard those numbers, my world shattered. I was in a committed relationship. How could this happen to me?"

McDonald's partner, who eventually died from the disease, unknowingly passed it to her.

McDonald is one of a growing number of African-American women who have been infected with HIV. About 50 percent of those with HIV will develop AIDS within 10 years.

Recent statistics reveal African-American women represent almost 70 percent of new HIV cases in the United States each year. In Louisiana, African-American women represent about 25 percent of the new HIV cases, health officials said.

Baton Rouge is tied with Miami for the nation's second-highest AIDS case rate, according to new figures from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New Orleans occupies the seventh spot on the list, which is based on AIDS diagnoses in the last three years.

Despite the availability of

HIV drugs that can delay full-blown AIDS, the number of AIDS cases statewide rose by 21 percent from in the last three years, said Amy Zapata, surveillance manager for Louisiana's HIV/AIDS program.

The number of diagnoses in Baton Rouge increased steadily during that period, she said, while New Orleans' year-by-year totals were relatively stable.

Many Americans are oblivious to the problem. Vice President Dick Cheney said during an October debate he was "not aware" of the toll AIDS is taking on African-American women.

"Believe me, if I got it, nobody's safe," says McDonald, who has a teenage daughter. "People want to label folks with HIV as nasty. If you tell them you got it from your mate, they don't want to hear that."

"HIV touches everybody's world. The only way it doesn't is if you don't have sex - period," she said.

McDonald, meanwhile, married about a year ago. She found her husband in an HIV support group. He, too, has the virus.

"At the medical center where I work now, one day, this woman was crying and screaming and I asked her what was wrong," McDonald says. "She said, 'I just found out I'm HIV positive.' I said, 'So am I. Now dry them tears and let's start learning to cope.' She was shocked to find out I had it."

"People think if you've got HIV, you're some ol' broke down somebody, not able to work. I've got a 401K and I'm saving for the future. I'm a God-fearing woman who is enjoying life with my husband and daughter."

While no cure has been found, medication can prolong the lives of those infected. McDonald takes nine pills and two shots a day. The medicine is paid for

through the state Health Department's AIDS Drug Assistance Program.

The program, which serves about 1,100 Louisianans, helps indigent people afford the costly drugs used to fight HIV. "Those eligible don't have private insurance, are not eligible for Medicaid or Veterans Affairs benefits and make less than about \$34,000 yearly," said Bob Reilly, director of the Assistance Program.

"Most people don't understand the difference in HIV and AIDS," says McDonald, sitting at a table inside a Baton Rouge convenience store. "Let's say this room is full of water. If a person has full-blown AIDS, the water is all the way up to the ceiling. My medication keeps the water at floor level."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40% of Americans with AIDS live in the South, and 46% of new HIV/AIDS cases are reported there, primarily among African-American, Latinos, and women.

State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise said 1,400 Baton Rouge area residents have AIDS and 1,600 have died from it. "The rates of new cases of AIDS have reached an alarming rate," he said, "not only in Louisiana but particularly in Baton Rouge." Cerise said cases are growing in the heterosexual population. The state received about 9 percent more federal money than last year to help low-income people get anti-retroviral drugs. This year Louisiana received \$13.8 million in Ryan White funds, up from \$12.7 million last year. NO/AIDS Task Force Executive Director Noel Twilbeck noted that the federal money is for HIV drugs alone and is not for medicine that fights AIDS-related infections such as thrush and pneumonia.

Wednesday, January 12, 2005

Thank you for your participation in this study. This is the first of four short questionnaires. Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**1. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**2. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in preventing and protecting you or other people against the HIV risk?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**17. Would you read more about the HIV issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**18. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**19. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**20. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**21. Would you pay more taxes to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**22. Do you think HIV is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**23. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**24. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**25. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**26. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**27. Do you think there is a real threat of HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**28. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**29. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**30. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

Thank you. Now please go on reading the second story.



**COASTAL EROSION THREATENS OIL INDUSTRY**

BY STUART SILVERSTEIN

Louisiana's coast is the home of a major segment of the country's oil and gas industry. About \$100 billion of energy infrastructure, including critical oil reserves, is linked to the coast of Louisiana. Cities and ports in south Louisiana support and supply the rigs working the gulf's massive oil and gas fields. Hurricane Ivan reminded officials what this offshore production means to the nation: even the short interruption of supply caused by the hurricane forced a spike in already-high oil prices.

Louisiana wetlands protect thousands of miles of pipelines carrying oil and gas from offshore rigs along with interstate pipelines supplying consumers of every stripe and size across the nation. Allowing the erosion to continue would first constrict, then strangle, this flow of energy to homes, cars and businesses.

Congress and federal officials should look at the disruption of oil and gas production caused by Hurricane Ivan and Tropical Storm Matthew and consider the consequences of continued delays in beginning the federal-state effort to restore Louisiana's coastal wetlands, state and local officials said at the beginning of this year.

Thousands of oil and gas wells, production facilities, and facilities that service the huge offshore oil-production industry in the Gulf of Mexico were built long before the state's coastline was tattered by erosion and can no longer be expected to withstand the effects of storm surge and waves accompanying a major hurricane or even a small tropical storm, said Gregory Stone, a coastal geologist and director of Louisiana State University's

Coastal Studies Institute.

He told members of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Restoration and Conservation that waves as high as 60 feet were measured at several buoys offshore as Ivan skirted the mouth of the Mississippi River, and even though the waves would diminish as the storm approached the shallow coastline, Ivan would have devastated facilities once protected by wetlands.

"I'm not here to be an alarmist, but to tell the truth about what I saw," Stone said before running a video clip taken aboard the Deepwater Horizon semisubmersible drilling rig at the height of Ivan's winds.

The rig is being used by BP to drill in 6,800-foot-deep water about 150 miles south of Grand Isle, Stone said.

A worker on the rig filmed waves rocketing up through the center of the platform, with water coming over the deck, 60 feet above sea level.

Stacy Methvin, president of Shell Pipeline Co. LP and a member of the commission, agreed that the storm has been an eye-opener for the industry.

She said the storm sheared a three-mile section of one company pipeline and moved it more than a mile away. And that was only a small part of the 10,000 miles of pipelines affected by the storm.

"The storm went directly over 150 platforms," Methvin said. "At Shell, we had one drilling rig secured and evacuated people, and when they returned, it wasn't where it was originally located. It was found 70 miles away."

At the end of last year the Minerals Management Service

reported lost production of 462,000 barrels per day of oil and 1.6 billion cubic feet per day of natural gas in the Gulf, based on reports from 19 major oil producers.

Since platforms began being evacuated for fear of hurricane hit, shut-in wells have lost 3.4 percent of the Gulf's yearly production of oil, and almost 2 percent of the yearly production of gas.

Crude oil futures on the Nymex hit a new high at the end of last year at \$54.93 per barrel. The price of natural gas at Henry Hub in Louisiana closed at \$5.65 per thousand cubic feet, well below record wintertime highs posted in 2003.

"The price of oil could easily have hit \$75 a barrel if this storm had hit 100 miles to the west," said Ted Falgout, director of the port of Port Fourchon and a member of the commission.

Though the huge offshore waves produced by Ivan would taper off as they moved into shallower water and onto Louisiana's shoreline, Stone said they still would wreak havoc with oilfield equipment and pipelines in the state's coastal marshes.

Without a major effort to restore barrier islands that now act as speed bumps for such waves, much of the coast's fragile wetlands that protect inland oilfield facilities will disappear in 30 years. Though President Bush submitted a 2005 budget that included \$8 million for the restoration project, only about \$5.5 million of that money will be released for use on the program this year. State officials, however, say that more federal help is needed to make a difference.

Wednesday, January 12, 2005

Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**31. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**32. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in environmental protection?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**33. Would you read more about the coastal erosion issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**34. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**35. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**36. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent wetland loss?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**37. Would you pay more taxes to prevent wetland loss?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**38. Do you think coastal erosion is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**39. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**40. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**41. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**42. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**43. Do you think coastal erosion represents a real threat?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**44. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**45. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**46. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5



## MORE FUNDING NECESSARY TO FIGHT THE GROWING HIV EPIDEMIC

BY ADAM STONE

Baton Rouge is tied with Miami for the nation's second-highest AIDS case rate, according to new figures from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. New Orleans occupies the seventh spot on the list, which is based on AIDS diagnoses in 2004.

In other AIDS-related news, Louisiana has received about 9 percent more federal money than last year to help low-income infected people get life-prolonging antiviral drugs.

Baton Rouge's high ranking, falling right behind New York, is based on per capita figures, which are found by dividing the total number of cases by a city's population and multiplying that number by 100,000.

Baton Rouge reported 49.5 cases per 100,000 residents in 2004, and New Orleans reported 39.1 cases per 100,000 residents.

Both rates were far above the national average among similar-sized cities, which for New Orleans' category is 19.3 cases per 100,000 residents and for Baton Rouge's category is 9.1 cases per 100,000 residents.

Despite the availability of HIV drugs that can delay full-blown AIDS, the number of AIDS cases statewide rose by 21 percent in the last three years, said Amy Zapata, surveillance manager for Louisiana's HIV/AIDS program.

The number of diagnoses in Baton Rouge increased steadily during that period, she said, while New Orleans' year-by-year totals were relatively stable.

Health officials said there are several possible explanations for the increases, such as:

- People finding out they are infected too late to benefit from treatment that can keep them healthy longer.

- Some medicines losing their effectiveness.

- Lack of access to care.

- Lack of information about the ways the virus is spread.

For this fiscal year, the federal government gave the state \$13.8 million, up from \$12.7 million last year, to help needy Louisianians get antiviral drugs. Among the amendments approved is the restoration of \$720,000 to a condom distribution program that brings in federal cash for HIV/AIDS treatment.

NO/AIDS Task Force Executive Director Noel Twilbeck had a mixed reaction to the increase.

"We're happy about it," he said, but added that the demand for the medications from a steadily increasing number of people who are living longer probably means the money will run out.

If that happens, people in the New Orleans area can turn to the Charity Hospital pharmacy, Twilbeck said, but people elsewhere in Louisiana will have to hope for more federal money.

And even though Louisiana is receiving more money for prescriptions, the money is for HIV drugs alone and not for medicine that fights AIDS-related infections such as thrush and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia, Twilbeck said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40% of Americans with AIDS live in the South, and 46% of new HIV/AIDS cases are reported there, primarily among blacks, Latinos, and women.

State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Fred Cerise said 1,400 Baton Rouge area residents have AIDS and 1,600 have died from it. "The rates of new cases of AIDS have reached an alarming rate," he said, "not only in Louisiana but particu-

larly in Baton Rouge." Cerise said cases are growing in the heterosexual population.

One key factor in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS is to get those infected on medication, and "getting them to come out of the closet with the fact that they have HIV/AIDS," said Eddie Sandifer, co-director of the Southern AIDS Commission, a group that provides food and other resources for those infected with HIV or AIDS.

"Denial is one of the big problems, and, of course, protection is not being used like it was for a while there," Sandifer said.

Health officials have used mobile units, giving residents in rural areas more access to health care workers. About 7,000 people have been screened in more than two years through these units. They've also gotten valuable one-on-one time with health care workers. Urban areas have the highest concentration of HIV cases, but people there have easier access to health care and other resources.

Face-to-face contact with a health care provider is important for people who miss television and radio commercials about HIV, don't have access to the Internet and don't read newspapers, said Charles Thomas, an AIDS activist and resident of Grace House in Baton Rouge, which provides housing for people with HIV/AIDS. Thomas was diagnosed with AIDS in February.

"They're unaware," he said. "And then when they catch something, they're like, 'How did this happen?'"

Combating similar ignorance of HIV is one of the best ways to ensure the number of new HIV/AIDS cases in the state does not continue to rise said Grace House director Leonard Williams.

Tuesday, January 18, 2005

Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**47. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**48. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in preventing and protecting you or other people against the HIV risk?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**49. Would you read more about the HIV issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**50. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**51. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**52. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**53. Would you pay more taxes to prevent HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**54. Do you think HIV is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**55. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**56. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**57. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**58. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**59. Do you think there is a real threat of HIV spread?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**60. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**61. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**62. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5



## HURRICANE THREAT MAKES A CASE FOR ACCELERATING COASTAL RESTORATION

BY JENNIFER MOORE

The Federal Emergency Management Agency lists a hurricane strike on New Orleans as one of the most dire threats to the nation, up there with a large earthquake in California or a terrorist attack on New York City. Even the Red Cross no longer opens hurricane shelters in the city, claiming the risk to its workers is too great.

Climatologists predict that powerful storms may occur more frequently this century, while rising sea level from global warming is putting low-lying coasts at greater risk. "It's not if it will happen," says University of New Orleans geologist Shea Penland. "It's when."

Congress and federal officials should look at the disruption of oil and gas production caused by Hurricane Ivan and Tropical Storm Matthew and consider the consequences of continued delays in beginning the federal-state effort to restore Louisiana's coastal wetlands, state and local officials said at the beginning of this year.

Louisiana's wetlands are home to thousands of oil and gas wells, production facilities, and facilities that service the huge offshore oil-production industry in the Gulf of Mexico. But many of those facilities were built long before the state's coastline was tattered by erosion and can no longer be expected to withstand the effects of storm surge and waves accompanying a major hurricane or even a small tropical storm, said Gregory Stone, a coastal geologist and director of Louisiana State University's

Coastal Studies Institute.

Though President Bush submitted a 2005 budget that included \$8 million for the restoration project, only about \$5.5 million of that money will be released for use on the program this year, said Gerald Duszynski, Louisiana Department of Natural Resources acting assistant secretary. The state will match that money, he said.

Congress failed to approve a water resources bill that included authorization of the \$1.9 billion coastal restoration program before adjourning in December. It's not expected to take up a new version of the bill until at least March, officials told the Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal Restoration and Conservation.

The \$8 million Bush included in the budget for Louisiana represents about 10 percent of all Army Corps of Engineers money to be spent on planning of environmental projects nationwide.

But one member of the commission was critical of state officials for placing more emphasis on finding money to keep the Saints football team in New Orleans than finding ways to pay for coastal restoration.

"We wouldn't be squabbling over the Saints if Ivan had taken a path over Grand Isle," said Abbeville land manager Judge Edwards. "We're looking at a tsunami-like event that's going to happen here in this state, and we're putting more emphasis on a football team that has trouble winning. It's very frustrating."

Corps and state officials expect to use part of the money to

establish a science and technology program and hire its director. The program will provide independent scientific information about the potential success of proposed projects and of the techniques to be used to restore various types of marshes and coastline.

Officials hope to complete a feasibility study for rebuilding a series of barrier islands and shoreline beaches along the southeast Louisiana coast. The study would be used to push for money for the rebuilding project, either as part of the federal Louisiana Coastal Area plan, or in a separate authorization request to Congress.

Money also will be used to continue studying the best way of reducing the environmental effects of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet. The Corps has a study under way to determine whether the shortcut from the Gulf of Mexico to the Industrial Canal in New Orleans should be reduced in depth or whether locks or other structures should be built along its length to limit erosion and the effects of hurricane storm surge.

Officials hope to have money left to pay part of the cost of three projects that would eventually be moved into the Louisiana Coastal Area program.

The projects include a diversion of Mississippi River water into the Barataria Basin at Myrtle Grove, a diversion into the Maurepas Swamp at Hope Canal, and increasing the flow of Mississippi water into Bayou Lafourche through a new diversion.

Tuesday, January 18, 2005

This is the last questionnaire. Please circle one number for each question below that best describes how you feel. Numbers “1” and “5” indicate strong feelings; boxes “2” and “4” indicate weaker feelings; and box “3” indicates that you are undecided.

**63. How interesting did you consider the story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**64. Did this story encourage you to become more involved in environmental protection?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**65. Would you read more about the coastal erosion issue?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**66. Would you recommend this story to a friend?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**67. How important was the story to you personally?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**68. Would you favor increased state funding to prevent coastal erosion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**69. Would you pay more taxes to prevent coastal erosion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**70. Do you think coastal erosion is a vital issue to society?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**71. How truthful was the story in your opinion?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**72. Did you find the story convincing?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**73. Did you find some statements of the sources in the story questionable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**74. How accurate do you think this story was?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**75. Do you think coastal erosion represents a real threat?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**76. Were the government sources in this story believable?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**77. How credible was this story to you overall?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**78. How reasonable did you find the choice of sources for this story?**

Not at all				Extremely
1	2	3	4	5

**79. What is your primary source of news?**

Newspapers	Magazines	Television	Internet	Radio
1	2	3	4	5

**18. How often do you read/watch/listen to the news?**

Daily	Every other day	Once a week	Sometimes	Never
1	2	3	4	5

Your age:\_\_\_ Gender: Male\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_

**THANK YOU!**

## VITA

Raluca Cozma was born in Piatra Neamt, Romania, on March 19, 1980. She attended The University of Bucharest where she earned the degree of Bachelor of Arts in journalism and mass communication sciences in June of 2003. In order to graduate, she had to conduct a research project that analyzed the state of environmental reporting in Romania. Currently, Raluca Cozma is enrolled in the doctoral degree program in Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Her research interests include risk communication, media effects, visual communication, and foreign correspondence. She has worked as a broadcast reporter and image editor for several TV stations. Her expertise helped her in the teaching experience at the Manship School broadcast laboratory. Raluca Cozma has also been an investigative reporter for the first Romanian student newspaper in English, *The Bullet*.