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Facts over feelings

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Facts over feelings.

How citizens evaluate responses to uncertainties about power lines.

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Introduction

To ensure power supply security, electricity transmission system operators (TSOs) have to upscale high-voltage overhead power lines. However, upscaling frequently meets opposition. Opposition can be caused by uncertainties about risks and benefits and might lead to costly delays (e.g., Linder, 1995; Wiedeman & Boemer, 2016). To minimize opposition, TSOs and related public agents need to respond to these uncertainties in a credible and convincing (i.e., effective) manner.

Theoretical foundation

Effective risk communication is associated with sharing facts. However, factual responses can be perceived as "cold" and technocratic. To add warmth, it has been suggested to also refer to values or show personal commitment (e.g., De Bruijn, 2011, De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 1999; De Wit, Das, & Vet, 2008). For example, when confronted with uncertainties about the impact of electro-magnetic fields on local residents' health, a TSO spokesperson can share scientific findings as well as emphasize that her organisation and the government will never take any irresponsible risks.

Research question and research method

Although it is generally assumed that a factual response is more effective when warmth is added, empirical evidence for this assumption is lacking. To fill this scientific gap, we conducted systematic research. The findings further contribute to society because they help to improve effective communication and opinion-formation about power lines.

The research consisted of three phases: In the first phase meetings were held during which experts identified the most relevant uncertainties about overhead power lines. Furthermore, the experts formulated warm and cold responses. The effectiveness (credibility and persuasiveness) of these responses was assessed with a large-scale representative survey ($N = 881$) in Phase 2. Phase 3 consisted of an experimental survey testing the hypothesis that a factual response is more effective when warmth is added with videos that were randomly distributed ($N = 412$).

Results

The most important finding of our research is that—in contrast with what is often suggested—a factual response to uncertainties about high-voltage overhead power lines is not more effective when warmth is added (although warmth increases feelings of sympathy).

Relevance of the paper to the panel topic

This paper integrates psychology and public administration in several ways. First, it investigates judgments of citizens in their interactions with public services. Second, it showcases the use of experimental methods to test theory. Third, the results can affect decisions of public managers and politicians with regard to risk communication on high-voltage power lines.

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