

Addressing the Fire in the Room:
Frameworks to Mitigate Risk of Wildfires in California

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interplay between three distinct communicative perspectives (strategic, persuasive, and instructional) with four communication theories (attitudinal inoculation, IDEA model, sublime, and relational dialectics) in order to suggest policy recommendations for state leaders in California. These recommendations were presented as methodological frameworks that, if implemented, will lower risky behavioral patterns and increase awareness of dangers in the hope of mitigating the number of wildfires in California.

The paper opened by exploring the background of the issue, followed by examination of all seven elements in a review of literature. An analysis of the elements saw synthesis between several communicative perspectives and theoretical frameworks. In the following pages, the paper detailed specific ethical considerations if the issue remained unsolved and later discussed frameworks to help mitigate the issue. These included modifying behavior through attitudinal inoculation campaigns and educating publics using principles of the sublime. Lastly, the findings of the paper were summarized and with a concluding call to action.

Keywords: Communication, California, Wildfire, Safety, Behavior, Education

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Introduction

Background

School closures. Remote workdays. Mandatory evacuations. Loss of life, limb, and property. *Smoke days* [emphasis added]. These actions transpire from rapidly spreading and uncontrolled wildfires. These infernos are sometimes deemed an act of God, human sabotage, or worse – negligence. Nevertheless, wildfires are a growing threat to communities, infrastructure, and ways of life for Californians. In recent years, these blazes are starting from increasingly bizarre methods of human-caused ignition (Cart, 2024).

By now, much has been written and discussed of the gender reveal party in California which sparked a devastating wildfire that destroyed five homes, over 20,000 acres, and claimed the life of a firefighter (Canon, 2021). While this incident provoked internet ridicule and criticism across the country, there is no slowdown of asinine reasons why humans continue to start wildfires. However, the simplest reason they ignite is usually due to “people...not using appropriate judgement” (Acuna, 2024, as cited in Cart, 2024, n.p.).

The destruction of Lahaina, Hawaii by a savage wildfire displaced thousands (Omer, 2024). This fire was completely preventable, and the after-effects are concerning. Property moguls lined up to buy the burned-out ruins of Lahaina and turn the plots into something other than ancestral homes (Cerullo, 2023). Even worse, no matter the location of a wildfire, the risks of losing the ability to insure your home follow. Underwriters like State Farm have canceled thousands of policies in California (Darmiento, 2024). An insurance fallout of this scale has significant ramifications for an already unaffordable part of the country. If homeowners, renters, landlords, and corporate tenants are unable to secure fire insurance, they cannot continue to live in these areas and support local communities (Darmiento, 2024).

Problem Statement

The state faces significant wildfire risks each and every year, with no end in sight (Ohanian, 2023). These issues affect the lives of every Californian. Leaders can invoke three distinct perspectives to address these concerns. They include strategic, persuasive, and instructional communication. Furthermore, substantial literature has been written on theories which have found success in modifying behavioral patterns and educating participants. It is argued that attitudinal inoculation, the IDEA model, rhetoric of the sublime, and relational dialectics are the contending frameworks for addressing the issue. Thus, a question is developed: What methodological frameworks can California policymakers advocate for if they wish to modify behavioral patterns and educate publics to reduce wildfire risk?

Next Steps

Now that the background of the issue has been established and the purpose of this paper articulated, a review of literature will be conducted. This will be followed by an analysis which synthesizes three distinct communicative perspectives with four theoretical frameworks. Ethical implications will be discussed, with two policy recommendations proposed as solutions to the aforementioned question. Lastly, a summary will be included which restates the objectives and findings of this paper.

Review of Literature

Strategic Communication

To begin, strategic communication is a multifaceted, interdisciplinary research area that scholars believe is historically under-researched (Thomas & Stephens, 2015; Hallahan et al., 2007). Academics continue to identify the importance of strategic communicative practices; however, theoretical studies have seen constrained publication (Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

Moreso, the strategic communication subfield can be considered relatively novel when compared to more established disciplines like interpersonal communication (Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

As such, a singular definition of strategic communication is difficult to come by with researchers unable to condense competing definitions (Thomas & Stephens, 2015). Scholars trend to giving their own definition of strategic communication with individualized styles that best suit their research (Zerfass et al., 2018; Thomas & Stephens, 2015). However, a loose definition of strategic communication can be as follows: Strategic communication is a deliberate message between an organization and their message receivers.

Argenti et al. (2005) note that strategic communication attempts to “align[ed] with the [organization’s] overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” (p. 83). Gruing, (2006) believes that strategic communication is more like a bridge between organizations, and is inherently institutional in nature. Hallahan et al. (2007) subsequently describes strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). As approached from the realm of management, Thomas & Stephens (2015) draw readers to the work of Jarzabkowski et al. (2007). The authors note that there are many different people in an organization that use communicative actions and verbal/nonverbal expressions to accomplish a goal or send a message. However, Thomas & Stephens (2015) refuse to singularly define or narrow the definition of strategic communication. Instead, they break down the discipline into three separate umbrella categories: strategy, communication theory, & research methods (Thomas & Stephens, 2015). This breakdown of independent terms allows for a broader approach to strategic communication, allowing researchers to independently define and study the separate terms, when applicable.

Hallahan et al. (2007) disseminate six different strategic communication zones that are present in most organizational structures. However, Zerfass et al. (2018) note that when strategic communication, being used as a term to cover a discipline is expanded and segmented, the phrase loses its meaning. They note that articles, books, and academic programs have been published or started under the term *strategic communication* [emphasis added] and are only *strategic* [emphasis added] in name alone (Zerfass et al., 2018). This is a disservice to the discipline, as poorly defined terms lead to misguided expectations for scholars and researchers. Furthermore, public relations professionals have adopted strategic communications as a term to avoid using the phrase *public relations* [emphasis added] (Zerfass et al., 2018). PR often connotes negative emotions. The desire to move away from a PR release to a strategic communication statement is easier for publics to digest and for organizations to stand behind (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Altogether, officials and organizational leaders attempt to use the phrase strategic communication to their own advantage. Zerfass et al. (2018) describe that almost every communicative action or verbalization taken by an entity/leader could be considered strategic in nature. And while scholarship can go back and forth upon the principles of a strategic verbalization, or the exact definition of the term, it is important to show that research is expanding beyond traditional boundaries set during the developmental days of the discipline. Compton, Botan, Zerfass, Sellnow & Sellnow, and Ivanov are a few of a growing number of scholars who are researching strategic communication's messaging effects to educate and modify behavior of publics.

Persuasive Communication

Utilizing our definition of strategic communication, as defined above – a deliberate message between an organization and their message receivers, it is suggested that the most valid perspectives come from Ferrari (2018) combined with Zerfass et al. (2018). These authors desire to conceptualize and pin a more coherent, applicable, and subset definition of strategic communication, rather than resigning it to generalities. Thus, it is argued that persuasive communication is its own distinct subset of strategic communication. Public opinion is changed through these strategic, almost *persuasive-like* [emphasis added] communicative efforts. These specific messages are not routine actions, as any message delivered by a leader can be considered communicative in nature (Ferrari, 2018).

Thus, organizations need messages that are understandably direct and provide receivers with actionable change (Gruing, 2006). Being able to communicate effectively through persuasive messages that offer these criteria provides a chance for message receivers to change their behavior. Ferrari (2018) indicates how persuasive communication plays an integral role in pushing change-makers into action. Equally as important as strategic and persuasive communicators, instructional experts are needed to convey messages to the next generation of change-makers before they face new and generation-lasting crises.

Instructional Communication

Instructional communication is typically defined as a transactional, two-way process between subject matter experts and learners who use communication to make meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages (Farris et al., 2018). Another relatively new subset of communication studies, these unique interactions have been officially studied since 1972 (Farris et al., 2018). Starting in the early 1970's, scholars such as Kibler and Lieb-Brillhart advocated

and eventually won support for a separate instructional communication division in the International Communication Association (ICA) (Farris et al., 2017). While other interest groups were around during this time period, this was the first group officially recognized by a professional association, and provided a legitimate outlet for research to be presented and published. In 1973, West Virginia University started the first instructional communication doctoral program, giving more legitimacy to this new discipline (Farris et al., 2017). Coursework for this program was focused on K-12 educational goals, and gave doctoral students a chance to teach at the primary and secondary levels. For those who continue the legacy of these early instructional communication scholars, the discipline can be broken down into additional research categories (Farris et al., 2017).

First, human communication plays a critical role in instructional communication. Finding out the focus of communicated messages, the transactional nature of conversations and classroom instruction, and communication actions is an important step when engaging with students. There is as much research behind the *how* [emphasis added] as the *why* [emphasis added]. Second, pedagogy is equally important. Academics who study pedagogy are continually interested in how instructors manage classrooms, influence student intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and deliver content through a variety of methods (Farris et al., 2017; Anderson, 2021). Third, educational psychology scholars explore underlying processes that influence student learning, with their research mostly focused on message receivers and students, rather than instructional personnel (Farris et al., 2018). Research under this category of instructional communication focuses on how different pupil backgrounds, knowledge levels and more, effect the conveyance of information.

Instructional communication has seen significant increase in attention among scholars since the pandemic years due to the rapidly shifting educational landscape. Many instructional experts are located in K-12 and higher environments. In these institutes of learning, students are no longer engaging in traditional classroom-based lectures, discussions, and teacher-centric operational patterns. Instead, scholars like Anderson (2021) have noted that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened a countrywide student motivation crisis. Pupils are no longer responding to the aforementioned learning techniques.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers noted that whatever would come afterwards would be a “new normal” (Arora et al., 2020, n.p.). Even when life would eventually settle down and have resemblance to pre-pandemic times, the world has fundamentally shifted; the loss of in-person activities for the pandemic years will have a life-long impact. However, Anderson (2021) goes on to note that the beginning of this educational landslide started long before our switch to online learning methods.

Scholars have taken profound interest in instructional communication pedagogy, for example, when comparing, contrasting, and exploring new modes of instruction at all levels of education (Arora et al., 2020). Many of these studies would not have been formulated without the COVID-19 pandemic affecting every learner in the country. Moreover, instructional communication continues to see literature developed and research conducted outside of the COVID-19 pandemic research bubble.

All three distinct communicative expressions – strategic, persuasive, and instructional demand theoretical frameworks that can handle generational cohorts and make a positive impact to the collective knowledge of California publics. The focus now shifts from communicative methods to communication theory, starting with attitudinal inoculation.

Attitudinal Inoculation

Inoculation theory was initially developed by McGuire, (1964) and its theoretical process is similar to the how a person can receive an inoculation against a virus – you receive a yearly flu shot, and in return, the inoculation provides your body with the necessary information to counteract the flu if you were to come into contact with the virus. Vaccine based inoculation has been practiced for many years, and is one of the most viable and effective methods for preventing the spread of viruses throughout the world. Health care, life expectancies, and global travel would look completely different if inoculation of humans and animals were not possible.

In terms of communication scholarship, inoculation theory is very much a biological metaphor (Compton et al., 2016; 2021). McGuire (1964) states that inoculation theory forms a resistance to a persuasive attack. Compton et al. (2016) discusses how attitudinal inoculation messages have the ability to prevent the spread of misinformation. By initially providing a weakened argument and then providing a counterargument, a person or group of individuals will develop the wherewithal to fend off the initial misinformation, not being swayed in their newly formed beliefs or opinions (Compton et al., 2016; McGuire, 1964; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1962).

Many authors have shown inoculation theory's effectiveness in healthcare settings. This is partly due to the greater ramifications of misinformation in this sphere. Additionally, there is prime material for inoculation messages to modify attitudes, opinions, and beliefs – E.g. fluoride in the water is poisonous, or getting an x-ray causes cancer (McGuire, 1964). Additional research throughout the years has also discovered that not every inoculation message needs to be negatively focused, the theory is just as valid when being used for positive reaffirmation (Parker et al., 2011). Even more so, when a receiver is presented with an inoculation message, it may

actually have auxiliary benefits as well – people who were exposed to one type of inoculation message showed that they also had more positive attitudes towards other similar behaviors (Parker et al., 2011).

Inoculation theory has long-lasting effects beyond its initial use. Scholarship calls this umbrella protection (Compton et al., 2021; Compton et al., 2016; Wong & Harrison, 2014). Initial inoculation messages may not need to cover every possible counterargument or rebuttal in order to provide significant inoculation against the preliminary threat (Compton et al., 2016; Pfau, 1995). Moreover, inoculation theory can be applied to much more than healthcare practices. The theory has been proven successful with many different disciplines; especially so with communicative messages that intend to disrupt or modify behavior (Dillingham & Ivanov, 2017: see also: Ivanov et al., 2017).

In fact, inoculation theory is becoming more popular due to its ability to counteract misinformation and modify these risky behaviors in a variety of settings (Compton et al., 2021). As social media, artificial intelligence, digital propaganda, and more become common and increasingly targeted, the need to refute behaviors and inform publics grows stronger (Compton et al., 2021; Kim, 2012). Global conflicts are becoming commonplace, and message receivers are receiving more static, friction, and noise rather than *clarity* [emphasis added] in many instances. This is where the idea that inoculation messages in educational campaigns to modify behaviors becomes a singularity.

IDEA Model

The IDEA model was originally created to be simple, all-encompassing framework for crisis and risk communicators. The four key components of this model include: Internalization, Distribution, Explanation, and Action (Sellnow et al., 2017). To ensure that communication is

both actionable and informative, the IDEA model stresses the significance of tailoring messages to specific situations and audiences. The first component of the IDEA model, internalization, centers on catching the audience's attention and helping them comprehend the personal relevance of the message (Sellnow et al., 2017). This is an essential step to encourage individuals to engage with the information presented. The second component, distribution, consists of strategically distributing the message through different channels in order to effectively reach the intended audience (Sellnow et al., 2017). Social media platforms, traditional media, and interpersonal communication networks are included in this stage.

Explanation is the third part of the puzzle; it seeks to provide accurate and precise information about the risk or crisis (Sellnow et al., 2017). In order to assist the audience to understand the implications and nature of the crisis, this step addresses the what, why, and how of a situation. Finally, the last component, action, describes specific steps that can be taken by individuals to protect them or mitigate the results of the crisis (Sellnow et al., 2017). Altogether, the four steps of the IDEA model enable publics to respond effectively to risk and crisis communicators by providing easy to follow frameworks for learning and action. For example, the IDEA model utilized by Sellnow & Sellnow (2019) provides steps for message senders and receivers to understand their roles in the communicative act. When planning an evacuation order for a town experiencing a wildfire, the IDEA model can help community leaders direct poignant messages to their residents. Every person in this model has a role they need to play and action to take when and if necessary.

For many, frameworks like the IDEA model do not see routine implementation into their lives and spaces of knowledge. Instead, rural populations, for instance, may feel that the visually sublime beauty of nature is all that is needed. California is known for its surreal forests,

insurmountable mountain ranges, and forward-thinking perspective on environmental justice and protection. The land itself lends favor to modify human behavior and educate publics by instilling a newfound appreciation and respect (Cantrill & Oravec, 1996).

Principles of the Sublime

Environmental communication as a field of study arrived on the scene in the early 1980s, derived from the rhetorical tradition (Milstein, 2009). Scholars credit Christine Oravec's 1984 publication as the first public assertion for the discipline (Milstein, 2009). Rhetoric's influence in academia began to shift, with environmental communication born out of a watchfulness for rapidly advancing technology and the ruin of nature by persistent over-development (Peterson, 1998). As an academic, Oravec helped distinguish the rise of conservationist progressivism, introducing views which are still dominant in environmental decision making to this day (Milstein, 2009). Many important environmental communication theories such as the historical exploration of the visual sublime were created under the guise of the rhetorical tradition (Milstein, 2009, p. 345).

To provide a more specific definition, the sublime is based on environmental exceptionalism, "the very existence of patriotic sentiment to the physical beauty of the landscape" (Oravec, 1984, p. 446). Sublime idealizations help us construct opinions on how we view, interact, and connect ourselves to nature. Included in the sublime are three principles - exaggeration, emotional aesthetics, and self-reflexivity (Cantrill & Oravec, 1996). The lens in which we frame and proclaim messages about our environment constructs our reality and our thoughts. "Frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 71). If we are to understand how the sublime and environmental rhetoric change our perspectives and modify our communicative efforts, we must establish these paths by

effectively choosing “one’s words [or visual representations] carefully to activate the right frames so that the truth can be understood” (Lakoff, 2010, p. 73).

Scholars argue that the general populace is entrenched with the idea of humanity’s separation from nature, so much so that we have trouble erasing it from our memory. It is a “terribly false frame that will not go away” (Lakoff, 2010 p. 76). There is a need for successful sublime framing to enhance environmentalism, increase respect for lands and scenery, and to propel the movement forward (Lakoff, 2010). To become effective, frames have to subvert the traditional mind and typical communicative efforts. We are used to seeing environmentalism portrayed by mass media and corporations who frequently have their own best interests in mind. These can oftentimes be laissez-faire messages, encouraging endless consumption without respect for spaces and environmentally fragile places.

Our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are, at our core, usually in opposition to these organizationally driven environmental portrayals (Lakoff, 2010). Unfortunately, many leaders fall to the sidelines, hesitant to communicate pro-environment messages and beliefs. This constant pulse, a push-and-pull dynamic, is something that can be explained with relational dialectics.

Relational Dialectics

Originally discovered by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery in 1988, relational dialectics theory (RDT) focuses on conflict and contradictions within dyadic relationships (*Relational Dialectics Theory*, 2017). By definition, a relationship is a unification between two persons where compromise mediates the connection (*Relational Dialectics Theory*, 2017). A dialectic, on the other hand, refers to discourse between people of different backgrounds or opinions (*Relational Dialectics Theory*, 2017). Eventually, all persons experience some sort of

tension and conflict with their partners, friends, and families. These oftentimes intimate communicative behaviors and patterns can be analyzed to determine how relationships are maintained. Baxter (2004) notes that there are scores of dialectical pairs within relationships, with highlighted focus on revelation/concealment, certainty/uncertainty, and connectedness/separateness (Baxter, 2004).

RDT offers a 30,000 ft overlook on how communication and contradictions are at the center of all relationships. This helps facilitate an understanding of dialectical tensions and relationship management. This wide-reaching aspect of RDT has continued to facilitate the production of significant interpersonal communication research. Particularly, in regard to emerging elements such as autonomy and information sharing in relationships.

As interpersonal research is heavily influenced by one's environment and associated interactions, the development of studying information sharing and decision-making autonomy is key to analyzing knowledge retention and release. Analyzing various relationship management methods, such as the dyadic conflict management styles of revelation/concealment, allows researchers to examine "the influence of self, the influence of partner, and the conjoint influences of self and partner on the autonomy processes of [message sharing]" (McIsaac et al., 2008, p. 693). The dyadic tensions that exist in relationships allow communicators to utilize frameworks from relational dialectics in real life applications when sharing messages with a broader community.

Now that three communicative perspectives and four theoretical frameworks have been reviewed through presently available literature, the following section will synthesize these elements to form a unique perspective that can shape policy for leaders in the Golden State.

Analysis

For many years, California has experienced record breaking temperatures and drought conditions. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts this trend will only increase throughout California and the country as our climate continues to destabilize (*Study Finds Climate..., 2023*). Billions of dollars in damages, habitat destruction, insurance industry collapse and more, have occurred and will continue to spiral out of control. Millions of residents are under constant burn advisories, and face a new year with worse, more expensive insurance coverage for their homes and livelihoods. Many domiciles and structures have been dropped altogether. It is important to note that while wildfires may be started by natural phenomena, human-caused fires make up a significant percentage of these devastating events (Cart, 2024).

To prevent wildfires from starting, spreading out-of-control, and preventing the loss of life and limb when these crises do result, actions must be taken by state leaders to inform California publics of risks and safety precautions (Prestemon et al., 2010). Communicating concerns to populations about undeveloped lands are especially important, since most fuel for wildfires comes from dried vegetation and brush that is unmitigated and let loose to grow (Prestemon et al., 2010). As such, not only do leaders have to communicate awareness about developed lands and buildings, but they must also make publics aware of sparsely populated properties and spaces that carry significant hazard. Research continues to show that wildfire education cannot be burdened onto one group or community - the desire to educate and mitigate fire danger comes from all who live, work, and interact with potential wildfire fuel and suppression efforts (Mercer et al., 2007; Butry, 2009; Prestemon et al., 2010). Crucially, spreading awareness of these issues is not devised of one specific policy trajectory or framework.

Instead, it is a collaborative effort among communicative leaders who utilize best practices for each unique situation.

As discussed earlier, it is suggested that the most valid perspectives of strategic communication messaging come from Ferrari (2018) combined with Zerfass et al. (2018). These authors desire to conceptualize and pin a more coherent, applicable, and static definition of strategic communication, rather than resigning it to a catch phrase or organization specific simplifications. Further support for this idea comes from Ferrari, (2018) who quotes Abraham Lincoln to say that public perception is key for all organizational communication efforts. Public perception is changed through persuasive communicative efforts, not routine expected message actions (Ferrari, 2018).

This is where the intersection of strategic and persuasive communication collides. Persuasion is the interaction between two or more in which one party attempts to influence, change, or produce a difference in opinion or action (Ferrari, 2018). Ferrari (2018) concurs with fellow scholars and notes the relatively negative perception when utilizing persuasive communication. However, Ferrari (2018) delineates a specific difference between *regular* [emphasis added] communication and *strategic* [emphasis added] communication actions in message delineation. Ferrari (2018) outlines in their study that every action taken by a person can be defined as communicative, and thus, there needs to be a differentiator when these same communicative actions are taken by an organization or leader when attempting to influence opinions. Ferrari (2008) utilizes this approach to extend the idea that strategic communication needs to be inherently purposeful and persuasive, with intent to influence, change, or create new behaviors in the message receivers. Persuasive tactics, according to Ferrari, (2018) are interwoven into strategic communication.

Leaders can utilize strategic communication to act as a bridge between themselves and others. As such, these messages need to be understandable, direct, and provide the receiver with actionable change or knowledge (Gruing, 2006). To effectively institute change, a leader will have to craft persuasive messages that meet the above criteria. For example, a strategic communicator may utilize the IDEA model framework by Sellnow & Sellnow (2019) which provides steps for message senders and receivers to understand their roles in this communicative act. When prepping for an evacuation order in a town experiencing a wildfire, the IDEA model can help leaders execute communication to local residents. Every person in the IDEA communication model has a role they need to play and an action to take when and if necessary.

For communicators who desire an even more persuasive lens, Ivanov, Compton, Sellnow, Pfau, and others have showcased studies which validate the use of inoculation theory. These papers continue to affirm how integrated into behavior modification this framework truly is. Information moves at the speed of light, along with an even greater amount of misinformation and static noise. It is argued that we need persuasive messages that inoculate publics before they face new and generation-lasting crises.

The focus on such attitudinal inoculation messages in educational and public relations campaigns started about 30 years after its initial development by McGuire in the 1960's. Authors such as Burgoon et al. (1995) and Easley et al. (1995) saw inoculation effective in corporate public relations campaigns, specifically in regards to the ability to prevent brand attacks and negative information spread. For a company, organization, or municipality government facing an imminent threat of an attack, being able to one-up and pre-disclose a potential argument, disagreement, or fact has shown to be an effective policy (Compton et al., 2021; Easley et al., 1995). Even more so, in most studies, pre-disclosure of issues has not been shown to effect

reputation or message effectiveness (Wigley & Pfau, 2010). California state leaders would do well to preventively disclose negatively focused messages, warning publics of disinformation before it reaches them through outside means.

Authors have noted that this practice of self-disclosure through inoculation messages is part of a different and newly formed umbrella called image preparing (Compton et al., 2021). Instead of trying to make amends after an incident happens, leaders are starting to preemptively provide statements, videos, advertisements, etc. to stave off criticism. These newly defined practices under the theory show that inoculation models continue to evolve and grow, heavily influencing newer avenues of study which took shape from the roots of scholarships of McGuire and Compton et al.

As previously touched upon, the educational environment has shifted from extrinsically motivated spaces into a new and different environment (Anderson, 2021). Classrooms are being flipped, and lecturing on material, even at the college level, is slowly being replaced or retooled for instructional practices that see subject matter experts work hand-in-hand with students as a guide. However, this process is slow, especially at districts that struggle to handle increasingly dangerous student behavior (Anderson, 2021).

Compounded with another widespread issue facing instructors throughout the United States is the learner motivation crisis (Anderson, 2021). No longer are students, especially at the K-12 and college level, motivated by extrinsic factors, e.g. getting a higher letter grade, winning an ice cream party, joining the football team, etc. Instead, students are grappling to find intrinsic motivation (Anderson, 2021). Without an inherent desire to succeed for their own aspirations, students are failing to understand and digest information in all academic settings (Anderson, 2021). Thus, instructional communication scholarship became the frontline for modifying

educational practices before cohorts of learners are lost to a system that has unsuccessfully attempted to keep the status-quo (Anderson, 2021). Learner knowledge and education is a direct approach to remediating the knowledge gap of wildfire risk in California. Every teacher in California is a leader in their classroom and inherently an instructional communicator. However, lingering feelings on levels of disclosure may preempt information sharing, leading to frustration.

Dyadic tensions exist in all relationships, specifically with regards to revelation and concealment. Potential negative attributes towards one's person were often associated with the decision to conceal, rather than reveal information. Baxter and Montgomery (1997) explain that relational dialectics theory views relationships as independent, and uncategorical. A push-pull progression of relational building is experienced, unlike a linear model which other theories have long-time considered (Baxter & Montgomery, 1997). Publics, especially when comprised of younger residents, may begin to feel reasonably uncomfortable when leaders and educators dismiss transparency. These communities begin to experience frustration, and mistrust builds. When crafting messages, instructional communicators should be aware of how to work together with their message receivers to present clear and transparent messaging, as one would to a doubtful partner. An effective method of presenting information can easily come in the form of a mass communicative appeal to the moral standings of publics.

By actively engaging with the sublime and utilizing its prowess to accentuate the idealistic views of nature, leaders can indeed inform publics and modify behaviors through subtle calls to action. While a rhetorical situation allows for a freedom of responses, "it does not invite just any response" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 10). The response has to be *fitting*, making sense to the situation (Bitzer, 1968). Additionally, the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity

(Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). And at the end of the day, “[Environmental] rhetoric is a mode of altering reality...by creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 4). In fact, several television programs in California attempted to do exactly that – implement visually stimulating sublime appeals. One such program in this field was *California’s Gold* (n.d.) with its late host, Huell Howser. Through repeated exaggeration of the sublime, both visually and verbally, Howser attempted to redefine public’s view on nature, conservation, and protection of environments. Howser defied mass media expectations, acting as a change agent and persuasive communicator who was never afraid to speak their mind. Leaders would do well to follow in his footsteps, invoking the sublime when desiring to educate and inform public on wildfire risks, something that ties directly into their own lived environments in the state. A sense of personal urgency can be crafted in this hybrid persuasive and instructional communicative effort. Howser sets the bar high – he was fearless in his presentations; relaxed, nuanced, and equally passionate about California, a place he had grown to love and adore.

Altogether, this study has shown a multitude of communicative efforts that California state leaders can take to best inform public about wildfire risks. It is argued that addressing these challenges is never easy. Cutting across the analysis, inoculation theory and the rhetoric of the sublime are argued to be most effective in informing public and modifying their behavioral patterns. Both of these theories hinge on the interplay of being persuasive and educational in nature. Leaders should formulate a plan of action that incorporates best practices from these two communicative perspectives and theoretical frameworks. In the next section of this paper, ethical considerations will be discussed followed by suggested policies for leaders to enact.

Ethical Implications

There are several ethical implications to be aware of if the problem remains unresolved. California as a whole continues to experience devastating wildfires each and every year. Almost the entirety Pacific Palisades, Malibu, and Altadena have been wiped off the map (Alfonseca et al., 2025). It is essential for leaders to prioritize the well-being and safety of publics by taking measures to educate publics while committing to transparent communication of policies and procedures. When leaders fail to address these issues, it is more than endangering properties and livelihoods. The ethical signposts of state leaders are called into question. It is unacceptable for governmental leaders in California to routinely miss the mark when it comes to educating publics about wildfire risks.

Besides, business as usual cannot continue. With an ever present and looming insurance crisis, housing is more unaffordable than ever in California, especially in fire-prone areas (Araullo, 2025). Policyholders in some parts of the state are already expected to see premium increases in excess of 300% (Araullo, 2025). When the cost of doing business rapidly exceeds profit and growth potentials, California residents are in a lose-lose proposition. Forgo insurance to keep the lights on at home and employees paid while risking total loss in the event of a crisis, or try to raise funds or consumer facing prices to pay for the increased insurance rates. Both are ethically irresponsible for all, making ends meet extraordinarily burdensome. Prices remain at all-time highs, with affordability being out of the question for many. In turn, this pushes developers to calculate risks and benefits on their own, without the availability of choice for insurance providers. By the time the building process is done, goalposts could have moved again, forcing real estate professionals and construction experts to abandon unprofitable projects, leaving properties half constructed, reminiscent of the Great Recession.

The cycle of increasing prices threatens to unravel the social fabric of California. Residents have, and will continue to be forced to migrate to lower risk areas, leading to greater housing scarcity in a state that was already well known for housing inequality and limited selection. This is especially important for California residents that reside in low-income areas. These communities are often the first to experience the shock of unmitigated climate and wildfire disasters and have the greatest barriers when searching for alternative housing, employment, and life essentials (Prunhuber, 2024). Even if California is able to offer relocation assistance packages to individuals, where is the line drawn for who gets help? With a deepening budget deficit, additional spending may only make the issue harder to solve for state leaders.

The ethical and moral implications placed on first responders who live and work in the affected communities must also be considered. These necessary individuals are facing the same housing instability and unaffordability as the greater community which undermines their ability to provide public-first care and response. This is in addition to the unnecessary risks placed upon their shoulders when trying to ensure outdated policies and procedures are followed. Not only does this link back to the unraveling of the ethical fabric of California, it also sets emergency personnel up for failure from the start.

Lastly, theories such as inoculation and the sublime are hardly perfect. There are several potential factors to be aware of when leaders decide to use inoculation frameworks. First, Wigley and Pfau's (2010) claims that a preemptive inoculation message will not hurt attitudes if a crisis does not occur appear to be partially questioned by Wan and Pfau (2004). This could be a significant hindrance to behavior modification and similarly discussed principles (Dillingham & Ivanov, 2017). While a preemptive message may initially be beneficial for message receivers, the lasting effects of attitudinal inoculation will become moot if the inoculation scenario does not

come to fruition. However, the majority of scholars trend towards agreement that delivering inoculation messages that instruct best practices and attempt behavior modification will not harm or discredit established beliefs (Wigley & Pfau, 2010).

Turning towards the sublime, rhetoric is the main political tool to drive engagement and divisiveness throughout the United States (Hackenburg et al., 2023). When utilized successfully, politicians and leaders who use moral rhetoric are invoking one of the “most powerful and widely used forms of rhetoric” (Hackenburg et al., 2023, n.p.). The sublime is inherently entrenched in morality, and as previously covered, there is an inherent desire to successfully enact framing of the theory to enhance environmental rhetoric and propel conservation movements forward (Lakoff, 2010). Ethically speaking, subverting publics to advance your message opens up the possibility of division amongst state residents and leaders (Hackenburg et al., 2023). Even if audiences are left to make their own decisions, they are still being influenced through the use of subjectively justifiable rhetoric.

Policy Recommendations

To address the problem statement at the beginning of this paper, it is argued that behavioral modification through attitudinal inoculation campaigns and the distribution of media which implement principles of the sublime are the best possible policy suggestions to California leaders, who desire to modify behavioral patterns and educate publics to reduce wildfire risk.

Modify Behaviors through Inoculation

After the recent devastating fires in Southern California, the Maui wildfires in Hawaii, and the continued risks of perpetual drought on the West Coast of the United States, it is more important than ever to have a full kit of strategies (Archie & Kim, 2025; Cerullo, 2023). Existing research has shown that the ability to change institutional behaviors is limited, thus making the

most favorable point of change from inoculating publics who live in fire prone areas of states like California (Brenkert-Smith, 2011). With its background in healthcare settings, attitudinal inoculation frameworks play a critical role in instructing change by modify attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of those the inoculation comes in contact with (Compton et al., 2016). It is argued that California state leaders should investigate and implement an inoculation campaign to modify public behavior. Presumptive behaviors are often spread through non-official channels of communication publics have had contact with. Instead, the inoculation campaign should be spearheaded by persuasive messaging by strategic communication experts chosen by state leaders. These individuals should be subject matter experts, seeking to change intrinsic value motivators rather than detailing extrinsic rewards to modify behavior patterns (Anderson, 2021). Persuasive techniques like attitudinal inoculation have historically been utilized to achieve intrinsically focused compliance (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2018).

Inoculation frameworks have been proven to still enact positive outcomes for messages conveyed to publics, even if the issue does not face the particular participant (Wigley & Pfau, 2010; Dillingham & Ivanov, 2017). Inoculation is a great fit for this purpose, since it has wide-reaching, public facing use. Since this paper argues that attitudinal inoculation frameworks should be used as a tool for behavioral modification, it recommends inoculation as a highly favored and practical theory (Dillingham & Ivanov, 2017; Compton et al., 2021; Burgoon et al., 1995; Easley et al., 1995).

Educate Publics through Rhetoric

Without having conscionable accountability for nature, we set ourselves up for moral failure. It is our duty to protect the spaces we live in by constantly learning more about our neighbors, lands, and climates. Nature cannot restore herself while it is being consistently tainted

by humans. The debate around environmental education in publics is not “simply about the physical contamination of nature, but about the moral contamination of an ideal” (Peterson, 1998, p. 371). Leaders of California and scholars alike must embrace the study of and dissemination of environmental rhetoric to the masses. Otherwise, we are morally negligent (Peterson, 1998).

As such, it is argued that leaders in California should continue to enact policy changes that provide funding for poignant and emotionally appealing media distributions dedicated to educating publics about their lived environmental spaces and how best to take care of them. Much akin to yesteryear’s *California’s Gold*, (n.d.) these exercises in the sublime should be distributed in classrooms, screened in community centers, and across public media channels. When material that is deeply embedded into the rhetorical perspective of the sublime is shared through visual, textual, or auditory means, it engages the respondent’s emotional prowess (Oravec, 1996). These deeply rooted emotional triggers radiate to and from the core of our beings – our very own internalized call to action.

Publics will see, read, hear, and experience the gravity of environments that surround them, being guided through the process of environmental exploration and protection through the use of the sublime. Not only will consumers of this material walk away from the experience having gained useful knowledge of their state, they will be called to a higher moral standard. It will prompt them to be their storyteller, sharing this newfound knowledge with others, so these new respondents might experience their own reaction to the sublime. In the end, these sublime frameworks leave viewers with self-reflexivity, thinking about rich wildlife and open spaces of California – and how best to protect it.

Summary

This paper explored a range of elements, starting with the background of the issue. As written by Cart, (2024) California is experiencing increasingly strange, human-caused wildfires. It is noted that publics are not applying best practices and judgement when using hazardous material and operating machinery (Cart, 2024). When these fires start, the infernos are devastating public lands, private domiciles, and businesses throughout the west coast. Because of this, insurance rates are skyrocketing, with many individuals and organizations having to relocate to different areas of the state if they desire insurance coverage (Darmiento, 2024).

Combined with a changing climate, record breaking drought, and extreme temperatures, California leaders and government agencies only predict the trend of devastating wildfires to increase (*Study...*, n.d.). Billions of dollars in damage are occurring, with entire neighborhoods, ecosystems, and industries being wiped off the map. Every year, California issues long-lasting burn advisories, all the while residents experience insurance premium increases, occupations destroyed, and lives being consumed in the flames. State leaders need to enact policy to challenge the status quo, modify behaviors, and educate publics on the wildfire risks which are growing beyond belief.

With the issue established, a problem statement was developed. It is argued that information sharing by leaders and organizations are largely done through three distinct communicative perspectives – strategic, persuasive, and instructional. In the communication discipline, there are numerous theories that have found real world success in modifying behavior and/or educating targeted groups. The four most relevant theories chosen were: attitudinal inoculation, the IDEA model, rhetoric of the sublime, and relational dialectics. The three communicative perspectives and four contending theories were synthesized in the following

pages to answer the problem statement: What methodological frameworks can California state leaders advocate for to modify behavioral patterns and educate publics to reduce wildfire risk?

Strategic communication starts the literature review process. A relatively recent subset of communication studies, it has seen significant attention in recent years as risk and crisis scenarios becomes more relevant in an increasingly disordered world (Thomas & Stephens, 2015). Organizations and leaders utilize strategic communication to align company positioning and synthesize institutional goals with their missions and values (Gruing, 2006; Hallahan et al. 2007). Thomas & Stephens, (2015) and Hallahan et al. (2007) stipulate that strategic communication can be broken down into several different categories or zones, which allow for greater flexibility when positioning press releases and organizational statements. However, this is refuted by other scholars like Zerfass et al. (2018). For many scholars, they lament that strategic communication is only strategic in name, while others dictate that it more closely resembles traditional persuasive messaging efforts.

Scholarship from Ferrari (2018) combine arguments with Zerfass et al. (2018) to note that public opinion is only modified through persuasive communicative efforts, no matter the strategic branding that organizations and leaders attempt to incorporate. Additionally, Ferrari (2018) writes that in these persuasive communication contexts, information is shared in order for knowledge to be gained – these statements are not verbalized for looks, rather, they are intended to foster change. This is where instructional communication experts come into play. Organizations and communicative leaders are battling not only for their message contents to be heard by intended recipients, but a growing crisis in intrinsic motivation to learn and adapt to shared knowledge (Farris et al., 2018; see also: Anderson, 2021).

These distinct communicative frameworks demand perspectives that are guided by communication theories. Attitudinal inoculation, for instance, has roots in healthcare, being developed by McGuire to compliment vaccine-based initiatives which helped eliminate sickness and disease (McGuire, 1964). It is argued that by changing one's attitude, you can prevent disinformation (sickness) from spreading. Seminal work from scholars on inoculation theory helped craft new methodologies for responding to risk and crises.

The IDEA model is one of these frameworks. It was born out of Sellnow & Sellnow's desire to have a balanced model that can be easily used for a wide range of communicative messaging efforts (Sellnow et al., 2017). The IDEA model centers on the notion that details are freely shared and are revealed to publics in communicative sessions. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, especially when organizations and leaders are constantly in a battle to reveal or conceal information. This is often dependent on the situation, who is involved, and what is at stake. Relational dialectics theory notes that these feelings are always present, in every part of the communication cycle (Baxter, 2004). Hinging off feelings and moral relativities, principles of the sublime are discussed. In this rhetorical tradition, being able to generate child-like awe and wonder in consumers of sublime material can lead to real, actionable change (Lakoff, 2010; Oravec, 1996).

In the end, this paper argues that the methodologic frameworks of inoculation theory and the rhetoric of the sublime are California policymakers best bet to modify behavioral patterns and educate publics to reduce wildfire risks. Both of these theories center on the interplay of persuasive and instructional communication. Leaders are issued a call to action to implement policy changes that will allow subject matter experts to explore these methodological frameworks and begin the process of delivering messages to residents. If California officials

decide to do nothing, the ethical implications will become too great to ignore. They must address risky behaviors and a growing educational blind spot. Insurance is exorbitant in many parts of the state, and publics are in a losing battle against affordability and prosperity (Araullo, 2025). Without action, the social framework of California will continue to unravel, leading to unmitigated disasters being commonplace. Now is the time for action.

About the Author

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