

Conceptualizing and communicating risk in “post- trust societies”

Ragnar Lofstedt PhD

Professor of Risk Management

King's College London

Overview of talk

- Provide an introduction of how people perceive risks;
- How these theories and ideas led to the growth in the development of risk communication programmes;
- Yet risk communication is still difficult to do;
- Some case study examples
- Policy recommendations

Risk perception 1 (Kahneman and Tversky)

- Importance of heuristics and biases
 - Anchoring effect;
 - Simplifying heuristic
 - Availability heuristic
 - Understanding base rates
 - Hindsight bias

Risk perception 2 (Fischhoff, Slovic, Lichtenstein)

- People view risks differently
 - Natural-technological
 - Voluntary-involuntary
 - Familiar-non familiar
 - Control-non control
 - High frequency/low consequence vis-à-vis low frequency/high consequence
 - Females-Males
 - Children-no children
 - Fair-not fair

“Psychometric paradigm” led to the development of risk communication programmes

- Site and build new nuclear power plants
- Site nuclear waste facilities
- Build waste incinerators
- Convince the public that certain foods are safe

Risk communication 2

- Three types of risk communication strategies were put forward:
 - Top down
 - Dialogue
 - Bottom up

Risk communication 3

- Yet risk communication is still difficult to do!
 - Social amplification and attenuation of risk (Kasperson, Pidgeon)
 - Narrative (Downs)
 - Deliberation (Renn, Wynne)
 - Problems with self selection bias
 - Optimistic bias (Weinstein)

Trust is key

- Trust-no trust (Lofstedt, Pidgeon, Siegrist, Slovic)
 - High levels of public trust can equal low levels of public perceived risk
 - Low levels of public trust can equal high levels of public perceived risk
 - Trust can explain up to 50% how the public will perceive a certain risk
 - Example: Barseback nuclear power plant incident 1992

Rise of post trust societies

- Caused in part by regulatory scandals
- Dioxins in Belgian chicken feed
- Tainted blood in France
- Mad cow disease in the UK and elsewhere
- Foot and Mouth disease
-but also
- Collapse of the financial markets (post Lehman 2008)

Post trust societies 2

- The regulatory model in many parts of Europe changed
- Consensual style
 - Decisions were take behind closed doors
 - Involved elites (very much “old boys” networks)
 - NGOs were not much listened to
- Adversarial style
 - Open/transparent
 - Stakeholders + representatives from civil society consulted
 - Media and social media play a greater role

Post trust societies 3

- There are, however, cultural/national differences
 - UK is more representative of post trust societies than Sweden;
 - There is less trust in Eastern parts of Germany than in the west (Bouder et al);
 - Populist politicians feed on post trust societies
 - Why we have Brexit
 - Why there is a rise in the popularity of the Swedish Democrats

Case studies

- Post trust societies (when it went badly)
 - UK Brent Spar oil storage buoy (1995)
 - US Department of Energy-siting a nuclear waste storage facility (1987-2011)
- Where it is ongoing (and not going well)
 - European debate on the safety of pesticides and plasticizers
- Yet even in “less” post trust societies risk communication can be difficult
 - The Swedish 2016-17 campylobacter scare

Policy recommendations

- EFSA and other European agencies need to promote media guidelines ala those developed by the BBC and we all need to work with the media;
- Regulators and other bodies need to find critical friends who can both evaluate what the agencies are doing and speak on their behalf;
- We (academic community) need to help regulators and policy makers to become better communicators;
- Ensure that scientists themselves become more honest communicators;
- Promote the establishment of a genuine European Academy of Sciences and the re-establishment of the Chief Scientific Advisor position (plus 50 staff-as in the UK) within the European Commission

Policy recommendations 2

- Help regulators establish independent risk communication advisory boards-such as the one that US FDA has in place;
- Help ensure that the regulators and other bodies pre-test their communication messages;
- Support the establishment of a formal working group on risk in the European Parliament;
- Ensure that the communication director within a regulatory agency is part of the executive function