Conceptualizing and communicating risk in “post-trust societies”

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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
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)

• 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