

REACTION PAPER

Kasperson and Kasperson - "Border Crossings"

It is a commonly known fact that environmental risks problems such as acid rain and emissions of nuclear radiation (especially within the European context) cross international borders. To date, however, little attention has been paid to address such environmental problems from a transboundary risk communication approach. This paper gives an example of one such case, namely the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania. Of particular interest is to uncover how the risks posed by the Ignalina reactors have been communicated both nationally and internationally and how this communication has been influenced by such factors as the social amplification of risk, the role of trust and the issue of conflict resolution.

Slovic - "Risk Perception"

Perceptions of risk play a prominent role in the decisions people make, in the sense that differences in risk perception lie at the heart of disagreements about the best course of action between technical experts and members of the general public, men vs. women. Both individual and group differences in preference for risky decision alternatives and situational differences in risk preference have been shown to be associated with differences in perceptions of the relative risk of choice options, rather than with differences in attitude towards (perceived) risk, i.e., a tendency to approach or to avoid options perceived as riskier. Perceptions and misperceptions of risk, both by members of the public and by public officials, also appear to play a large role in the current examination of American preparedness to deal with the threat of terrorism. Thus risk perception is the focus of this white paper.

People's reactions to the events of September 11 and their aftermaths are important illustrations of existing insights into the psychology of risk perception and response to risk. For one, they demonstrate the selective nature of attention to different sources of risk or danger. Also, this is not simply a characteristic of democracies, but of human processing in general. The social amplification of risk can be seen as an ex-post attempt to make up for such failures of anticipation. The reactions of public officials to certain, newly diagnosed sources of danger can be seen either as responses that are the result of overestimates of existing dangers on the part of these officials (that are mediated by the vividness, and affective salience of observed threats), or as attempts to provide reassurance to a public, who is known by these officials to fall prey to these biases. Undoubtedly, a well known distinction between felt and attributed responsibility for acts of omission vs. acts of commission also plays a role. While failure to anticipate a theoretically knowable, but not previously experienced source of danger might be excusable, failure to reduce a known source of risk is certainly not. Now that we are beginning to appreciate the complex interplay between emotion and reason that is essential to rational behavior, the challenge before us is to think creatively about what this means for managing risks from extreme events. On the one hand, how do we temper the emotion engendered by such events with reason? On the other hand, how do we infuse needed "doses of feeling" into circumstances where lack of experience may otherwise leave us too "coldly rational?"

The ripple effects arising from the social amplification of risks pose other challenges. Building such effects into risk analysis or decision analysis will argue for the adoption of costly preventive measures that would seem unjustifiable if we were only accounting for the costs of direct effects.

Finally, in a world that must deal with “terrorist minds as hazards” we must attempt to understand how such minds process emotion and reason in search of a form of rationality that seems alien to the vast majority of human beings.

Lofstedt - “Risk Communication”

People often fail to effectively communicate due to a lack of clear communications goals and key messages to support them. Setting such goals and identifying support messages are decisions that should be made prior to the issuing of any public comment and are especially important in a crisis.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, public sensitivity to terror and fear of further crises has posed unprecedented challenges. One of those challenges is in how information is communicated to the public in timely, accurate ways that do not heighten concern and fear. Communicating effectively during a crisis takes planning; preparation; an understanding of communications protocols, messaging and the media; and the ability to manage the flow of information. Each is a challenge that can be met effectively, to the benefit of those receiving messages in times of crisis.