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Reaction Paper, Transboundary Risk and Public Trust
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The Lofstedt paper discussed the risk communication program regarding the nuclear reactor issue, Denmark vs Sweden. The Danes wanted it closed down due to safety issues; the Swedes (whose population inherently trusted the government) needed it open to generate power until a replacement or decreased demand could be accomplished. It is difficult to establish risk communication (especially on politically-charged topics such as nuclear power) across national boundaries. The Swedes had difficulty communicating risk (or lack of risk) to the Danes. An understanding of risk communication and evaluation of risk communication programs would have been helpful for the Swedish government in this issue. The Swedish government's attempts to convince the Danish that the plant was safe failed for several reasons: trust or lack of trust, lack of control, social amplification of risk, and fear of the plant. Trust was high in Swedish equipment, balanced by low in faith in the Danish emergency response system. Risk amplification was increased when the politicians discussed the issue. Reciprocal dialogue between the public and the experts was suggested to be more beneficial. It would increase understanding and the perception of control, and decrease social amplification of the issue.

Lofstedt defines risk communication: to design programs to communicate to the public the risks they may be exposed to. Risk acceptability depends on where you sit in the debate (citizen vs. expert). One-way communication programs (rather than dialogue) work in Sweden because trust in the government (as the civilian protector) is high. Sweden is the exception rather than the rule, though. Kasperson discusses social amplification of risk, which was present among the Danes regarding the nuclear plant.

There are few studies evaluating the success or failure of risk communication programs. The Swedish plant was built near major Danish and Swedish metropolitan areas. In the discussion process, there was a breakdown in communication between Danes and Swedes. Reciprocal risk communication strategy was needed.

Slovic suggests that even good policy and communication are not effective without an understanding of how people think and respond to risk. He goes on to describe the factors underlying the perception of risk. Knowing these factors can help policy-makers improve communication to the public and help them predict public response to technology and risk management strategies. A public citing risk concerns may be acting on other social or ideological concerns. Realizing this can help policy-makers discover hidden agendas and plan their risk communication strategy accordingly. Risk communication must be a two-way process.

Slovic states that irrational fear of a nuclear plant based on misperception of risk. This fear is reinforced by unfavorable media coverage and a lack of understanding regarding nuclear power and its true risks. I think this is one of the most important factors in setting public policy. The public is easily influenced by the media. Most of the American public gets its risk education by the TV news, radio and newspapers, not scholarly journals. They believe the sensational reports of the media (who are motivated by the desire for ratings and sales, in addition to good reporting standards). The American government has yet to find a good way to counter this, and public policy has suffered because of it. Both the US Government and the media need to improve risk communication, so that the public is presented with the facts (not the spin). Facts would enable an educated, more reasonable perception of risk.