

Slovic – Perception of Risk

I started this week's readings with Slovic's paper introducing the psychometric paradigm of perceptions of risk. It was a very rich article. It started me thinking about my own approach to risk and how I evaluate expert's risk analysis.

Slovic's method is useful when trying to understand public responses to hazards and to improve the communication of risks. Risks are mapped in two dimensions: dread risk and unknown risk. By developing this cognitive map, Slovic shows that riskiness means different things to different people (e.g. lay people vs. experts). These differences come from media exposure, prior experience, and expert knowledge. He went on to explain that perception of risk can magnify the impact of an accident – like a stone thrown into a pond. He concludes by arguing that unless policy makers take the public's differing perception of risk into account their efforts at risk communication will fail. They should engage in a two way process.

Kasperson and Kasperson – Border Crossings

The Kaspersons' article dealt with transboundary risk situations. They classified these risks into four classes: first, border-impact risks or upstream – downstream issues that do not involve long-distances; second, point-source transboundary risks such as Chernobyl or the River Tiza in Romania; third, structural / policy transboundary risks where state decisions such as the US desire to promote an auto based transportation system effects other states; and lastly, global environmental risks such as global warming or polluting of commons.

Löfstedt and Jankauskas – Swedish Aid and the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant

Löfstedt – Risk Communication

In these two articles Löfstedt explores transboundary risk communication and management. He described two schools within the field of risk communication. The old school model has experts persuading a doubting public. The new school model involves two-way communication with dialog between the public and experts. After Chernobyl there was a social amplification of risk associated with nuclear power - an example of the ripple effect. Löfstedt provided details about Sweden's interactions with the Ignalina plant in Lithuania and the Barsebäk plant in Copenhagen. Ignalina was seen as a risk to Sweden, and taxes were spent to upgrade its safety situation. Barsebäk was viewed as a risk by the residents of Copenhagen and not by the Sweden. In both situations, Sweden acted in the old school manner. Both situations could have been improved by two-way dialog. Lithuania felt that their concerns were not a priority. Copenhagen residents saw the debate become political and move away from constructive engagement.

Reaction

My first reaction to the readings was to step back and look at forms of risk separate from environmental, technological, or disaster related risks. I first encountered the concept of transboundary risks in Yugoslavia. The risk of war spilling into neighboring countries (Macedonia for me) was real. It would be interesting to go back and look at how risk communication was conducted by all the different parties involved. My second reaction is in response to the readings dealing with nuclear power. I immediately thought of the US "expert" appraisal of these countries as nuclear risks. How does labeling these countries amplify the risk? Does our hostile attitude increase the likelihood of armed intervention and a resulting transboundary nuclear exposure?