



Risk Communication and the Cost of Getting It Wrong

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Risk Issues Are Gaining Media Attention

- Farmed Scottish salmon
- Bird flu
- MMR vaccine
- New nuclear build



What Is Happening?

- Growing level of public distrust toward regulators/ policy makers
- Public demanding access to information
- Pluralism of science, amplified by the media
- Pluralism of information sources
- Risks increasingly small and uncertain
- Low hanging fruits have been regulated



What Are the Main Drivers?

- Researchers (specifically Fischhoff, Renn, Slovic and White) uncovered a series of drivers that influence how the public perceive risks:
 - Voluntary-involuntary
 - Natural-technological
 - Control-non control
 - High probability and low consequence risk vis-à-vis low probability and high consequence risk (dread)



What Are the Main Drivers? (cont.)

- Familiar-non familiar
- Reproductive organs-non reproductive organs
- Children-no children
- Trust-no trust
- Fair-not fair
- Female/Male



What Does This Mean for Us?

- The uncovering of these variables led to interest in how one can best communicate risks
- Governments and industry alike took the view
 - We now know how the public perceive risks
 - Therefore let's develop communication strategies based on our understanding



Risk Communication Strategies That Have Been Implemented

- Top down (first attempt at risk communication)
One way presentation of scientific facts
- Dialogue (widely used today)
Two way form of persuasive communication
- Bottom-up (occurs from time to time)
Stakeholder interaction in a social context



New Thinking and Theories

- Many risk communication programmes have not worked (e.g. siting and building hazardous or large infrastructure projects) because
 - Social amplification of risk
 - Narrative approach
 - Trust
It is 9 times easier to destroy trust than to gain it



Trust Is Key

- Trust can explain up to 50% of how public perceive risk:
 - High public trust - low public perceived risk
 - Low public trust - high public perceived risk
 - Tough regulator - high public trust
 - Weak regulator - low public trust



Case Study: Barseback

The Barseback nuclear plant incident August 1992: the Swedish perspective

Q: You may have heard that over the last year there has been a great deal of discussion concerning the Barseback plant and the Danes. Do you feel that Barseback is a safe nuclear power plant?

Yes	60
No	27
Maybe	9
Do not know	5



Case Study: Barseback (cont.)

(If yes) Why do you say this?

(let the respondent him/herself come up with an answer)

I believe in Swedish industry	57
It is a good plant	5
Public information is widely available	4
Do not know	2



Case Study: Barseback (cont.)

Barseback: the Danish perspective

Q: You may have heard that over the last year there has been a great deal of discussion concerning the Barseback plant and the Danes. Do you feel that Barseback is a safe nuclear power plant?

Yes	34
No	53
Maybe	4
Do not know	9



Case Study: Barseback (cont.)

(If yes) Why do you say this?

(let the respondent him/herself come up with an answer)

I believe in Swedish industry	31
Public information is widely available	5
It causes less damage than other energy sources	1



Case Study: University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB)

- Siting of the BSL-4 facilities Galveston, Texas
- UTMB recognised early the need for effective public engagement strategy:
 - Working with CDC communications experts
 - Internal communications
 - Focus groups, internal and external
 - Dialogue meetings with community leaders and local media
 - Radio Q and A sessions with experts



Case Study: University of Texas Medical Branch (cont.)

- Two large public meetings were held
 - First meeting was hostile
 - Second meeting was much less hostile
- Outcome: No opposition, even though UTMB had been involved in several recent controversies



Case Study: The Nuclear Debate

Success stories:

- Finland and its fifth nuclear reactor
- Radiation waste storage – Finland and Sweden
- Swedish regulators' handling of past incidents



Case Study: The Nuclear Debate

Getting it wrong

- US government:
 - Let's force the folk of Nevada to take on the entire country's nuclear waste
- Certain members of the nuclear industry:
 - The public are ignorant and stupid
- Industry:
 - Nuclear is completely safe, highly cost effective and the waste issue is solved
- NGOs:
 - Nuclear is dangerous, a complete waste of money and waste is a major problem



Case Study: The Nuclear Debate

Lack of communication strategy

- Too little transparency on all sides
- Cover ups, fabrications and works of fiction
- Temelin nuclear reactor – inherently unsafe?
- “Nuclear power will save the world from climate change”
- Too much hypocrisy
- Lack of public trust

Conclusions: Lessons to Take Home

- The importance of risk perception factors
- The changing communication environment
 - Public distrust of authorities
 - Media often amplifying risks
- The importance of doing one's homework
- The role of not over sensationalising
- Working with the media and not against them
 - Developing reporting guidelines
 - Need to build up trust and not destroy it

