

Media portrayal of environmental risk: dissiminati



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on or Delusion
Media Portrayal of Environmental Risk: Dissemination or
Delusion?

Transmission of ideas and information through media avenues like television and the press are the predominant means by which much of contemporary culture and the developed world obtain vital information. The media has an enormous impact on the public's conceptualization of ideals: societal perceptions are shaped by the information made available to us through the different venues of media. Examining how the transmittal of information regarding environmental risk is disseminated by the media and accepted by society exposes an evident quandary.

The media repeatedly broadcasts data that instead of informing people with beneficial news adversely invokes situations of tumult and unnecessary fear. Ramifications of the fictitious diffusion of information about environmental risks, or non-risks, to society include more than just the proliferation of misinformation. Circulation of wrongful environmental risk data has detrimental effects on businesses, industry and economy. Misinforming people about environmental risk undermines policies and government actions that are based on media hype or contentious scientific information. Abating the problematic and detrimental tendency of media misconstruing information about environmental risks will require a multifaceted collaboration between the media, the public, government and the scientific community.

A problem complicating environmental policy and risk reporting is largely attributable to media players, politicians and scientists overstepping their

boundaries into realms they are not qualified to operate in. Scientists must avoid getting involved in the environmental policy debate. Conversely, politicians must not attempt to reason on scientifically sensitive issues as if they are scientists.

Risk is defined as the severity of the consequences of an accident or a hazard like a toxin multiplied by the probability of its occurrence. Risks will exist indefinitely however we attempt to reduce risk by either reducing the probability or severity of the hazard. (Bahr, 1997) People must learn, including the media, to “ balance the risks and thus steer a safe course through the potential minefield known as life”. The process by which people perceive risk is dependent on what knowledge they attain and what information is made available. (Neely, 1994)

Thus the key role of the media in informing the public with the knowledge necessary to make up decisions about environmental risks is revealed. The media shapes public perception of environmental risk by providing the public with information, although sometimes misconstrued, about potential environmental hazards.

The value of risk assessment for risk management must be balanced against the accuracy and reliability of the data used, a process that is as much an art as it is a science. Risk assessment and risk management can be conflicting and should be carried out independently. Public concern and perceived risk, or public opinion, will strongly influence public policy and legislative action or risk management, even when no scientific validation exists for the said position. It is imperative to help the public understand that sometimes

adequate or complete scientific information necessary to establish a standard is limited by the information available at that time. (Salvato, 1992)

Communication of environmental risks, or the process of making risk assessment and risk management information comprehensible to groups and individuals is hard because these groups (the public) often want to know if something is safe, not whether the risks are uncertain and complicated. (Faustman, Omenn, 1996)

Without media coverage it is unlikely that an important problem will either enter the arena of public discourse or become part of political issues. In a 2003 comparative study conducted at Drexel University about the media's contribution to the social construction of global warming, the authors identify key contributors called "gatekeepers" that are exclusively involved in shaping what is portrayed and expressed in the media. These gatekeepers consist of journalists and reporters who are in essence told what to do by their lead gatekeepers, the advertisers and corporate owners. This power structure of the media enables corporate objectives to be strategically disseminated to the public and in turn construct social perceptions favorable to the involved gatekeeper. (Dispensa, Brulle, 2003)

Whether or not a probable risk is circulated to the public and how such information is portrayed is commonly spin-doctored by the involved parties or concerned gatekeepers. The institutionalized structure of the mass media encourages public disengagement from making informed decisions about environmental risk. Mass media seems to be more concerned with procuring consumer loyalty and demand while capitalizing on consumerism.

Media and the press play a large role in the formation of environmental policies and in the development of risk perception. Media coverage of disasters have lead to the development of laws and programs like the federal Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), or Superfund legislation that resulted from the infamous Love Canal incident in New York in 1980. Catastrophic events and situations that engender fear sometimes require political action to achieve a sense of resolution. Once a risk has been brought to the attention of the public, the public then demands resolution.

Another governmental initiative spawned with the intent to manage environmental hazards is the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 (TSCA). This act was formulated to regulate the creation, manufacture and distribution of chemical substances in order to identify and control hazardous substances before they pose a threat to the environment and humans beings. The TSCA requires the EPA to conduct information gathering about new chemicals, new chemical screening, chemical testing, and control of chemicals and asbestos. (Rosenbaum, 2005)

The TSCA is morass with complexities that hinder its efficient operation including the lack of manpower and funding to carry out all of its delegated tasks. Implementation of the TSCA is delayed by political, technical and legal problems. The TSCA lacks a clear stipulation that lays out procedures for accurate reporting of environmental hazards that could work to alleviate the issue of media misconstruing environmental risks.

The Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) of 1996 is an offspring of CERCLA designed to simplify regulations regarding pesticides and food contaminants. Scientific controversy over the degree to which substances are toxic to people continually thwarts the implementation of this law. Media coverage of such scientific controversy impedes the FQPA in accomplishing its task of reducing risks by distracting scientists and the EPA from conducting experiments and research in order to defend their assertions that are contended in the media and in litigation.

One constituent of the FQPA discussed on the EPA's pesticide information website under the highlights of the FQPA section is the Consumer Right-to-Know provision. This provision requires the distribution of brochures in grocery stores about the health effects of pesticides, how to avoid risks, and which foods have tolerances for pesticide residues based on benefit considerations.

No requisites appear to exist regarding the diffusion of risk information via public broadcasts, mass media or through the news thus granting media gatekeepers and players free reign on disseminating their interpretation (possibly biased) of risks. Nor does the provision delineate stipulations that would ensure the publishing of such brochures and literature is accurate, clear and unbiased. The producers of these possibly injurious chemicals are free to tell the story how they see fit.

In the United States the petroleum industry dominates a large portion of the business and economic market. This dominion has a significant impact on the media coverage and formulation of public perceptions of and about

environmental issues, specifically media coverage and public perception of global warming. Debate among the scientific community on the issue of global warming is rare, however global warming is a highly controversial and divisive issue amongst the American political arena. The formidable fossil fuels lobby has mounted a very effective campaign deluding policy makers and the public to believe that the issue of global warming is stuck in the limbo of uncertainty when in actuality the evidence is lucid. (Dispensa, Brulle, 2003)

The United States is the leading producer of carbon dioxide emissions, which are believed to be the most important cause of the green house effect. The United States produces one third of the total carbon gas emissions believed responsible for climate warming. Scientific consensus is growing about the imminence of climate warming. (Rosenbaum, 2005)

Media contributes to the divulgence of misinformation regarding environmental risks like global warming by perpetuating the idea that global warming is a dubious or contentious issue when in fact the science backing the issue is consistent and unambiguous. America's collective reluctance to accept this fact impedes resolution of this transboundary environmental predicament.

Controversies regarding possible environmental risks often contain numbers that confuse the media and the public. Unfortunately the media commonly fails at making sense of the empirical data amass with complex numbers and figures thus failing at effectively publicizing important and vital information.

A noteworthy example deals with articles published in the early nineties in The New York Times regarding the group of toxins known as dioxins. Keith Schneider, an environmental reporter for the newspaper wrote articles that questioned the standards used by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for regulating toxic chemicals. Schneider asserted that “ new research indicates that dioxin may not be so toxic after all”, and that “ billions and billions of dollars are wasted each year in battling problems that are no longer considered especially dangerous, leaving little money for others that cause far more harm.” These allegations in turn depicted a less-hazardous view of dioxin to the public community. Schneider used an analogy comparing that exposure to dioxin was considered by “ some experts” to be no more risky than spending a weekend sunbathing. (Friedman, 1996)

The articles authored by Schneider about the validity of the risk of dioxin earned him kudos from industry, government peers and academic interests. His articles also induced widespread admiration from those skeptical of most current environmental programs and priorities. At the same time environmental activists and other members of the journalism community deemed Schneider’s reporting tactic as highly advocate and the personification of “ backlash Journalism.” (Time’s Schneider Resigns, 1995)

Schneider’s statements about dioxin contributed to the complexity of the issue. His attempt to use an analogy to relate the significance of a mysterious toxin like dioxin to a tangible risky activity like sunbathing did more to convolute the issue than to clear it up. In this situation the reporter overstepped his boundary from that of a journalist into the scientific arena

by attempting to quantify a risk without applying the necessary scientific methodology, thus discrediting his report and increasing public confusion.

The EPA's National Center for Environmental Assessment has formulated a Dioxin Exposure Initiative that fundamentally intends to quantitatively link dioxin sources to general population exposure. The document states, "Although we have a general qualitative understanding of dioxin cycling in the environment, our quantitative understanding is limited." This statement negates and disputes Schneider's effort to express a simplified quantitative understanding of dioxin risk to something as menial as sunbathing.

Controversy exists over the topic of who should be responsible for evaluating environmental risks. Michael Gough, Director of Risk and Science Studies at the CATO institute asserts that the federal government has no necessary role in environmental risk assessment. He states that in regards to the management of chemicals and medical devices the market will assure safety on its own without government interaction. Gough and CATO believe that EPA risk assessments lead to unnecessary and expensive actions that feed public fear therefore exacerbating the problem rather than fixing it. Gough also states that the first step in determining which environmental risks are worth addressing at all is to determine which risks are the most serious and deserved of our attention. (Gough, 1996) This initial task of hazard identification and determining inherently dangerous situations is the first step in making an environmental risk assessment decisions as delineated by the National Academy of Sciences. (Neely, 1994)

Gough's next suggestion after effective hazard identification is to exclude governmental involvement in the proceeding steps of dose response, exposure assessment and risk characterization. Adopting a practice of this nature would disregard all efforts and infrastructure already in place to assist with these tasks. The consequences of a repealing all of the existing infrastructures, administrations, regulations and regulatory organizations would be far more detrimental than beneficial.

What Gough is failing to recognize is the role the media plays in the fabrication of concern regarding an environmental risk. Gough discusses how statements relating 70, 80 or 90 percent of cancers to environmental causes have no evidence and are intentionally contorted from what scientist said in the 1950's and 1960's. He then goes on to describe how the use of the word "environment" includes everything we come in contact with including everything we eat, drink, take as medicine, radiation from the sun, x-rays, etc. (Gough, 1996)

Gough exposes the key notion that media depiction of a scientific issue allows for the notion to be convoluted by the reporter. Gough does not recognizing that concept has been lost in translation, and that the greater problem is that the actual reporting of environmental issues needs to be addressed and effectively managed.

—Conclusions—

The mass media, in particular the news media, serves as an important institution for the reproduction of hegemony. The media helps to define social reality. (Dispensa, Brulle, 2003) Inadequate or misleading media

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coverage can contribute to people's fear of environmental risks such as in the case of dioxin. The public's exaggerated fear about environmental risks are setting priorities for regulation and research rather than scientific expertise. (Friedman, 1996) Public fear combined with political eagerness or governmental overreaction equates to the misdirection of attention from issues posing the greater scientifically documented health risks to those receiving the greatest public apprehension. (Rosenbaum, 2005) We must learn to pick our battles and effectively value the assessment of risks.

Our culture is evolving into a technocratic manner of regulation marked by increasing technological savvy of the players involved in policy decisions. However the line between the scientists, politicians and journalists, although frequently convoluted, must be clearly defined and held to obstinately. Society needs to realize how we are controlled and manipulated by the media and be aware of the repeated ambiguity environmental coverage is stricken with.

Politicians and governmental agencies must reform policy formulation procedures that are negatively affected and influenced by imprecise disclosures concerning environmental risks. Public officials and politicians need to abstain from making hasty decisions based on biased, incomplete and insufficient data and must have sensitive regard for the distant future even when there are no apparent political rewards for doing so. (Rosenbaum, 2005)

Media industry players should be aware of the intensity of the power they hold in informing people and must do so with veracity and a tenacious

adherence to the tenets of the Society of Professional Journalist's Code of Ethics. Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Additionally, members of the press must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know and must assume accountability for their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. (SPJ, 1996)

Scientists must find methods to erect barriers against corporate encroachment on science that undercuts its integrity and elicits public suspicion, scrutiny and doubt. (Tenove, 2005) Scientists are faced with the difficult task of combating public dissent and misinterpretation when insufficient or inconclusive data exists. Scientists, the media and politicians all pass around the demand from the public to have comprehensible and clear information regarding probable environmental risk. This puts rigorous pressure on all involved parties to generate answers and make decisions even at times when data to achieve such conclusions is lacking.

The public needs to question whether or not media presents us with an objective story, especially when the story, like global warming, is presented to us as an issue stricken with controversy. The mass media may not choose to genuinely depict the adverse effects business practices may toll on the environment because of the consequences such information may have on the productivity of their business. The current administration's blatant rejection of climate change and the dismissal of the Kyoto Protocol as an unfair measure to the United States economy are partisan notions not derived from unbiased or unequivocal foundations.

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