

Reconfiguring the Risk Landscape: The Role of Public Relations

Chris Galloway

Monash University, Victoria, Australia
Christopher.galloway@arts.monash.edu.au

Abstract

Public relations literature seems narrow when it deals with the profession's engagement with risk, mostly concentrating on questions of managing threats to organizations' reputations. However, there is an opportunity for it to open itself to considering the theoretical and practice-related issues arising from hazards and the broad spectrum of vulnerabilities publics see arising in today's "risk society". There is room for reconfiguring the public relations landscape to better reflect the scope of contemporary risk anxieties and attempts to influence them through communication. This adjustment would produce an altered concept of public relations, one envisaging PR moving beyond advocacy of the interests of risk producers to contributing constructively to a more democratic and open approach to risk debates.

Key words

Public relations, risk communication, organization, reputation, communication.

Introduction

Risk is a fluid, malleable concept shaped by the differing interests that deploy it – including public relations, acting on behalf of its employers.

Society uses risk as an organizing construct in its sense-making activity focused on complexity, uncertainty and uncontrollability. In the face of pervasive, threatening uncertainty, a “risk management of everything” (Power, 2004) approach seeks rational responses to risk through science-driven analysis of problems. In businesses, “risk management”, in everything from customer interface to product manufacture to commercial agreements and more, describes attempts to drive operational, market, financial and legal vulnerability as close to zero as possible. Here risk may be either an assessment of the likelihood that a hazard, or potential source of harm, will produce a tangible threat to wellbeing, or a “manufactured” risk such as one that has to do with the possible consequences to shareholders of an enterprise’s decision-making on, say, a planned entry to a new market. At a nation-state level, governments use risk approaches to limit the likelihood of citizen activism over disputed policy decisions.

Communication is central to all such efforts if risk management is to achieve its objectives, which centre around identifying and assessing risk, then developing and implementing appropriate mitigation strategies. This “risk communication” may be part of standard risk management practices in an organization, or may (if the risk is considered significant enough) stand on its own as a separate – but linked – sphere of activity. Risk communication is not automatically the responsibility of public relations practitioners. It may be undertaken by risk managers or by organization members with responsibilities in areas such as environmental, health or safety concerns. Especially where external audiences are involved, it may, however, be implemented or guided by professional communicators. Their titles may vary (some organizations choose to operate public relations activities under labels such as “corporate communications” or “public affairs”), but they may be classed as public relations practitioners because of their particular focus on the communicative dimensions of the organization’s relationships with significant “publics”.

Public Relations' involvement

Public relations people may, therefore, be involved on behalf of clients or employers in the strategic deployment of particular, often self-interested concepts of “risk” (cf. Moloney, 2000, 2006: 128). Examples might be seeking to assure consumers that “there is no risk” or “there is minimal risk” in drinking fluoridated water, in eating beef treated with growth promotant chemicals or in living near a mobile telephone transmission tower. Risk as an organizing construct is not a neutral, value-free concept. As Otway (1987: 125) notes, “...what counts as fact is conditioned by political, organizational, and peer pressures”. Public relations may be party to the conditioning, as a profession that seeks to frame issues and persuade publics on behalf of those who employ its services.

Practitioners and their clients may be motivated to act because of a real or perceived risk to corporate reputations. Because reputation is seen as an intangible business asset functioning as an intervening variable in stakeholders' development of trust – and therefore confidence to buy products and services – organizations are concerned to protect it, often employing PR people to do so. This work may involve “buffering” (shielding the organization from its critics) or “boosting” (seeking to frame events in the most positive light possible) or both. Some reputation risks result from a failure to manage hazards. Here, too, Public relations may be involved, as PR is often called on to represent the interests of organizations publics perceive as generating or producing risk, whether the risk is tangible – as in toxic waste – or intangible, as in financial or legal risk.

As professionals, these communicators may take a leading role in framing risk assessments for lay audiences and in seeking to win acceptance of these frames as legitimate. The PR brief may also (in effect, even if it is not explicitly stated) cover working to exclude other frames that may be less congenial to the organization's interests. Given the wide scope risk has acquired as a way of describing and identifying various vulnerabilities to which people feel prone, one might expect it to constitute a major theme in the Public relations literature. However, in that sphere, risk communication seems largely to lack the theorizing that has surrounded the widely-researched concepts of issue management and crisis communication.

Communication and mitigating risk

If a reason was needed to extend thinking about PR's present engagement with risk, it might well be found in the fact that to many concerned citizens, hazards seem to hover around every corner. Beck's (1986) "risk society" concept has never appeared more apt, nor communication about threats, global or local, more vital. As people feel more vulnerable, reducing risks and communicating about them gains a sharper edge (Heath et al., 2002). In the fragile atmosphere of social anxieties, communication can help authorities reduce or prevent the likelihood of a possible risk becoming a risk event, or crisis. It can educate publics on protecting themselves, and help to build trust. Absence of effective communication is problematic, to say the least. According to the *Final Report of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, "the lack of a government public communications strategy and media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns and further delayed relief" (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006: 4). Risk and crisis-level risk events in particular, demand high-order communication skill, the kind of skill professional communicators – PR practitioners – say they can provide.

Some of the communication challenges confronting organizations dealing with risk issues may result from publics' perceptions that the world is more objectively dangerous than it was, notwithstanding the fact that this idea is open to question (Power, 2004). According to Furedi (2002: 2), "society's difficulty with managing risk is driven by a culture of safety that sees vulnerability as our defining condition". The broader field of risk communication, not just that part of it to do with corporate reputations, focuses on altering this fragile sense of vulnerability, perhaps through seeking to allay concerns, perhaps through empowering people to protect themselves by providing them with the information they need to do so. Although closely related to issue management and crisis communication – central concerns of public relations, most often considered in the light of threats to corporate reputations – risk communication when it refers to hazards differs, because of its focus on the possibility of direct danger to the well-being of humans or the physical environment.

When debates about risk and hazards arises, the central role of communication should spotlight public relations practitioners' ability to con-

tribute vitally to messaging and campaign management on risk topics, such as a potential avian influenza pandemic. For example, confronting concern that scientists and technicians might acquire valuable information that could prevent a pandemic but not know how to communicate the information “to the right people in the right time” (Greco, 2005: 1), PR could advance a claim to provide the necessary expertise. But such claims seem absent, and health concerns are only one item on a long list of current social anxieties about risk. In *Today's Public Relations*, Heath and Coombs (2006) list a range of contemporary risks. They report, for example, that “Greedy executives can ruin a company, leading to hundreds of employees being laid off and investors ruined” (Heath & Coombs, 2006: 207). They continue: “Note that once this sort of risk occurs, crisis communication is needed. Because of this role in society, public relations practitioners serving all types of organizations are at the forefront of risk communication” (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

PR's low profile

Yet, when the broad spectrum of the application of risk concepts is considered, public relations appears puzzlingly low-profile. Risks to corporate reputations and strategies for dealing with them seem to loom much larger in the literature than perils to public physical well-being. Certainly, clients and employers demand “strategic reputation risk management” services (Larkin, 2003). But limiting the profession's risk engagement to reputation obscures opportunities in the expanding domain of communicating about hazards and the risks they pose, or are perceived to pose. Such openings challenge both public relations practitioners and employers who prefer to tread more familiar (and, arguably, easier) ground in issue management and crisis communication. In fact, there appears to be a *lacuna* in the public relations literature about risk communication. Analyses of issue management and crisis communication are relatively frequent; risk communication commentary, rare. While others publish periodically on risk communication, Robert Heath, based at the University of Houston, seems to be the only public relations scholar to sustain a lengthy research program on risk communication, working together with associates.

Part of the reason may be that it is not axiomatic that public relations practitioners can “own” a broad risk communication role. A putative competence in “reputation risk management” might not stand them in good stead in communicating about physical hazards and risks, even though both domains demand engaging with involved and often detailed technical issues. Practitioners often see themselves as “keepers” (Hyde, 2002) of clients’ and employers’ reputations. Dealing with potential damage or decay to corporations’ standing with key publics is considered core communications business, assigned priority because reputation “may be an intangible resource leading to sustained competitive advantage” (Barney; and Dierckx & Cool, cited in Deephouse, 2000: 1091). A positive reputation signals stakeholders about the attractiveness of the firm; they are then more willing to do business with it (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Weigelt & Camerer, both cited in Deephouse, 2000). According to Roberts & Dowling (2002: 1078), reputation-building does not need to have a direct impact on today’s bottom line to provide future benefits. Even “activities that have no positive impact on current financial performance (e.g. McDonalds’ houses for sick children or Philip Morris’s anti-smoking campaigns) are still critical as they generate reputation assets that allow above-average profits to persist over time”.

The idea of reputation risk is that these vital intangible assets are susceptible to damage or even loss, with consequent financial implications for the business concerned (Larkin, 2003; Rayner, 2003). Both public and private sector managers take reputation risk very seriously. A 2005 AON Ltd (n.d.) survey in the UK found respondents regarded loss of reputation as their companies’ single biggest threat, moving up from a fifth placing in 2003. Public relations is called in to ride shotgun against this danger: reputation guardianship is “part of the traditional function of corporate affairs and communications departments” (Webley, 2003: 9). However, while practitioners may regularly be briefed to ward off reputation risk, they seem much less visible when the larger sphere of risk communication is considered: that is, communicating about hazards and risk. As one instance of this apparent reticence, a search of the archive of *Communication World*, a flagship publication for the leading practitioner group International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), produces only six articles on risk communication from 1993 to the present. In contrast, issue management rates 63 articles and crisis communication, 83.

By and large, this low practitioner profile for PR and risk communication carries over to the academy, although there is one notable exception. Robert Heath has, with colleagues, authored at least 12 papers on the subject since the early 1990s. He has also, on his own account, written about risk communication in books, such as a chapter in his *Strategic Issues Management* (1997). Other academic authors have produced valuable but only occasional contributions rather than the rich *corpus* that Heath has built up over time. One can only speculate as to why more researchers have not followed Heath's lead. Issue management is an older concept than risk communication, dating from 1976 (Issue Management Council, 2005), while crisis – arguably – offers a simpler frame within which the elements of a problem stand out starkly. However, risk communication, associated with uncertainty and probabilistic assessments, may be seen as a more challenging and possibly less interesting field, because it is less dramatic when conducted pre-crisis.

Heath and his associates seem in no doubt as to risk communication's status *vis-à-vis* PR. The *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*, edited by Heath, Michael Palenchar (2005: 753) calls risk communication “a sub discipline of public relations studies.”. Palenchar and Heath (2002: 129) also identify risk communication as a public relations sub discipline, “intended to increase the quality of risk decisions through better communication.” Without so directly bringing risk communication under PR's wing, Heath et al. (2002: 318) asserting that “risk communication has emerged as a specialized field with solid implications for public relations”. Palenchar and Heath (2002: 130-131) set their concept of PR's role in a relationship frame: “Public relations is a practitioner and scholarly discipline increasingly devoted to understanding the quality of relationship construction, maintenance and repair. For this reason, practitioners and scholars have reason to understand variables that affect the risk communication process”.

Yet apart from Heath's seminal work, both individually and with colleagues, there is little substantive indication in either the academic or the practitioner PR literatures that risk communication is yet taken particularly seriously as a sub-discipline. Outside Heath's research, there appear to be no public relations empirical studies examining topics such as the number of practitioners involved in risk communication and the nature of their involvement. One example of under-emphasis on risk commu-

nication is *Risk Issue and Crisis Management* (Regester & Larkin, 2005) published in conjunction with the UK Institute for Public Relations. In the book, the subject of “Dealing with Risk” merits only five pages in a total of 186 and the topic of “effective risk communication” merely a single reference on page 16.

Amongst a slender tally of non-Heath academic papers, Gordon (1991: 28) does assert, without support, that “communicating about risk is an important and challenging aspect of public relations today.” The article is largely a compendium of advice to practitioners. Adams (1992) refers to risk communication expert Peter Sandman’s contention that communicating about risk shouldn’t be left solely to public relations “technicians” but rather, should be considered the responsibility of plant managers and environmental officials. “In reality, though,” Adams (2002: 28) suggests, “risk communication *is* a public relations function; and it’s especially true in media relations [the focus of Adams’ paper], clearly the purview of the communications professional (although other managers *should* be schooled in such concepts)” (original emphasis).

However, more than an italicized emphasis is needed to press home a point. Jones (2002) provides a more nuanced approach:

Given the increased focus on publics in the management literature and the demands from industry for more effective ways of dealing with critical publics and avoiding crises, public relations appears perfectly placed to meet these demands. In particular [this paper focuses on] the emergence of risk as a major facet of production of contemporary society. With organizations producing risk as much as they produce goods and services, risk communication becomes a prerogative of public relations (Jones, 2001: 58).

Possibly, public relations people are not particularly involved with risk communication because risk managers (such as Sandman’s plant managers and environmental officials) may not see them as possessing sufficient relevant technical competence in a particular risk domain to warrant holding overall communication responsibility. Equally, PR people might shy away from risk communication because it often centers on technical data and complex scientific assessments. A cynical colleague may be right: “PR people have decided there’s no future in risk commu-

nication, therefore they don't do it. The clients are averse to dealing with risk and consultants have decided there's no money in it" (personal communication, February 17, 2006).

Other literatures

Medicine, environmental studies, science, and commercial risk management and analysis all have much more to say than public relations about communicating risk. For example, the United States National Library of Medicine counted 847 citations for health risk communication from January 1990 to October 2000 (Zorn & Ratzan, October, 2000). Gurabardhi et al. (2004), who focus on environmental and technological risk communication, undertook a survey of the peer-reviewed risk communication literature between 1988 and 2000 listed in the electronic databases ISI Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI Science Citation Index, and ISI Arts and Humanities Citation Index. Their list of the nine most relevant journals for risk communication with five or more publications recorded in the survey period does not include a single communications-oriented publication: the fields represented include risk analysis/assessment and management, hazardous materials, radiation protection, health physics, environmental health and medicine, and environmental science and technology. It may be that in interpreting risk communication as narrowly as "communication to do with reputation risk," often prompted by a crisis, public relations is allowing category-bound thinking (Sunstein et al., 2001) to isolate it from a productive and valuable area both of academic inquiry and of practice.

A major crisis such as the now classic examples of the oil spill following the grounding of the tanker *Exxon Valdez* or the release of the toxic chemical from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, will require PR activity among other interventions, if only to brief interested parties on what is being done to handle the situation. While these extreme cases call for extraordinary responses, day-to-day communicating about risks requires a different calculus from that often employed in issue management and crisis communication. Risk communication centers on uncertainty and assessments of probabilities. Success demands understanding both lay and expert assessments and learning how to connect them productively. The

result may not necessarily be lay publics' meek acceptance of expert assessments and recommendations. If a dialogic process is used, based on the notion of "risk democracy" (Heath & Abel, 1996 a), the outcome may amend both expert analyses and lay opinions. Technical considerations of risks, such as the likely toxicity of particular chemicals to humans and the physical environment, may need to be taken into account and the communication necessary, require professional management.

Against this backdrop, public relations people cannot afford to remain outside the ambit of risk communication as it is now understood as extending across a wide range of disciplines, including "public relations, risk management, psychology, rhetoric, political science, and sociology" (Palenchar, 2005: 754), as well as others, such as environmental and health communications. PR practitioners may best serve their interests – and those of their clients and employers – not only by identifying a role for themselves in risk communication broadly defined, but also by advocating that they should assume it, collaborating with those who have direct responsibility for the physical, technical and technological facets of risks.

This is not completely foreign territory for PR. Fundamentally, risk communication is simply about organizations, private or governmental, engaging publics about hazard and risk information with a view to influencing their attitudes to risk and, often, their behavior – such as in providing the information they need to help protect themselves from danger. For PR practitioners, campaigns with such aims are familiar: public relations activity typically aims to capture audience interest and to steer it towards a desired result. However, just as mere awareness of an issue is useful but, in itself, insufficient for a campaign whose aim is behavior change, so merely providing people with facts about hazards and risk assessments falls short. No longer will publics put up with risk messages being thrust at them by expert sources whose assumption is that "if you knew what I know, you'd think the same". Publics expect to be involved in assessing the nature of risks to which they are exposed and to share in developing a response strategy.

This "democratization of risk policy" (Power, 2004: 20) has brought "the principles for accepting risk – 'risk appetite' – in the language of private sector risk management standards – into public question" (Power, 2004: 19). The extent to which the trend is actually democrat-

ic remains problematic and some observers are dubious about both the concept of risk democracy and whether it applies to public relations. Renn (2003) is so apposite on this point that he is worth citing at length:

The popularity associated with the concepts of two-way communication, trust-building and citizen participation, however, obscures the challenge of how to put these noble goals into practice and how to ensure that risk management reflects competence, efficiency and fair burden sharing. How can and should risk managers collect public preferences, integrate public input into the management process, and assign the appropriate roles of technical experts, stakeholders, and members of the public? Who represents the public? The elected politicians, administrators, stakeholders, or all persons who will be affected by the risk? (Renn, 2003: 13).

Public relations can help provide answers to these questions. As an integrative discipline whose scope includes stakeholder relationship building, consultation and organizational emergency (crisis) communication, public relations is well equipped to assist, moving beyond its association with the interests of risk producers to helping facilitate more democratic approaches to risk considerations. Doing so might well be counter-intuitive for some PR clients and employers – but also produce more robust outcomes as risk-concerned publics respond to opportunities for more meaningful engagement with risk assessment and response strategy development. For this to occur, both practitioners and academics need to better define and adjust their picture of the scope of PR's role in communicating risk. The wider risk literature provides much for public relations to draw from. What is needed now is for both scholars and practitioners to develop more robust linkages between risk across the spectrum of its contemporary use and the need, and opportunity, for PR-managed communication.

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