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Extended abstract:

MEDIA COVERAGE OF RISK TECHNOLOGIES IN DENMARK

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Comparing press reports on technological risks

This paper presents the preliminary findings of an analysis of media coverage of technological risks in the Danish press. The study looks at news reports of four contemporary risks presented on three different media platforms. It includes news stories on national and global risks, long-term and short-term risks as well as general and more particular man-made risks.

The research design is based on a comparative perspective that takes into consideration the nature and constraints of the media system. Thus, news media approach technological risks in different ways according to both internal and external constraints. Consequently, risk coverage reflects news values, technological media platforms, professional norms, organisational routines and media institutional practises. As a result, media coverage of risk technologies constitute a particular discourse that differs from risk discourses in other public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

The study's methodological starting point is a quantitative content analysis, which forms the basis for a subsequent qualitative analysis. The quantitative part compares risk coverage in terms of general media exposure, relations to news values, risk actors, and the distribution of content variables like domestic/foreign news.

Based on these findings the study looks at qualitative differences in how the media presents various technological risks. The analytical aim is to (1) identify and discuss competing risk discourses and "risk alignment processes" in the media coverage of technological risks, and (2) provide a picture of the overall risk culture that emerges from the various mediated risk discourses circulating in the press.

Conceptual foundation: comparing risk framing in the press

Risk discourses are often investigated by looking at particular individual risks such as GMO pollution, food scandals, risks of nuclear fall-out or global climate change. However, in public communication technological risks are rarely confined to a single risk event. They circulate and develop among a variety of

technological risks, of which some are rather momentous (e.g. risks of explosions), others local (e.g. toxic depots) and yet other again global in scope and consequences (e.g. climate change). In other words, public risk communication is part of a broader communicative risk culture in which individual risks add to, build on, or perhaps even neutralizes each other.

For that reason it becomes important to consider how the media discursively makes sense of risk technologies. Moreover, the aggregate risk picture that emerges from the increasing mediatization of risk shows how omnipresent representations of risk permeate the public mind-set.

However, it is equally important to analyse the differences in mediated risks. To pursue the latter we draw on media theoretical concept of master-frames (König, 2006; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012). Media coverage of technological risks forms discourses that frame risks in particular ways. Some representations of risk are generic in nature, reflecting the media systems preferences for e.g. sensation and conflict. Others relate to questions of globalization and what has been called “the geo-politics” of risk and disaster coverage (Pantti, et al., 2012) as well as tendencies of domestication and the manageability of technological risks.

Risk coverage and risk discourses differ substantially in their degree of specialization and discursive variation. To measure this we propose that the concept of “frame alignment processes” (Snow, Jr., Worden, & Benford, 1986) could be translated into a notion of “risk alignment”. Accordingly, mediated risks differ in terms of their discursive tendencies towards bridging, amplification, extension and transformation of risk.

Data and methodology

The study is based on a sample covering four month of Danish media coverage of technological risks (01.01.2013 to 31.03.2013). It is assumed that such a period provides enough data for capturing both discursive patterns and variations.

Based on an initial pilot-study and a principle of maximum variation sampling, the sample contains news reports on four technological risks:

- Climate change
- Nuclear waste
- Swine and/or avian influenza
- Insulin medicine

News items are sampled from three media platforms:

- Newspapers: five national dailies (three broadsheet + two tabloids)
- Television: news programmes from two national public services broadcasters (DR, TV2)
- Radio: news reports and updates from three radio channels (highbrow and mainstream) belonging to Denmark’s Radio (DR)

The sample (n=344) has been subject to a mixed quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and qualitative media analysis (Altheide, 1987, 1996). Both methods are concerned with multiple document analysis. However, whereas the former seeks to quantify differences and similarities in risk coverage, the latter

seeks to explore those patterns through a process of “constant comparison and investigation of documents over a period of time” (Altheide, 1996, p. 10).

From risk to risks: discourses, meta-discourses and the cultivation of risk culture

The preliminary findings suggest that press coverage of risks differs substantially in terms of frequencies and the distribution of risk variables. Climate change is by far the most covered risk topic, despite the fact that our sampling period contains none of the typical “trigger events”, such as COP meetings or (un)natural disasters (Cottle, 2009). Press coverage also differs as to whether technological risks are presented as the primary or the secondary topic, and even more when it comes to presenting these technological risks *as* risks. For instance, less than 30% of the news reports on climate change present climate change *as* a risk. The majority of news reports relate climate change to politics, financial topics or cultural issues. In contrast, approximately 80% of articles on pandemics and nuclear risks explicitly articulate these as risks.

News coverage differ less in terms of news values (actuality, sensation, conflict, etc.), and it hardly differs when looking at the distribution of news platforms (tv, radio, newspapers) or the distinction between news and views.

These variations have important consequence for (1) the discursive representations surrounding risk coverage, (2) risk alignment and (3) the overall picture of mediated risks.

Ad 1) Most risk coverage contains a more or less explicit sub-text concerning the manageability of risk. The underlying questions are whether different technologies are posing as risk that can be contained, controlled, resolved? Or is it unmanageable or uncontrollable due to natural forces, political constraints, geographical challenges etc.? Our data suggests that, domestic risks appear more likely to be presented as controllable, and foreign risk as less manageable.

Our data also indicates that foreign news is more prone to focus on disasters than risks compared to domestic risks. Thus, we consider risk coverage a pre-stage to disaster coverage. Risk, in contrast to disaster, includes at least an element of controllability.

Ad 2) Risks are constantly related to a broader political, cultural or natural context in the process of ‘risk alignment’. As a result risks are augmented, diminished or even neutralized. Risks are *amplified* when e.g. questions of depositing nuclear waste is related to natural risks of earthquakes or flooding. Risks of climate change can be *transformed* into a discourse of green growth or ecological modernization. *Bridging* may occur between structurally different risks such as the risk of side-effects from medical treatments and risks incurred from climate change. Finally, the pharmaceutical industry can *extend* its frame to include regulatory positions or patient values.

Ad 3) The patterns of risk coverage suggest that media presentations of risks are highly heterogeneous. Some risks are framed as health related, technologically induced, politically (un)resolvable, or financially important. Grasping risk coverage *en bloc* suggest that risks are everywhere in modern society pertaining to all aspects of human activity.

Two explanations spring to mind. The first is the theory of the risk society, which points out that the modern society is increasingly producing its own risks (Beck, 1992, 2007). The other is the theory of mediatization, which suggests that media activities are increasingly encroaching on all aspects of modern life replacing earlier forms of social interaction, communication and information exchange (Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2009). As Luhmann suggests, it is through the media that society is (self-)alerted and becomes aware of its own risks (Luhmann, 1996, 1997).

The risk of mediated risks: paralysing or democratizing risk perception?

The heterogeneity of risk coverage contains its own communicative challenges, perhaps even risks. If technological risks are everywhere, how can we expect any public reaction, concern even mobilization? If the public in the rich part of the world feel besieged by risks, what would be the likelihood of any cosmopolitical identification with risk victims in other parts of the world?

On the other hand it may be the very ubiquity of risks that is the answer to these questions. Because mediated risks comes in all sorts and shapes, as conflict, sensation or surprise, in relation to finance, health, politics or science, no one is untouched by risks. We are all subject to mediated risk. Perhaps it is herein that lies the true “democratization of risks”, to paraphrase Ulrich Beck.

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