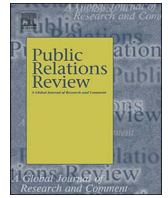




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## Marketplace commodification of risk communication: Consequences for risk bearers and implications for public relations

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### ABSTRACT

Society's attempt to understand and communicate about risk is perhaps the world's oldest topic – the rationale for human existence and survival (Douglas, 1992). This paper takes critical stock of public relations scholarship and practices in the daunting complex that has become known as the infrastructural approach to risk communication. This approach blends critical judgment of the community structures where risk is discussed and the discourse in which it is analyzed as the foundation for risk governance needed for fully functioning societies. The critical lens of hegemony and postmodernism reveals how an increasing amount of risk communication scholarship and practice has evolved into a new professional, industrial, and societal hegemony that often marginalizes risk bearers and risk arbiters as a nuisance in an otherwise modern and elitist approach to risk control through which risk communication becomes a “priced commodity.” Such commodification can empower organizations to take further risks because of the perceived confidence that its robust risk management programs and risk communication teams, including public relations, can control the dialogue and thereby help protect it from business continuity failure. The great challenge is whether risk communication and management ultimately favors the interests of elites over, and even to the marginalization and subjugation of, the interests of risk bearers and arbiters, ignoring the experiences of inequalities over the life span.

### 1. Introduction

Society's attempt to understand, measure, predict, mitigate, and communicate about risk is perhaps the world's oldest topic – the rationale for human existence and survival (Douglas, 1992). Over the centuries, the questions of risk assessment, management, and communication have twisted and turned. While the questions and answers may have shifted, what is clear is that society is formed, organized, and operated for the collective management of risk. By extension, a case can be made that societies are more fully functioning as they are more or less capable of collectively managing risk.

To support responsible practice in what has become known as the risk society, public relations scholars are obligated to consider intended and unintended consequences of risk management and risk communication, which symbolically is multi-dimensional, layered, and textual. This research paper takes analytical stock of public relations scholarship and practice in the daunting complex that has become known as the infrastructural approach to risk communication. This approach blends critical judgment of the

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community structures where risk is discussed and the discourse in which it is analyzed as the foundation for risk governance needed for fully functioning societies. While the increasing amount of risk communication scholarship offers new ways of understanding and managing risk, critical theorists have simultaneously articulated ways that such emerging scholarship operates as a new professional, industrial and societal hegemony. From this perspective, risk bearers and risk arbiters are understood as a nuisance in what is further situated as an elitist approach to risk control through which risk communication becomes a “priced commodity.” (In this context, risk arbiters are advocates for risk bearers who seek to resolve the conflict with information gathered from risk researchers. See [Palmlund, 2009](#); for an explanation and a dramaturgical rationale for and roles played in the societal evaluation of risk.) Such commodification can empower organizations to take further risks because of the perceived confidence that its robust risk management programs and risk communication teams, including public relations, can control the dialogue – even in the age of social media – and thereby help protect it from business continuity failure.

The great challenge in such matters is whether risk communication and risk management ultimately favors the interests of elites over, and even to the marginalization and subjugation of, the interests of risk bearers and arbiters. This paper reviews the complexity of a modern risk society and various risk communication infrastructures, which are dominated by a marketplace economy and science-based view of risk, and proposes that one place to begin is in analyzing risk governance to create a more fully functioning society. Hegemony and postmodern critiques are brought to bear to highlight problematic risk communication practices such as science-based-only risk assessment; dominant public relations perspectives such as symmetry, mutual satisfaction, and mutually beneficial relationships; static lists of best practices based on a rationale model; risk source as the primary focus or agent of public relations; right to know based on information as power; and ultimately the inclusive participatory process.

Ultimately, our discussion suggests how entangled risk communication is with governance, infrastructures, and confluences of interests. This line of thought is distinguished from related scholarly debate in public relations scholarship in that this paper asks public relations scholars and practitioners who work in the area of risk communication to address hegemony and postmodernism by investigating the nature and impact of sociocultural risk discourse, shaped by symbols (language) and its relevance for reflective risk management. Such discourse is no better than the risk communication infrastructure (public sphere) where engagement and dialogue occurs to construct meaning for society to be fully functioning – better places to live and work in relationship to health, safety, economics and environment. In this vein, what fosters or hampers risk communication efforts to increase the quality of society and the success or failure of the organizations, the communities and the individuals seeking collectively to solve problems and manage risk. It is also worth considering how well public relations, as practice and scholarship, protects all interests or becomes a commoditized means of elite control. As ancient as such matters are the central focus of this paper is on the shifts that are relevant to today’s headlines.

## 2. Risk and risk society

This paper approaches risk as probabilistic events that can result in various harms and benefits caused by risk creators, borne by risk bearers, and intervened by risk mitigators and arbiters ([Palmlund, 2009](#)). The amount of benefit or magnitude of harm is a focal point that can be discussed, mitigated, and assessed to be fair and/or equal, or unfair and/or unequal.

Douglas’ work can be used to reason that the nature of society is its organization for purposes of the collective management of risk. Making that point, [Douglas \(1992\)](#) offered cultural theory as “a way of thinking about culture that draws the social environment systematically into the picture of individual choices. It provides a method of analyzing public debates as positions taken in a conflict between cultures” (p. xi). In this way, culture becomes rationalized as risk management. Dietary restrictions and mating behaviors became issues of species survival and public policy. Religions as well as occupations, trades, and professions grew to give order to chaos and prediction to unpredictable events. Orders, hierarchies, exclusions, and inclusions become central to the ideology of culture as humans create and cope with risk. Such cultures and the successes and failures that flow from them become fundamental to critical inquiries into the nature of risk governance in a modern risk society.

Anthony [Giddens \(1991\)](#) and Ulrich [Beck \(2008\)](#), in the latter part of the 20th century, recognized how the hurriedly expanding complexity of modern social organizations made it impossible for any governmental institution to deal with social problems relying solely on governmental apparatuses. Beck’s risk society thesis of reflexive modernization, first published in German as *Risikogesellschaft* in 1986, discussed how risk societies (e.g., industrial societies), based on their limitless need to create wealth, have cultivated and extended technologies that produce goods for society while also creating unforeseen consequences that elevate or create new risks. (See [Beck, 2008](#); for a thorough explanation and a reflexive modernization rationale for the issue and discourse of risk.)

According to [Beck \(2008\)](#), these manufactured risks have penetrated and created change in all levels of society and the resulting globalism creates borderless risks. At the local and global levels these postindustrial societies can be characterized by their development from modern to risk communities and cultures where the primary generator of risk has shifted from being organic and nature-based to industrial manufacturing and marketplace oriented. Such risks are embedded in the decision-making processes of for-profit organizations that take calculable risks to generate profits through business creation ([Beck & Holzer, 2007](#)) – ultimately defined by a marketplace economy and supported by corresponding public policy. Combine this with concerns that neoliberalism is privatizing the marketplace of ideas ([McChesney & Nichols, 2002](#)) and that large private corporations have the power to exercise market censorship over mainstream media (including social media) adds another detrimental layer of a risk society.

[Beck \(2008\)](#) also points out that the responsibility for risk impacts has been largely shifted away from the manufacturers of the risk to the risk bearers, who must make risk decisions based on limited scientific knowledge (assuming such information is shared) and with limited to no personal experience. Combine these previously mentioned elements of a risk society with the byzantine development of risk insurance and the tantalizing idea of manageable and quantifiable risk, and a perfect storm is created where risk

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