Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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PART 2
The European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School 2014 and its Participants

Risk discourse in news media.
Power to define danger?

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Abstract

The 21st century is being marked by a host of large-scale social threats: pandemics, natural catastrophes, terror attacks, political tensions and technological accidents. However real and material such events and processes are, they become socially visible and meaningful as *risks*, and an increasing awareness and presence of such risks is a particular characteristic of the societies we live in (Beck, 1992). By choosing what information to present and how, the media are crucial players in the construction and communication of risk (Kitzinger, 1999). While there has been a lot of studies about how media reports risks related to particular issues such as health, ecology or technology, a more holistic inquiry into the general features and dynamics of mediated risk discourse is missing. The atomistic approach to understanding mediated risk does not reveal the shared characteristics of the broader flow of information about risks, thus losing sight of a crucial part of the risk society argument - the fact that risks are complex and systemic (OECD 2003) rather than simple and linear (van Asselt and Renn, 2011). This chapter outlines a research design for systematically investigating media's risk discourse as it appears across different areas such as social, economic, political, cultural, environmental or technological. Referring to the theoretical ideas regarding discourse espoused by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau 1990, 1993; Mouffe 1993, 2008) as well as Foucault (1969), the chapter illustrates an approach to the study of mediated risks not as something inherent in objects, events or processes themselves, but as something constructed by the interplay of the media and other discourses.

Keywords: risk, news media, discourse, framing, a holistic approach

1.   Introduction

"Why are so many fears in the air, and so many of them unfounded?" (Glassner, 1999)

A postmodern society is increasingly becoming obsessed with its future, and following the process of reflective modernisation has gained the label of "risk society". According to Beck (2006), modern society has become a risk society, a society increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that we live in an uncertain environment filled with health risks, natural disasters, social disintegration, political tensions, scientific discoveries hurtling out of control, etc. On the other hand, modern society emphasizes our ability to control these hazards. In a risk society, the sense of fear is at the same time ever present and considered as partly groundless; we live in a paradox of simultaneous rising living standards and the increasing feeling of risk. As Aaron Wildavsky (1979) atply put it – the richest, best–protected, most resourceful civilization in history, with the highest degree of insight into its own technology, is on its way to becoming the most frightened.

When creating awareness of "risks", the role of the media is essential. News organisations are one of the most significant actors involved in the social construction of risk (Short, 1984: 721). They have the power to produce and share the knowledge about risks, defining which objects, actions, and processes should be considered as dangerous, predicting who will probably become victims, and distributing blame for causing the things that threaten us. It is widely recognised that media coverage of risk is selective (Kitzinger, 2009), and there have been a lot of studies about how media report risks related to particular issues such as health, ecology or technology (e.g. Collin and Hughes, 2011; Escobar and Demeritt, 2014; Eskjær and Roslyng, 2013). However, a more holistic inquiry into the general features and dynamics of mediated risk discourse is missing. The atomistic approach to understanding mediated risks does not reveal the shared characteristics of the broader flow of information about risks. Thus, it looses sight of a crucial part of the risk society argument – that risks are complex and systemic (OECD, 2003) rather than simple and linear (van Asselt and Renn, 2011).

This chapter outlines a research design for systematically investigating the media's risk discourse as it appears across different areas such as economic, political, health, cultural, environmental or technological problems. In this approach, a mediated risk is being understood not as something inherent in objects, events or processes themselves but as something constructed by the interplay of the media and other discourses. The chapter begins with a discussion on a variety of risk definitions revealing ambiguities in this field. It then introduces discourse theory as a methodological basis for making sense of mediated risks. Finally, some findings of a pilot study are presented, seeking to provide empirical illustrations as well as reflecting on some of the qualitative features of risk representations in (television) news.

2. Roving among definitions of risk

The concept of risk lacks a fixed meaning in the discourse in scientific literature and varies across different disciplines. There is no commonly accepted definition of a risk – neither in the sciences nor in public understanding (Renn, 1998). Statements similar to these are usually found in academic publications that deal with risk issues. This reflects a confusion rising from the absence of a stable definition of risk. Different disciplines employ specific definitions of risk applying them to the particular context such as health, economics or psychology. Risk is incorporated into so many different disciplines – from insurance to engineering to portfolio theory – that such a confusion should come as no surprise (Damodaran, 2008).

On a general and abstract level, the concept of risk is twofold. Firstly, there is the formally exact, scientific starting point where risk is considered as *a probability of losing something valuable*. This approach usually refers to risk as something objective and aims then to measure risks. However, such technical perception is not able to provide answers to many questions rising in the social context of a society concerned with making sense of risks. Within the last decades, then, much greater attention has been paid to the social nature of risks, the fact that risks cannot not only be defined as objective threats but need be understood also as an awareness of these threats. Hence, risks are essentially also socially constructed. Those who have adopted such a *social constructionist* position, regardless of the strength of this view, tend to argue that a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of our belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledge and discourses (Lupton, 2013). This approach to risk helps to explain why different societies are afraid of different things as well as why the perception of risk varies among members of the same society. For instance, differences between experts' and laypersons' opinions show that not only objective and rational factors influence perception of risk. There are a lot of other factors influencing risk perception, e. g. socio-demographic characteristics (Hakes and Viscusi, 2004), religious and quasi-religious beliefs (Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 2002), cultural models (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982) or media effects (McCluskey and Swinnen, 2011).

This work focuses on the risk definitions constructed and mobilized in the news media. Thus, the concept of risk is, from the outset, treated as a social construct which comes into the world as a result of the various practices of social agents. According to Balžekienė, risk as a social construct is shaped by interaction and the influence of various social, cultural and institutional factors (2007). News media form a specific area that employs a particular concept of risk. As Kitzinger (2009) states, TV news, radio reports and the press, for example, do not cover risks as formally defined (as a calculus of "likelihood multiplied by impact"). Instead, they cover stories: disasters, crises, controversies and inquiries. In this respect, the notion of risk is defined in a broader sense and comes closer to another concept –

danger. As Wilkinson (2009: 23) claims, on most occasions, in everyday life the language of risk is used not so much as a cue to raise questions of mathematics. Rather, it is a means to highlight common "worries", "problems" and "concerns". Andy Alaszewski, professor of health studies, has introduced a valuable idea of the "risk iceberg" that helps to illustrate a wide range of other concepts involved in the definition of risk. A wide array of inter-related terms and concepts – such as "hazard", "danger", "harm", "safety", "vulnerability", "dangerousness", "blame" or "accountability" – underlie and build our understanding of "risk" (Alaszewski 1998: 10, cited in Shaw 2001). Even if some semantic differences exist between all these notions they all have something in common – the sense of declining safety. The diverse vocabulary of risk presented by Alaszewski points to the way news media has a hand in the process of risk framing.

3.   Risk and discourse: several theoretical implications

Discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world – including knowledge, identities and social relations – and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns. We are surrounded by various thematic discourses, and we also help to create as well as maintain them through different social practices, such as daily conversations or comments on social networks (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002: 5). Crucial theoretical and methodological insights regarding discourse have been developed by a number scholars, including Fairclough (e.g., 1985, 1992, 1993), van Dijk (e.g., 1985, 1997, 2011), Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau 1990, 1993; Mouffe 1993, 2008) and, of course, Foucault (1969). Laclau and Mouffe, as well Foucault, are particularly useful in discussing the characteristics of risk discourse in news media.

Laclau and Mouffe began a prolific theoretical production with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* in 1985, that was soon called Post-Marxism (Biglieri and Perelló, 2011). The theoretical starting point of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is the proposition that all social phenomena and objects obtain their meaning(s) through discourse, which is defined as "a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed" (Laclau 1988: 254, cited in Carpentier and De Cleen 2007). For Laclau and Mouffe, a discourse is an attempt to fix a web of meanings within a particular domain (Rear and Jones, 2013). In this sense a discourse is understood as a specific structure of various elements whose meanings are in flux.

For Laclau and Mouffe analysing discourses points to several important analytical concepts such as *floating signifier*, *nodal points* and *field of discursivity*. These core concepts give a structural body to their theoretical model, and enable an operationalisation of various discourses, including the risk discourse in news media. The idea of *floating signifiers* refers to the way elements of a discourse gain

different meanings in different discursive contexts (Carpentier and Van Brussel, 2012). "Risk", can be understood as such a floating signifier, whose meaning varies in different contexts not only among different disciplines, but also in the varying discursive contexts provided by news media. It can be assumed that in the domain of news media, a "risk" is constructed when it is placed into the field of other discourses such as political, economic, environmental, technological or health discourses. Articulation of "risk", thus, gains different meanings in various discursive contexts. For instance, risk related to GMO is reflected differently in terms of human health, environmental issues, economy or progress of science. Following Laclau and Mouffe, it can be said that "risk" and other closely related concepts – like "threat", "danger", "insecurity" or "disaster" – are linked together by a particular system of meanings or chain of significations, assigning meanings to other signifiers within discourse (Rear and Jones, 2013). Due to this complexity of risk representations, intertextuality and interdiscursivity are also key parts of understanding risk discourse. While discourse theory points to the way the construction of "risk" is intertwined with other discourses, it also helps to see that at the same time a general discursive field of "risks" has emerged. Thus, we can think of "risks" articulated by "economy" or "health", but also "economy" and "health" being constructed increasing through the lense of "risks".

The question about the more or less autonomous role of media adds another layer to these considerations. Media distributes daily a wide range of risk messages regarding various dangers for individuals, social groups and for the whole society. Zinn (2010), for instance, revealed the growing frequency of the word "risk" and related terms' in newspapers. However, he also notes - "It remains unclear whether the increasing usage of the word 'risk' is mainly a result of new risks, a change of social regulation and governance, or of a socio-cultural preference towards individualist values or a mutual linking of all these developments". In any case, it is obvious that risk is becoming an integral part of news discourse.

In the field of media, it is useful to define discourse as a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements that in some way together produce a particular version of *events* (Hall, cited in Burr, 1995: 67). In this respect, a discourse is a means of imposing a specific understanding of reality by those who have power to construct it. Discussing risk in the frame of power states Beck (2006), also notes: "Risk definition, essentially, is a power game. This is especially true for world risk society where Western governments or powerful economic actors produce and define risks for others". If the meaning of risk is socially constructed, the nature of it highly depends on who speaks about it and how. Also, this presupposes the perception of discourse not only as a self-propelled process, but phenomenon that different social actor aim to under control.

In this sense the ideas of Foucault become relevant. According to Foucault, in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures (Foucault, 1970 in Young,

1981). The discourse of risk developing in the field of news media is also shaped by a wide range of various techniques, procedures (e.g. framing) which make it possible to create a view that the leading actors behind the discourse are willing to see. For example, a side effect of some vaccines can be presented in different ways when the producer of vaccines, an independent expert or a mother whose child is sick starts talking about it. Producers of news decide whose voice readers/viewers/listeners should recognise as the most significant, convincing and reliable.

Through the risk discourse news media can also gain power to manipulate or even control a society, not always leading towards rational behaviour. News organisations tend to draw a dangerous picture of the world, including such variables as risk sources, victims, people who should be blamed for causing risk as well as those have to be treated as responsible for risk control. Sometimes some of these details can be excluded from risk messages and left unnoticeable, but in the analysis of discourse this means something as well. In short, news media can create and transmit to audiences a particular knowledge of risk and consider it to be true. As Foucault claims, truth is a discursive construction and different regimes of knowledge determine what is true and false (Jorgensen, Phillips, 2002). The ability to create a regime of knowledge becomes particularly important while taking into account that media never really mirror reality. In the context of the discursive construction of risks, the media are indeed accused of routine sensationalism. Journalists are blamed for exaggerating risk, "whipping up hysteria" and distorting reality (Kitzinger, 1999).

4.   The flow of risk representations in the television news

Without techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, risks are socially non-existent (Beck, 2006). Aiming to reveal the some of the contours of general *risk discourse in news media,* I carried out a pilot study on risk representations in television news.

This qualitative study followed the principles of the grounded theory. The empirical material for it was collected using the document review (audio-visual material) method, and consisted of 94 news messages sampled out from the Lithuanian television news "TV3 žinios"[1] using purposive and theoretical sampling. The data analysis was divided into different stages typical for the grounded theory strategy: open, axial and selective coding (Böhm, 2004).

It is important to emphasize that the research data reflect only the case of Lithuania. The way risk is presented can be particular and undoubtedly determined by various factors that come from political, economic, sociocultural, historical contexts, etc. Referring to Rinkevicius (2000), Lithuanian society can be treated as a "double-risk" society that faces the complex uncertainty related to the transition to

the market economy and democratic governance; there is increasing social anxiety about high-consequence risks and the inability of modern institutions to cope with such risks.

Looking at the materials of this pilot study, one finds a rich and diverse presence of "risks". Even if the notion of risk often is future oriented, in the media it is also – or maybe mostly – relevant in making sense of events that have already occurred, because "what happened before can be repeated again" (Mairal, 2011). As expected, risk discourse in news media is also multidimensional and it includes a wide range of risk representations emerging from different contexts: the economic, political, cultural, social, health, technological and environmental. Below, I will offer some illustrations and first reflections on how "risk" becomes articulate in the media in relation to these different fields.

> As the prices of food and fuel are rapidly going up, economists of Lithuania are changing their prognoses regarding inflation – it will continue growing. It is stated that the purchasing power will decrease considerably and the poorest inhabitants of the smallest towns will be affected mostly (2011 05 09, TV3 žinios)

In the analyzed news messages *economic* risks such as tax and price increases, the threat of economic crisis, or the expansion of a "shadow economy" were often presented. According to news reporters the elderly and inhabitants of rural areas as well as "the whole society" will feel the impact of these risks. Economic risk control was usually attributed to specialists, experts and heads of the state. In the conditions of financial instability, the media also underlined the weakness of the authorities' actions in coping with economic threats. Thus, media did not merely help the experts to handle the economic risks.

> In spite of the world's efforts disturbances in Syria are still in progress. There are a lot of explosions and tanks are going around. At least 25 people were killed and approximately 200 were injured. According to Russia, the responsibility of continuing violence lies with the opposition of Syria and cooperating western countries. Meanwhile, the general secretor Rasmussen of NATO stated that the alliance was not going to interfere in internal affairs (2012 02 10, TV3 žinios)

The representations of *politic* threats introduced dangers that are relevant both in the national and global arenas. These are the risks such as cross border tensions, threat of war, terror attacks, etc. The existence of these risks is caused by conflicts of interest, solitary individuals or mobilised ones. According to the news, the state authorities and institutions providing special services (e.g. police) should take a part in governance of these risks. In the pilot study materials, *cultural* risks presented mainly tensions among ethnic and religious groups, and these were closely related to political risks.

> The new school year is promising lower salaries for pedagogues and even losing a job for some of them. The government blessed the economy plan prepared by the ministry of education and science by which municipalities will receive smaller funding. Besides, the minister of education and science claims that municipalities themselves will be able to decide how to economise – cutting down salaries or dismissing teachers (2012 12 28, TV3 žinios)

The inductive classification of risks emerging from this pilot study suggests that the media divides the *social risks* into two categories. The first one encompasses all threats caused by *deviant behaviour* while the other one includes risks that emerge due to gaps in the social security *system*. Risk sources varied from social practices of deviant behaviour to different institutional dysfunctions. As above, individuals or occupational groups were usually presented as victims of systemic social risks.

> The world health organization is ringing the bell of danger due to mobile phones. The researches reveal that mobile phones can increase the risk of having brain cancer, but specialists of Lithuania notice that radiation of mobile phones is much smaller than the one which is produced by microwave ovens or computers widely used in the mode of life (2011 05 08, TV3 žinios)

Health risks encompass all dangers that can negatively impact individuals' health or cause death. These risks are caused by technologies, food products, diseases, pollutants or other sometimes unknown reasons. According to the news scientists and some official institutions – but also individuals themselves – are the actors responsible for the management of these risks. It is paradoxical, but in some cases specialists (e.g. medical staff) are not only those who have to control risks, but also cause them, e.g. medical negligence.

> The visitors of the amusement park in California got not a very pleasant dose of adrenalin. Instead of having an amusement ride for 3 minutes, 20 attraction fans spent almost 4 hours hanging in the height of 90 meters. Fortunately, none of them was injured. They were released from the grip of attraction after dusk. This was not the first time it had gone out of order. In September 7 people were imprisoned for several hours as well (2012 09 20, TV3 žinios)

Technologies do not only exist to provide for for human needs, but also as a source of risks. In the news messages analysed nuclear risks, technological disasters and technological dysfunction were mentioned. The causes of technological risks were not always indicated either. As usual, individuals who use some kind of technology were presented as victims of technological risks (e.g. passengers, owners of cell phones, etc.).

> The sun is attacking the Earth. A huge amount of sunbeam gales that reached Lithuania and other countries caused a magnetic storm. Medical people are worried. More and more people are complaining of health disorders, particularly those who have heart diseases. Scientists are concerned that the supply of electricity can get disturbed and various devices can break down. Such powerful storms are expected to occur more frequently (2012 03 08, TV3 žinios)

Environmental risks were introduced more often as a threat caused by nature and more seldom as outcome of anthropogenic behaviour of individuals and a side effect of industrial society. These risks were mostly presented as a danger related to extreme weather conditions such as storms, earthquakes, floods, etc. that endanger people united by the same living territory. Public authorities, specialists, scientists and special services (medical staff, fire fighters, etc.) were pointed out as being responsible for control of these risks and the elimination of their consequences.

The pilot study points to some issues that demand further analysis and elaboration. First, more reflection clearly is needed to understand the dynamics between the *event*-orientation of the news and the notion of risks. Second, the ambiguous role of experts is particularly interesting: they serve both to control risks (react to risks) but they are also used to illustrate the limits of this control and thus the uncertainty of the future. Third, the pilot research also shows that the articulation of risk in news media is often accompanied by strong rhetorical devices, for instance, picturesque comparisons, metaphors, epithets, and visual tools, such as eloquent images or images evoking strong emotions. Thus they seem to contribute to the process of social construction of risk and help to cement the sense of danger.

5. Concluding remarks

Risk is a contextual notion that emerges in the field of news media as a complex phenomenon. Risk discourse exists as a general macro structure that brings together various discourses of more narrowly distinguished areas of risks. These more specific discourses are not completely separate fields, but have some strategic points of contact. The media are a crucial factor in creating the implicit links that construct the general discourse of risks. Representations of individual and specific risk are an integral part of the general risk discourse and illustrate a variety of different threats that attract the attention of news media. Although the theory of risk society emphasises the relevance of environmental concerns and new risks, in some countries, for instance Lithuania, dangers related to socio-economic welfare are also prevalent, at least in the area of news media. The theoretical sketch in this chapter and selected findings from the pilot study should be understood as an attempt to promote a holistic approach towards risk communication, trying to take into account media coverage of the complexity of dangers that societies are facing in the period of late modernity. Undoubtedly, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of the general risk discourse as it develops in news media.

Note

1 The information programme "TV3 žinios" belongs to one of the most popular Lithuanian commercial TV stations. The general population comprised of "TV3 žinios" broadcasts in the period since 8th of May, 2011, to 6th of February, 2013.

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Biography

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