Politics, Roadblocks, and Extreme Events: Notes Toward an Interdisciplinary Research Program

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In Henrik Ibsen's play, "The Enemy of the People," the protagonist Dr. Stockmann discovers what he believes to be a serious public health threat, namely suspected contamination of his town's famous public baths. Ibsen's tale chronicles Stockmann's efforts to communicate the gravity of his beliefs to others and his unsuccessful struggles to convince the local mayor and business owners that drastic and costly action is needed to clean up the baths. The play reveals the importance of communication, leadership, and political strategy needed for effective risk analysis and management, something that is especially needed to respond to extreme events.

In keeping with the underlying message of Ibsen's drama, empirical, interdisciplinary research could profitably focus on the interaction between experts, decision makers, "stakeholders," and the grassroots public. In particular, researchers could examine roadblocks to effective and legitimate risk management that arise because of these interactions. They could evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies for engaging the public, the private sector, and governmental decision makers. A research program on the processes of risk management should be both comprehensive and comparative, encompassing responses to acts of terror as well as other manmade and natural disasters, and applying to both developed and developing countries.

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The response to the events of September 11th illustrates the need for analysis of the politics and process of risk management, as both the immediate and long-term responses to the terrorist actions have called for leadership and cooperation across all sectors in society. Yet the importance of the political process extends beyond even the events of September 11th. For example, decisions about whether to evacuate a community on the advice of hurricane experts calls for effective communication between experts and decision makers, and an understanding by experts of the kind of democratic accountability that decision makers face. Decisions about how to reduce brush fire risks requires an understanding of how to communicate with homeowners and create adequate incentives to take corrective actions. In some cases, expert advice proves insufficient for influencing governmental or public decisions, and other social actors need to be engaged. For example, some years ago city officials in New York showed little interest in upgrading building requirements and providing additional earthquake protection – until, that is, a local television station aired an expose.

The research community should place more emphasis on studying the interaction of experts, decision makers, and the public for several reasons. First, since risk management decisions affect the public, those who are committed to democratic politics should take interest in understanding appropriate and effective ways to engage the public in risk management decisions. Second, risk analysis by itself does not lead to effective decisions. Experts can benefit from greater awareness of the constraints on decision makers and how public values and perceptions play a role. Third, public participation and constraints facing decision makers may place roadblocks in the way of effective risk

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North (Northworks), and Zur Shapira (NYU). These notes reflect only the author's interpretations of, and extensions on, the discussion -- and not necessarily any consensus view of the participants.

management. The public may place important risk management options "off the table." For example, before September 11th, increased US development assistance abroad or more risky military strategies against Al Qaeda arguably could have prevented the terrorist destruction, but they were not politically viable options to decision makers. In many situations, public buy-in is needed for effective risk management implementation.

An important research effort would be to explain how the interaction between experts, decision makers, and the public affects the effectiveness and legitimacy of risk management. A key question is under what conditions do different strategies for engaging experts, decision makers, and the public lead to better risk decisions and implementation. Such a research approach would require further conceptual work to identify ways of operationalizing the effectiveness of risk management, but general criteria could be established against which to assess relative success.

Analysis of the politics and process of risk management will require some creativity, as extreme events are, by their nature, less amenable to large-n analysis. One research strategy might be the systematic selection of data-rich, matched case studies. Qualitative research design with small samples is common in the social sciences, but requires careful selection of cases in order to maximize variation on the independent variable that is key to the researcher's theory and minimize variation on other factors.* For example, researchers could compare risk management processes by different municipalities responding to an identical hurricane or different developing countries responding to similar kinds of disasters.

* An excellent discussion of systematic approaches to qualitative research can be found in Gary King, Robert Keohane, & Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton 1994).

Another research strategy might be to conduct simulations of different processes for making risk management decisions. Such an approach is used in research on negotiation strategies in which teams of subjects are given scenarios to try to resolve. Along the same lines, teams of risk managers and decision makers (or subjects assigned to such roles) could be asked to solve risk management scenarios. By varying the ground rules for decision or employing different strategies of engagement across teams, researchers could better assess the effects of varied procedures and strategies for risk management.

The key point is that wherever there are risks, there are people, and people bring different interests, values, and perceptions to bear on risk problems. Whether in the developed world or in developing economies, risk management takes place in a fluid, often contested political environment with multiple actors. Research that analyzes the political, strategic, collaborative, and leadership dimensions of risk management would therefore help make expertise about risk make a difference in a world that needs that expertise. As Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann surely came to realize, in order to protect public health and safety it is not enough to understand risks and how to avoid them, but also to see that appropriate decisions actually get made and that effective responses are implemented through processes that necessarily involve more than the risk experts.