

250. Risk Communication in India: Emerging Perspective

Manoj K. Patairiya

National Council for Science & Technology Communication (NCSTC)
Technology Bhavan, New Mehrauli Road, New Delhi 110016 (India)
manojpatairiya@yahoo.com, mkp@nic.in; +91-11-26537976

Abstract. Risk communication is important especially to the public in the form of an attractive and consumable product at times when they need it the most. At the same time, the public involvement and engagement with risk communication practices may offer a multilateral diffusion of such knowledge that empowers people with the ability to take not only informed but also analytical and rational decisions to combat and overcome the risks. Corporate sector has an added social responsibility to achieve this objective. Especially, in the emerging countries like India, a number of corporate houses, national, multinational or international are engaged in a variety of activities ranging from research and development to production and manufacturing causing a plethora of risks with multiple magnitudes. They are expected to educate the public, make the people aware and build the capabilities into them to be able to fight against hunger, drought, diseases, disasters, and superstitions with courage and self-confidence. An account on role of corporate sector in risk communication with reference to developing countries is being given in this paper; i.e. i) Creating public awareness as what a particular corporate firm does; ii) How it is going to benefit or harm the public (for example: Union Carbide Corporation, India did not inform the public about possible Methyl Isocyanate gas leak, that caused thousands of casualties in Bhopal, India on 02 December 1984); iii) Providing informal risk education to the public; iv) Solving local problems causing risks with communication inputs and management interventions; and v) Improving the quality of their public relations and promotional programmes, etc. The paper discovers a range of issues and problems concerning corporate sector and risk communication and identifies certain possible solutions.

Communicating Risk

Risk communication is generally attributed to the interactive process of exchange of information and opinions amongst individuals, groups, and institutions concerning a risk or potential risk to human health or the environment. Risk communication can vary from environmental communication and safety communication to health communication. It can involve care communication (which relates with awareness), consensus communication (which relates with preparedness), and crisis communication (which relates to actually dealing with crisis). Risk communication includes environmental, health, disaster and other issues causing any risk, threat, crisis, conflict or uncertainty to mankind.

For example, over 80% diseases are caused by unpotable drinking water and millions of people are dying every year from petty diseases, such as, diarrhea and jaundice, etc., which are curable, but there are hardly any effort to educate people about the risk involved in taking dirty drinking water. Surprisingly, neither scientist seems to be eager to solve this problem, nor the media shows intention to cover such issues, as perhaps these cannot fetch handsome research grants or make media headlines. As a contrast, if you talk about so called dreaded diseases and high end cutting edged technologies, you are likely to get attention from all around! Dealing with such communication risks seems to be a great challenge. Similarly, sometime unnecessary media hype gives a different perspective. In case of foot and mouth disease outbreak in USA and some other countries, media gave it undue hype, though, as a matter of fact the disease was limited to cattle only and there was no risk for human health.

Social Responsibility of Industry and Corporate Houses

The industry and corporate houses generally use common natural resources like air and water directly or indirectly for running their businesses. Besides their commercial interests, they are responsible for the welfare of the society that includes educating public about the work they are doing. It would help create better understanding between the firm and the society leading to enhanced cooperation and minimizing risks. The industry is not only responsible to educate their employees about possible occupational hazards but also it must shoulder the responsibility to educate and prepare the residents of the locality to be able to cope-up with possible disaster due to any fault in the industry.

Had the Union Carbide, India educated the public about the lethal effects of Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) gas and simple precautions, the life of thousands of people could have been saved. Simple information could have done wonders. A wet towel or any wet cloth can save life if it is put over the mouth and nose in the event of leak of MIC gas. Since MIC gas is soluble in water, it will be absorbed in the wet towel and will help reduce ill effects of the killer gas. Most of the people were became victim of the gas because they ran in the same direction in which gas was flowing.

Had they gone in opposite direction, they could have been in a better position. The industry must not escape from its social responsibility, especially when it comes to life and death of the people. It is an advantage, if the people are educated about other related subjects also.

Solving local problems of public importance with communication inputs and management interventions is equally important for the state, public and the industry, as in most cases we find industry at the backdrop of a problem. Often, local scientific or technological risk issues do not find place in mass media. It is worth noting that there has been considerable success in addressing local issues/ problems/ technologies through local/ regional level science journalism involving and motivating industry. An example is noteworthy here. In a workshop on risk communication for media persons at Rampur, India, a group of journalists discovered during the course of preparation of their story as an exercise of on the spot reporting that untreated effluents from Kashipur and nearby industries were being discharged in the Kosi River. Animals died as a result of drinking the polluted water of the river. Even trees and plants did not survive. Moreover, the ingress of polluted river water in the wells of the nearby 60 villages rendered water unpotable. This group of reporters made a thorough investigation of this problem during the course of the workshop. Specimens of polluted water were collected and analyzed. When the reports appeared in media, the authorities and industries were alarmed and forced to take a number of measures to solve the problem. This is how such local level risk reporting can help bring to the fore the local problems and help address the same.

Corporatization of Media and Communicating Risk

Media is considered to be the fourth estate of power especially in a democratic setup, like India. The advent of latest Information Communication Technology has opened new vistas of global or transnational exchange and access of media flooded with ample amount of international news and information lacking sufficient local and regional news coverage. At the same time, there exist countries that are not blessed with the power of democracy and hence may not be able to enjoy the power of fourth estate. In the circumstances, it is not only difficult to get the news but also to access them from outside the country. In case, someone succeeds in getting this censored or cooked-up news through unlawful sources, it leads to the next level of complicacy, as this news may not be authentic. It so happens, especially in case of coalmine collapses or similar disaster takes place. In such cases, the accountability of the source cannot be beyond doubt.

The primary function of media was to inform and educate public about the day-to-day happenings all around but now the primary function of media has become to sell audiences to advertisers. The media does not make money from subscriptions. Any TV News Channel does not make money when you turn on your television; they make money when an advertiser pays them. Now advertisers pay for certain things. They are not going to pay for a feature on risks of environmental degradation or a discussion that encourages people to participate democratically and inculcate a scientific bent of mind and rationalism. Unfortunately, the media houses further encourage the corporatism in a multinational business atmosphere that has a number of emerging commodities and pro-corporate concepts to sell to the audience.

The state of the Internet right now is rather like the state of the electronic media back in the mid 20th century. In most countries, radio or a large part of it was handed over to the public interest. Radio was mostly handed over to big corporations despite struggle by Church and other groups. Later, with television, there was no struggle at all. Now, we have the Internet. Like all the rest of modern technology, the public funds it. Even with print, there was a large, independent press in both England and the USA earlier this century. In England, it was on the scale of the commercial press. They were gradually taken over by corporate power. Even in developing countries like India, big corporate houses that mainly have their commercial objectives generally run the press and media and science, technology, health and environment stories for them is a tailpiece affair.

Risk of Commercial Compulsions

It has been a growing belief that only things having commercial and economic viability will sustain in today's fast advancing world that is governed and influenced by commercial and economic factors. The issue of increasing influence of commerce on scientific research and development and problems arising thereof has been the focus of discussions at various forums recently that causes risk concerns the world over. Things have even reached the point where commercial compulsions are making fundamental changes in the way risk issues are handled, and in the way, it is communicated. A step ahead, the efforts directed towards dealing with risk communication also tend to face the similar challenges and therefore it cannot be seen in isolation.

In a business driven society, if a corporate house is spending a couple of million of currency on public relations, it knows how to package things so as to overcome public opposition and change public attitudes and psyche to be

able to sell their concepts and not the concepts important for risk preparedness. It seems to be rather unfair to expect such corporate owned media houses to realize their responsibility towards risk communication. Increased media globalization nowadays is overwhelmed with corporatism that has only objective of income generation, leading to a state of obscurism away from pragmatism.

Investigative Approach

The risk communication is chiefly limited to describing various aspects of a particular risk, either in a descriptive manner or some precautions for it. A number of multinational and foreign companies are opening their research centres in developing world because of availability of comparatively low cost resources and manpower. These corporate research centres range from pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and information technology to agriculture, etc. To bring public awareness about certain risk factors, there is a need for investigative journalism in this field. Whether safety measures have been taken, is there chance of any possible disaster or hazard, how the anticipated research is going to benefit or harm, is there any environmental threat to water bodies, animals or plants, are some of the questions which could form part of investigative reporting. Whatever is happening in this field, good or bad, proper or improper must be brought before the people. This form of communication is attractive in its own way and retains readers' interest in the article to read further. Normally, a journalist publishes an article after a thorough investigation on political, social, or an economic issue. This aspect, however, is largely absent in the case of scientific, health and environmental topics.

The various forms of risk communication become clear only when aspects like proper or improper uses of science and technology and good or bad impact of the same on society are brought to the fore. Risk reporting then will develop into a form of an alert guard and adviser, say, the case of introduction of new technology, genetically modified food, CNG fuel, and so on. It is necessary to realize that investigative journalism does not imply investigation of any irregularity alone or projecting something sensational, but bringing to the people those useful information also still not known far and wide.

Emerging Concerns

The concerns have been expressed from across the country on different occasions on different risk issues and aspects. For example, a multinational organization was involved in a research project on *Aedes aegypti*, which causes a yellow fever, but not in India. On investigating the relevance of this research, it came to fore that the company had some hidden objectives. The worldwide scoop was published in the media and the project was closed as a result. Similarly, here is an interesting case as how the world came to know the nuclear programme of a country! There were consecutive global tenders for a device used in nuclear operations, a system that keeps the critical mass separate, and a catalytic converter after an interval of some period. A vigilant journalist was able to connect the link of these tenders and found the truth and reported in media.

There could be some very strange risks associated with the social systems and traditions. In India, in Maharashtra state, people objected to installation of wind mill farms with a mis-belief that if wind mill will extract the oxygen from air while producing electricity, how they will breathe! Similarly, according to a scientist in a neighbouring country, a parliamentarian has made a proposal to the government to capture the evil spirits and put them to work, thereby solving country's energy problem. A number of risk issues are emerging out of unlawful practices of food adulteration, cases of spurious liquor, over claims by advertisements of consumer goods, insufficient trials by pharmacy companies, and genetically modified foods, etc. The public needs to be made aware of the risks involved in such activities.

Conclusion

As the 'information age' rapidly progresses and if we want to direct it towards 'knowledge age', we need to develop the potential at foundation level to foster and support appropriate synergistic and imaginative combinations of disciplines. Improving quality of public relations and promotional programmes of risk oriented organizations is yet another area of great concern and needs to be addressed. Most corporate houses have PR and Promotional departments; generally, their main task is image building of the organization and propaganda to sale its products. These departments can be augmented and oriented in a way to be able to communicate risks to the public including their activities and scientific aspects of their services and products. It has been observed that the press releases and hand outs issued by these groups are generally not up to the mark or media friendly. Risk communication should be looked as the collective responsibility of scientists, communicators, states, social activists and workers, etc., and cannot be pursued in isolation.

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