

"SCHWEIZERHALLE"
PERSPECTIVES ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHEMICAL RISK

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"Schweizerhalle"

On the night of November 1st 1986, a fire started in the SANDOZ warehouse number 956 situated at Schweizerhalle, near Basle. Approximately 1'350 tons of agrochemicals, insecticides, fungicides and pesticides had been stocked in the warehouse (90m tall, 50m wide and 8m high).

For more than 6 hours firemen directed their hoses into a blazing inferno of flames up to 60m high, and into ongoing explosions. 25'000l of water were blown into a sea of flames every minute, during a four hour period. This water originated from and subsequently flowed, unfiltered, to the near-by river Rhine, carrying away more than 150 kg of mercury, large amounts of thiophosphoric acid esters (in total approximately 36 tons of chemicals). For the first time since World War II catastrophic alert was triggered at Basle and its vicinity. The International Emergency planning for the river Rhine acted immediately.

Research Questions

Empirical evidence from content analysis together with four conclusions, that can be drawn from a series of scientific technical disasters will serve as a standard to compare Swiss print media coverage of "Schweizerhalle".

From content analysis of media coverage of science, technology, environment, risk, natural or scientific technical disasters, etc. it is evident that media coverage is reductionist with regard to time, space and complex structures of events.

From experiences such as Three Mile Island, Tchernobyl, Seveso, Bhopal, "Amoco Cadiz", "Exxon Valdez", the War in the Gulf or Fukui-Mihama 2, etc. four conclusions can be drawn: (1) Even the richest parts of the world may not be able to escape the consequences of one single scientific technical catastrophe. (2) Distances, sovereignty and other traditional means of separation do not guarantee safety any longer. (3)

Regardless of the causes or uniqueness of a single catastrophe, events and disasters as previously mentioned are no longer independent events. (4) If some of those events occur without serious consequences in terms of loss of human life or profit, all events exacerbate stress for the commonwealth and psychological welfare of the individuals.

Three research questions were asked:

- (1) Is print media coverage of "Schweizerhalle" non-reductionist with regard to time, space and complex structures of events ? Is coverage of "Schweizerhalle" therefore framed in a "ecological" meaning?
- (2) Is "Schweizerhalle" shown as a "normal catastrophe" in an advanced industrial society?
- (3) Are the psychological and social dimensions, aspects of anxiety, helplessness, and stress of "Schweizerhalle" shown? With regard to these aspects, are there elements of activating journalism?

Sample

During November 1986 coverage of "Schweizerhalle" was analysed in the dailies: "Basler Zeitung", "Basellandschaftliche Zeitung", "Nordschweiz - Basler Volksblatt", "Basler AZ", "Tages-Anzeiger" and "24 Heures". The sample is not representative for 161 Swiss daily newspapers, though it is a meaningful and relevant sample with regard to the coverage of scientific technical issues of Swiss society.

Content analysis was executed along some 70 variables for all newspaper editions during November 1986 and for every article on "Schweizerhalle" written in these editions. 143 editions, and altogether 1'464 articles were analysed.

Results

The bulk of coverage is done in local newspapers, and as a consequence "Schweizerhalle" is nevertheless covered as an important local event.

Rhythm of press conferences, and quantity of press releases by the public authorities determine the rhythm and the quantity of the media coverage. Consequently, the most important single dominant subject of media coverage is the ever present influential political discourse.

Following single media related events the coverage of "Schweizerhalle" is divided into the coverage of single events: the dominant subject - in quantity and quality - on the first two days of coverage is the fire itself, the third day of coverage is the pollution of the river Rhine, the fourth day is the first view of the local government's concerning the catastrophe itself and the work of the risk management.

In traditional journalistic terms "Schweizerhalle" is no catastrophe: There were no dead and only a few residents hospitalized. And it was quite obvious from the beginning that SANDOZ could prove no difficulties to pay even a considerable sum of money. Nevertheless, it is stated in 56 editions, especially in 47 of local newspaper editions (49.5%), at least once, that "damage is great". Though "damage" is only a word, the meaning is neither defined, specified, quantified, nor qualified. In addition, the journalistic means to stage-manage "Schweizerhalle" as an outstanding event is done by comparison to other events.

Coverage compares "Schweizerhalle" to events such as Tchernobyl, Bhopal and Seveso. Although, another category of events is nearly unreported.

These events occurred in Switzerland on Friday, October, 30th and in early November 1986: The events included a fire in an electric power station with releases of dioxine, a release of radioactivity in a nuclear power station and chlorine gas in a food production company. The first two events ("dioxine" and "radioactivity") are only covered in five editions and the third ("chlorine gas") is only reported in two editions.

There is no explicit linkage made between these events and "Schweizerhalle".

"Schweizerhalle" is not considered a "normal catastrophe". It is compared to extraordinary industrial events such as Tchernobyl, Bhopal, Seveso. "Schweizerhalle" is less compared to the chemical disasters Seveso and Bhopal, which occurred two and four years before. Although, "Schweizerhalle" is compared to Tchernobyl, which occurred months before. For arguments sake, conditions in "Communist Russia" are not comparable to the situation in Basle and Switzerland. One editor-in-chief commented, that at least here, no members of minorities or marginal residents will be forced by announcement of death penalty to clean-up the site.

Psychological stress and general bad feelings, anxiety, hate, anger and frustration of the residents were stage-managed for coverage in the form of protest-movement-coverage, or in the form of "letters-to-the-editor".

Manifestations of protest in the street are covered as "manifestations of protest in the street": It is deviance which is covered, actions are labeled to be actions of environmentalists and green parties and - consequently, read between the lines - to be actions of marginals and radicals. Even if in the case of "Schweizerhalle" the reason and legitimation of protest is not covered as dubious. It is criticized that protesters did not behave in a very polite manner: Throwing dead fish on members of government and SANDOZ top management is not the way "real Swiss" behave.

Coverage does not concentrate on the "état d'âme" of the residents. As compared to the reactions of governments, politicians, traditional political parties, etc. "reactions by the people in the street" are only the dominant subject in a quarter of articles (81 articles as compared to 300 articles on "reactions by government officials and public authorities"). Media coverage of "Schweizerhalle" quotes "normal people" only 6% of all first citations as compared to local government and local public authorities who are quoted 29%. Even on the ranking of the second and the third citation "normal people" do not rank on the top.

Conclusions

With regard to the research questions it is evident that "Schweizerhalle" coverage in a relevant sample of Swiss print media is as reductionist as could be expected.

"Schweizerhalle" is not framed as a "normal catastrophe", nor as a highly probable disaster to occur. (Swiss reinsurances are more conscious to this evidence than Swiss mass media.) The more or less visible effects of psychological stress and bad feelings are only subjected for coverage when restrained by journalistic form and layout format.

"Schweizerhalle" coverage did not offer a public arena for speaking about "our bad feelings" and organizing for political action.

When risks are brought forward in traditional means of event coverage and bad news selection then media coverage does not offer much help to the public concerning these risks. This can be called "Komplexitätsschock". "Komplexitätsschock" means that people have no means to realize that chaos they suffer from, is caused by the tender movements of the wings of a butterfly far far away.