Developing risk-literate public relations: threats and opportunities

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Abstract

This paper argues that without a commitment to developing “risk literacy” in public relations, Palenchar’s positioning of risk communication as “one of the stronger contributions to the public relations body of knowledge” (2010, p. 448) is undermined because the contribution is relatively untapped. Risk literacy is a sufficient familiarity with risk studies and risk communication research to enable them to be applied in productive conjunction with more traditional approaches to risk issue campaigns. It is vital because when it comes to risk, “some forms of communication enhance understanding; others don’t” (Gigerenzer, 2002, p.32). Academics daring enough to expand their disciplinary vision could help produce risk-literate graduates, but would need to adapt curricula. Risk-literate practitioners would pay more attention to the antecedent phenomena of risk perceptions and anxieties that may be the root of the issues and crises they and their clients face. But such changes would spotlight an identity issue for PR: what is its role when other professionals with a specific risk or risk communication mandate are involved? The paper proposes a strategy based on cross-disciplinary partnerships. It concludes that risk-literacy would credential PR’s involvement and build recognition of risk communication’s place in the public relations canon, thereby supporting Palenchar’s assessment.

Keywords: risk, risk-literate, risk communication, issues, crisis

Body of knowledge

A body of knowledge is a “domain of essential information, mastery over which is required for success in a field or profession” (www.businessdictionary.com). Historically, professions emerged through a process of passing on such knowledge, which has both academic and practical components (Burnham, 1998, p.7; The Interim Security...
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Professionals’ Taskforce, 2008a, p. 27, cited in Griffiths, Brooks & Corkill, 2010, p. 44). The essential element of the public relations body of knowledge is its applicability to resolving public relations problems and goal-setting requirements (Walker, 1997). Like other disciplines’ bodies of knowledge, the PR corpus is evolving and therefore always incomplete, with important aspects such as consideration of culture yet to be integrated (Sriramesh, 2007).

For this reason, Palenchar’s positioning of risk communication as a strong contribution to the public relations body of knowledge is potentially significant. Yet for a field to contribute to both the academic and the practical aspects of a professional body of knowledge, its capability to contribute to problem-solving and goal-setting must be recognized. This paper argues that in public relations, this stage has yet to be reached, outside the work of only a handful of scholars. Further, it is argued that a field’s potential contribution must not only be acknowledged but also that the body of knowledge in question should be adapted to accommodate the new insights. In PR, this would mean that addressing problems and goals would regularly be informed by risk communication research and practice. Ideally, both scholarship and practitioner activity would reflect an enhanced understanding of risk and how it can be mitigated, through both appropriate communication strategies and appropriate operational adjustments.

Risk communication is communication about identified risks, whether hazard-related or manufactured (Giddens, 1999). It can be part of publics’ sense-making about the vulnerabilities to which they feel subject or a vehicle for organizations’ attempts to position something as risky, or not. It is part of corporate risk management (Challenging the Future, 2007) and may, or may not, be managed by PR (where it is not, it may be led by a risk management function). As a field based on persuasive communication, because it seeks not only to inform but also to elicit action, risk communication shares similar goals to PR. However, it is also distinguishable from it: for example, communicating policies on the safe operation of machinery is not the same as distributing media releases promoting a corporation as offering a safe workplace. In commercial life, risk communication is one tool among others to help the organization minimize its financial and legal liability. Governments may use risk communication to help displace to citizens some of the risk they are mandated to manage on behalf of the collective.
Palenchar is right to highlight the potential strength risk communication offers to PR, especially in areas such as message development and campaign planning, because many of the issues public relations clients grapple with (and scholars research) are “risk issues” (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Such issues are about how (or whether) risks should be mitigated or treated, whether a risk/benefit trade-off is acceptable, and the communication associated with questions of this nature. But validating Palenchar’s assessment of risk communication’s contribution to PR would require the profession to develop a “risk-literacy” that integrated risk communication insights into research and incorporated resultant findings into core practice activities, such as campaign development. Risk literacy is a sufficient familiarity with risk studies and risk communication research to enable them to be applied in productive conjunction with more traditional approaches to risk issue campaigns. It means having “an ‘underpinning knowledge’ of risk and uncertainty conceptually, familiarity with suitable risk assessment approaches and an ability to deal appropriately with the risk issues identified” (Abrahams, 2008, p.5), considering them as public relations problems to be addressed on clients’ behalf. Developing such literacy is important for at least three reasons.

**Why risk literacy matters**

The first is that PR cannot safely assume that clients will give it risk communication briefs on the basis alone of its claimed competence in communication and relationship management (Galloway, 2006). In practice, risk communication may be assigned to organizational functions such as finance, internal audit or a specialized risk management office regarded as possessing the requisite technical competence. PR needs to demonstrate not that public relations professionals are themselves risk experts but rather that they have a sufficient competence in risk domains to be able to collaborate effectively with other disciplines in developing strategies to deal with risk issues, including communication tasks.

Second, risk literacy is important because of the risk-related basis to many organizational relationships with publics. Sriramesh & Verčič define public relations as “the strategic communication that different types of organisations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics, many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse” (2009, p. xxxiv). Often, these relationships are inherently to do with risk as publics coalesce around issues they see as problematic (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). As publics articulate...
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anxieties about risks and demand action from those they perceive responsible, they generate pressures on organizations that may call for public relations, among other, responses.

Thirdly, risk literacy is important because the context for today’s public relations is that of a “risk society” (Beck, 1992; see also Beck & Holzer, 2007), in which clients and employers must undertake “the risk management of everything” (Power, 2004). This risk-sensitivity presents the field with profession-enhancing opportunities to envisage and implement an engagement with risk that not only includes reputation risk, a field PR sees as core business,¹ but also involvement in communicating about hazards, which involve potential harm to human health or the physical environment.

**Relative neglect of risk/PR’s role**

Palenchar categorises risk communication as a sub-discipline of PR studies (2005, p.753). However, outside the work of only a few scholars, including Palenchar himself, PR has yet to do much to enrich its research (or its practice, especially in the period before a crisis hits) by mining a wide risk and risk communication literature, including the literature about how issues can be framed as risks. These studies offer findings directly applicable to typical PR concerns, such as message design (Plough & Krimsy, 1988). Jones is right, therefore, to express surprise that PR “has not incorporated ideas of risk communication and deeper sociological consequences of the emergence of the so-called risk society into its scholarship” (2002, pp. 49-50). Such neglect may indicate lack of clarity about possible answers to the question, “What is PR’s role in dealing with risk?” Producing responses is complicated by the fact that some concepts salient to this topic such as reputation, crisis and risk itself are yet to find stable anchors in the scholarly literatures.²

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¹ See the Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ definition of PR as “the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour” (http://www.cipr.co.uk/content/policy-resources/careers-pr/whatispr)

It is understandable, therefore, that some scholars, such as Kewell, adopt too limited a view of PR’s role. She positions the profession as responsible for “keeping institutionalized reputations and reputational myths alive” (2007, p.240). This can be an important role but is too narrow and reactive a conceptualization of PR’s part. The profession already does, and is capable of doing, much more. A list compiled by Tonello (2007) indicates PR’s potential to contribute more widely. Writing about reputation risk, Tonello identifies eight “reputation risk oversight determinants” which he believes should engage the attention of corporate officers with fiduciary responsibilities. They range from, “The attitude of local communities in which the company operates” to “the policy-making decisions of regulators and legislators” to “the positive inclination of media towards the company” (2007, p. 14). Yet managing such matters is not the sole province of corporate officers with fiduciary duties, because a PR professional could claim competence and influence in relation to all of these determinants: the first, via community relations; the second, via public affairs and the third through media relations.

**Where PR is positioned**

Tonello’s view of PR’s role in relation to risk is that of a contributor to the overall corporate response. While he suggests that PR should be consulted, and involved in the “conceptual design as well as implementation of risk response strategies”, he argues that the ultimate responsibility should lie with those “who have a full understanding of the business risk and its causes” (2007, p. 37). Tonello’s main thrust is a corporate governance one, highlighting the role of boards. He counsels directors to “be sceptical of attempts at restoring stakeholder confidence solely through the use of savvy communication tactics,” emphasizing how important it is that response strategies also address operational risks (2007, p.10). In Tonello’s view, PR’s contribution should be fully integrated into an organization’s strategy to resolve the “business incident” causing the reputation risk (2007, p. 25).

Tonello’s omission of PR from the list of those with a full understanding of the business risk in question points to a real challenge for the profession. Just as lawyers may not possess subject-matter expertise in a field of law in which they begin to practise, but may develop mastery over time, so also PR practitioners seek to be perceived as competent communicators with the potential to develop specialized skill. This could include dealing

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3 The full list is available in Tonello (2007, p. 14).
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In fact, in consultancy practice, it is this perception of particular expertise that is “bankable”, i.e. the basis of attracting and charging clients. Yet Tonello’s argument (2007) implies that as a matter of course, PR expertise should defer to the loftier position of board members because they bear the weight of fiduciary responsibility. It therefore discounts the possibility that PR could play anything more than a subsidiary role in addressing reputational risk, let alone an active part in contributing to the organization’s management of other risks.

This is too myopic a view of the profession’s potential, even if it is accepted that PR need not (or even should not) hold the lead responsibility for responses to risk questions. As Tonello argues, this ultimately belongs to those with legally defined responsibilities – though one cannot assume that they will necessarily possess the competencies, including communication competencies, required. Tonello’s position that PR should be fully integrated into an organization’s risk response strategy (2007, p. 25) is also reasonable. However, PR practitioners - especially where they can form partnerships with other relevant disciplines - are capable of exercising a wider mandate than merely reactive communication. This is particularly because they have a boundary-spanning role (Ferguson, Weigold & Gibbs, 1984) and are capable of equipping themselves through developing risk literacy for the risk dimensions of relating the organization to its stakeholders. Such a responsibility carries strategic implications as the organization’s ability to manage its positioning in relation to risk issues may have financial, regulatory and reputational consequences.

PR and issues and crisis

Examining PR’s role in relation to risk requires considering the associated concepts of issues and crisis. PR work already includes “issue management” and “issue communication” (although practitioners do not have a monopoly in this: see e.g. Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Some, though not all, of these issues relate to risks associated with hazards and their management. While hazards may be inherent and therefore unchanging properties of certain materials, the risks they present can be minimized (Glossary definition, para. 3). Publics need to know not only about the risk but also what risk managers are doing to limit it, and what individuals and communities can do to mitigate potential impacts on themselves. In fact, they not only need to know but often demand requisite knowledge until they attain a state of “information sufficiency” in relation to the risk or risks they are worried
about (Griffin et al., 2004). In the light of such requirements, PR involvement with both hazard and non-hazard-related (reputation) risk issues would be enhanced by greater knowledge drawn from risk communication research of how publics construct interpretations of risk, interact with technical experts and judge their scientific assessments. This knowledge would be especially important in the period before a crisis emerges. In the pre-crisis phase, appropriate risk communication may help avoid or mitigate the risk of a crisis because it can both moderate risk-related anxieties and also provide self-protective information that helps people feel more in control in relation to risk. A wider PR involvement with risk would therefore mean, in practice, an intensified focus on the pre-crisis phase, when risk’s contingent potential for harm may be moderated by appropriate risk communication (as distinct from the communication required during a crisis, when the harm has been actualized in real damage and one is dealing with the consequences).
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Stages

The idea that crises are preceded by a period during which one can avert or mitigate their occurrence by appropriate action is advanced by a number of scholars, notably Coombs (2005; 2007; 2009 but see also e.g. Seeger et al, 2003; Hensgen, Desouza and Kraft, 2003; and Fink’s 1986 seminal contribution in 1986). Researchers such as these describe crises as presenting identifiable phases or stages. Coombs has simplified his initial four-stage typology (2005) to a three-stage one of pre-crisis, crisis response and post crisis (2007; 2009). As Coombs notes, crisis management begins with efforts to prevent or mitigate the various risks an organization faces (2005, p. 217). One definition of risk is “the sensitive task of dealing with a latent or slowly advancing crisis before it breaks in full force” (Seymour & Moore, 2000, in Sriramesh, Wattegama & Abo, 2007, p. 1). In this period, crisis prevention includes “risk aversion” aimed at eliminating or lowering risk levels (Coombs 2007, p.18; see also Sriramesh, Wattegama & Abo, 2007, p.1). A combination of strategic risk communication and operational responses at this stage can influence public risk perceptions capable of producing “social risk” (Bekefi et al., 2006) and thereby reduce the actual risk to the organization.

In this period, PR research into public concerns about perceived risks and facilitation of appropriate responses may minimize the likelihood of reputation risk to clients, whether or not that risk is connected to hazards. It can also help build up social or “reputation capital” as a reserve of goodwill to be drawn on if a crisis does occur (although reputation and reputation risk are better thought of as dynamic rather than as static constructs; see Scott & Walsham, 2005). PR risk literacy could also enable sharper tailoring of crisis communication strategies to different stakeholder groups and their varying risk perceptions. It could do this by guiding practitioners beyond top-line research of public attitudes to the underlying “mental models” (Plough & Krimsky, 1988) on which they are built, helping professionals to better address public outrage (Sandman, 1993) about risk on clients’ behalf and thereby helping to avert a crisis or to minimize impacts if one does eventuate.

Partnerships

Effectiveness in practitioners’ work on risk issues could flow as much from collaborative partnerships as from PR efforts alone: in fact, the risk literacy advocated here is needed to help credential the discipline with other organizational functions involved in dealing with risk. As part of cross-disciplinary alliances both inside and...
outside organizations, PR could play a critical role in helping clients to better handle contemporary risks and opportunities. For example, PR can help address the volatilities of social risk. Social risk, which can be considered a strategic risk to organizations, is defined as challenges by stakeholders to companies’ business practices due to real or perceived impacts on social or environmental issues (Bekefi, Jenkins & Kytle, 2006). This kind of risk is not covered in detail (or even at all) by formal risk management standards and techniques, which offer only general counsel on implementing stakeholder communication and consultation. However, because responding to such challenges may require operational as well as communicative responses, collaborative initiatives are needed.

Often, whether embroiled in the disputes of risk politics or not, PR clients need to communicate and build support for positions on risk (such as their judgment of the nature of a risk and how best to deal with it). Corporations, governments and civil society organizations may all need to communicate their policy agendas on risk questions, as deciding how to deal with risk is political (Beck, 1992). They need to do this because the outcome of the risk politics involved may directly affect their strategic interests. The task is challenging not only because of the opacity surrounding attempts to estimate potential consequences but also because the concept of risk itself is susceptible to shaping and calculated use in policy debates by interested parties. PR advisors need risk literacy in order to be able to counsel clients on appropriate strategies, especially on how to present to lay audiences both what is known and what is unknown about a given risk and its possible impacts and treatments.

**Risk debates**

The question of who is defining something as a risk and to what end, becomes relevant to considering the rhetorical contests (Heath, 1992; 2001; Heath et al., 2009) that develop around risk issues and those who seek to exert influence in them. PR professionals may choose to use “risk” strategically to advance client agendas, as in seeking to assure publics that “there is no risk” or “minimal risk” in activities such as drinking fluoridated water, eating beef treated with chemicals to accelerate their growth or living near a mobile telephone transmission tower. Risk is therefore not a neutral, value-free concept whose attributes may be determined with certainty; it is neither a standard to which the confused may resort nor an enduring condition. Today’s risky policy, product, or program might be proven safe tomorrow, or vice versa. As Otway notes, “what counts as fact is conditioned by political, organizational, and peer pressures” (1987, p.125). PR may be party to this conditioning through its bread-and-
butter activity of persuasive communication. An idealized symmetrical dialogue with publics (of the sort envisaged by Grunig and Hunt, 1984) over risk questions could perhaps lead to consensus on “what counts as fact” and advance to collaborative development of responses. However, such responses would need to be salient to publics’ mental models of risk and communication would need to be specific, beyond generalized assurances.

Risk communication is, therefore, required because questions about whether a risk exists and if so, how or even whether to handle it, arise at different levels both inside and outside corporations. These extend to non-governmental organizations, to geographically defined communities, to entire nations – and, in the case of trans-border risks such as climate change, the planet. For example, in communities, “the intangible large-scale effects of climate change which are so often reported to the public become ‘real’ only when put in more local terms” (Lowe, et al., 2006, p. 454) - terms that people can recognize as touching their everyday experience. It is risk communicators’ responsibility to develop this risk language so publics have the opportunity both to recognize the potential threat and to respond appropriately. Risk communication can also incorporate mutual engagement processes, ideally dialogic in nature, involving both organizations and publics and focused on developing policy approaches to risk questions. The task is complex because of the mosaic of differing interpretations stakeholders may hold: as Slovic (1992) found, risk perceptions may be governed by many variables including whether the risk is familiar. However, developing appropriate framing language and operating public engagement processes demand competencies which public relations professionals would readily claim as their own.

Risk society opportunities

Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” (1992) concept suggests that practitioners are operating in a social context preoccupied with risk, including established interests displacing responsibility for producing risk by using strategic communication. PR scholars (e.g. Heath & Palenchar, 2009) have begun to apply Beck’s insights, which were little used in public relations research until relatively recently. Beck believes elites seek to protect their interests by displacing risk to the less powerful, using professional communicators to justify or conceal their action and to tame social anxiety about risk (Beck, 1992, p. 75). Beck is cynical about media’s role in risk society. As Tulloch notes, he concludes that “‘market forces’, working together with the public relations spin-doctors employed by risk industries, will continue to control a ‘media-dependent, manipulable’ [Beck, 1997, p.123]
public" (2000, p. 26). However, Beck’s position does not contemplate the possibility that PR could make a positive contribution through helping publics to better understand the existence, nature and appropriate treatment of risks.

PR practitioners may see risk communication and PR as “indistinguishable” (Walker, 1997, p. 61), but while they are not synonymous (Turner, 2007; Walker, 1997), the corollary is not that risk communication and PR can be set in opposition to each other. Rather, risk communication is as an activity public relations can undertake, in concert with technical experts, before a crisis erupts because such communication can encourage publics to adopt mitigation behaviours that might help prevent a crisis (Sellnow & Seeger, 2001). In this light, PR’s ability to help its clients respond appropriately to a “code red [alarm] in the boardroom” (Coombs, 2006) may correlate directly with its ability to apply risk and risk communication insights (risk literacy) to pre-crisis communication. At present, risk communication tends to be under-utilized in this antecedent phase (Coombs, 2010, p. 27). In this period, publics may use risk as a “conceptual tool” to attack the legitimacy of institutions’ performance (Knight, 2007, p. 311) through attributions of blame or responsibility for risk production or failure adequately to mitigate perceived risk (cf. Beck, 2000, p. 215). As they develop, these assaults may move from minor signals of potential trouble for organizations, capable of being dealt with routinely, to full-blown reputation crises demanding urgent action.

Often, PR’s role in crisis-avoiding risk communication is not explicit in the literature but rather, occurs indirectly in studies of issues and crises. These domains offer abundant literatures, but they make little obvious use of the concept of risk. A 17-page synthesis of research on crisis management and communications for the Institute of Public Relations, written by leading crisis researcher Timothy Coombs, includes only one reference to risk. It comes in the context of discussing the “Pre Crisis Phase”: “Prevention [of crises] involves seeking to reduce known risks that could lead to a crisis” (Coombs, 2007, p.2).

PR’s potential contribution to make to risk communication does not imply staking a claim to hazard-related risk identification and analysis: that is the job of scientific experts. However, it does mean that PR has capabilities that could productively be applied to the varied and often complex tasks of communicating risk to affected, or worried publics, based on partnerships with those who do possess the relevant technical expertise. Yet this role is not to be taken lightly and PR professionals need appropriate intellectual equipment for it. Heath and Nathan
(1990) acknowledge that it is difficult for PR practitioners to deal with risk issues, arguing that providing information alone is not enough. They contend that practitioners should realize that risk communication is inadequate when predicated on an information paradigm that ignores the essential fact that risk is a controversial power issue that depends on agreement, evaluation and compliance. Rather than blunting disagreement and differences regarding risk issues, the answer may be to make them public and explicit as a first step toward resolving them (Cannel & Otway, 1988). Taking leadership in this regard will be a challenge for public relations practitioners. (p. 22)

Link

PR should see risk as the link between PR treatments of issues and organizational crises themselves. On the premise that a crisis is a risk manifest (Heath & O’Hair, 2009), PR’s relative neglect of risk studies hampers its ability to help clients deal with risk issues in the critical pre-crisis period. PR should therefore aim to develop both risk-literate practitioners and scholars who see helping to foster this literacy as central to their responsibilities. The scope of this interest should be wide, covering communication strategies appropriate both to public anxieties that a hazard might produce actual injury or damage at a future point - a sense of being “at risk”- and to the actualization of that potential in a “risk event”, or crisis. In dealing with localised risk debates, PR should take professional risks insofar as it should depart from its traditional, instrumental, and client-centred focus to embrace cross-disciplinary partnerships. These kinds of linkages hold the potential to enhance organizational reputations while simultaneously creating social capital. The theoretical basis for deploying these linkages rests on a “whole-of-society” view of PR which recognizes the importance of all social actors, not just clients, and so runs counter to traditional client-centric PR practice.

Scholarship based on an “organic theory” of PR (Vujnovic, Kumar & Kruckeberg, 2007) offers a basis on which PR could engage differently with risk questions, because it contends that PR should operate with a whole-
of-society perspective. This means not only acknowledging that governments and non-governmental organizations are key social actors along with commercial organizations, but also that “communicative exchange…is not limited to these actors” (Golitsinski, 2007, p. 25). Proponents of this holistic view argue that PR’s concern should extend to the “general public”, not just to groups identified as posing near-term risk to the organization. PR, the authors assert, needs to “recognize and accept its role in responding to threats to society as well as to the public relations practitioner’s organization” (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2009, p.6.)
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Changes

Practitioners driven by the typical pressure of organizational priorities may ignore the fact that the people they wish to influence may have different motivations from theirs. Publics’ first concern about risk will be potential personal consequences and, in the case of environmental risks, possible impacts on the immediate geographic community. PR practice that interprets the function’s brief purely in organization-centered terms, and is closely focused on propagandistic outreach, would miss emotional and values-based societal concerns, such as whether exposure to a risk is fairly distributed. Yet these concerns can play a major part in determining organizations’ standing with stakeholders, whose role in risk issues could be more than simply raising concerns and occasionally, engaging in activism about them.

As Scott and Walsham note, “The web of relationships that constitute an organization are not static, but contingent and dialectical” (2002, p.1). The web touches ordinary citizens, who should be included in interactions between scientists and policy-makers on the basis of a “triangular interaction” that accepts the citizen as, “not just the recipient of policy but [also as] an actor in the science-policy nexus” (Bäckstrand 2003, p. 25). For PR, this means accepting that citizens are more than mere message targets: they can assume active participant positions in risk policy-making. PR could facilitate Bäckstrand’s triangular to-ing and fro-ing in the risk policy development process. It could use the opportunities this involvement created to articulate client positions and adjust them as required in the light of other actors’ policies. A theoretical basis for doing so could be that outlined by Robert Heath. He sees PR’s contribution to risk communication in the context of a “fully functioning society theory of PR” [FST] (2006, p. 96). As Palenchar and Heath (2007) argue, while PR risk communication can be used to promote “a bad industry not communicating well”, at its best risk communication can help people mitigate risks and “in this way PR and risk communication increasingly can help make society more fully functional” (p. 10).

From a PR viewpoint, seeking to reduce identified risks that may lead to a crisis could involve a range of strategies. These could include persuading the organization to adjust behaviour to which stakeholders object and reframing a risk to make it more acceptable to audiences who may be overly worried about a low probability outcome. The aim is to reduce social conflict that could affect the organization’s goal-seeking activities. However, despite scholars such as Gutteling asserting that “new thinking on the risk communication process is essential for an organization’s crisis and reputation management” (2001, p.231), the PR literature offers few linkages between
risk communication and the profession’s more prominent concerns in issues, crisis and reputation management. In particular, PR studies could usefully explore the professional implications of “cultural” interpretations of risk, which see it as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped in discourse processes. This is salient for PR because the profession aims to influence these processes on clients’ behalf, although it typically does so within a “strategic publics” framework rather than the whole-of-society perspective advocated here.

Social processes of constructing risk frames and debating how to deal with risk are particularly pertinent to PR because the way risk is conceptualized influences the way risk-related policy problems are formulated and proposed solutions are shaped (Bradbury, 1989). Part of PR’s challenge is to grasp that social interpretations of risk include dimensions such as the political and the ethical (Bradbury, 1989). For this reason, technical analyses are “of limited use in understanding social orientation” (Ball & Boehmer-Christiansen, 2002, p.29) and therefore in themselves are an insufficient basis for communication strategies. The problem is that risk managers often fail to communicate effectively (Leiss, 2005, p. 18), leaving room for public anxieties about risks to flourish and for uninformed interpretations of risk to evolve in social networks. The difficulty for policymakers faced with choosing a treatment for a given risk under the spotlight of popular interest is that there is no consensus on what constitutes good risk management. As Ball and Boehmer-Christiansen note, “this plurality may prompt argument, even conflict, and the development of societal concerns” (2002, p. 25). In practice, policy decisions about managing risk are typically made by technical managers rather than social scientists (Bradbury, 1989) and it is these choices that PR practitioners may be called on to communicate and defend. However, even if technical managers make final judgments, they cannot do so completely in isolation but must engage stakeholders and the public on matters of risk acceptability (Leiss, 2005).

Mental models

The challenge is made more difficult by the existence of varying notions of risk and diverse demands for information and action. Communicators therefore need to understand audiences’ “mental models” of risk in order to be able to design appropriate messages for them (Krimsky & Plough, 1988). While subject matter experts can supply scientific risk assessments to be disseminated, how these are interpreted in social interactions will most strongly influence the outcome of PR risk communication. PR practitioners must therefore not only grasp the
essentials of technical risk assessments but also, more especially, understand contextual considerations in designing messaging on risk topics. However, the paucity of risk research in PR literature offers them little assistance.

For PR, forging a link between issue communication, risk communication and crisis communication matters, because some issues are “risk issues” (Regester & Larkin, 2002) and it is in PR clients’ interests to use communication in their efforts to minimize risk and avert crises. While PR does not engage in technical assessments of risk (experts need to do that), its role is to use both these assessments and a sound understanding of social processes in communication about risk. PR clients (governments both local and national, businesses and interest groups) recognize that risk seems increasingly important in public discourse, regardless of whether life is actually riskier. They must therefore respond to publics’ risk perceptions whether or not they believe them to be soundly based. A common pre-emptive approach is to implement risk management programs. If the likelihood of a risk producing harm can be reduced, the threat of stakeholder activism is correspondingly weakened. Standard risk management procedures move from identifying a hazard to analyzing how much harm it could inflict, making a risk assessment as to how likely it is that that harm will be actualised, and then selecting and implementing appropriate treatments. Stakeholder communication and consultation is recognized as important, but PR is not explicitly acknowledged as able to contribute to, or to manage, this activity.

While technical risk assessments rely on scientific evaluations, PR communicators need to recognize that it is not enough to publicise science-based calculations of risk alone, leaving activists to “play on the public’s insecurities” (Deegan, 2001, p.9). Growing activism around specific issues helps increase public awareness of risk. Both this development and growing uncertainty in organizational operating conditions, including “the impact of the highly improbable” (Taleb, 2007), call for professional communication to develop public awareness and understanding, and thus fall within PR’s scope.

Managing risk is a vital interest for all kinds of PR clients, who must perforce develop strategies for it. As Hutter and Power argue, “Formally organized activity inextricably implies some form of uncertainty processing and some version of the management of risk” (2005, p. 2). Public companies and also many non-profit and governmental agencies may be required to report annually on their response to risk (Hanson & White, 2004).
risks they confront include but also range more widely than those directly touching PR concerns, such as social risk to organizational reputations from activists’ lobbying. PR activities should encompass not only potential threats like these but also, contributions to the whole span of organizational risk responses, because the profession’s claimed competencies in communication and stakeholder relationship management are relevant to them all. As identified earlier, this would mean explicitly incorporating risk and risk communication research into PR strategising.

**Risk research**

Risk research extends across a wide range of topics including how risk concerns are amplified in society, the different ways in which experts and lay people may approach risk topics, and the “mental models” people use in forming risk judgments. Yet while both PR and risk communication seek to influence publics’ perceptions and behaviors, shared goals have produced little mutual enrichment. Each field could assist the other, but interdisciplinary borrowings are rare. Althaus (2005) argued that the various academic disciplines should work together to bring to bear on risk perception and interpretation the best each has to offer (as cited in Palenchar & Heath, 2007, p.4). Nevertheless, outside of Robert Heath’s work (e.g. 1990; 1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1997a; 1997b; 2000; 2002; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2009a; 2009b) and increasingly, that of Michael Palenchar (e.g. Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Palenchar & Heath, 2003; Palenchar et al., 2005; Palenchar & Heath, 2006; Palenchar & Heath, 2007; Palenchar, 2008; Palenchar, 2009; Heath & Palenchar, 2009) the PR academy has yet to make a sustained response to this call. While some PR scholars have attempted limited conflation of risk communication and PR, they do not explore wider possibilities.

This is noteworthy in the light of Falkheimer and Heide’s claim that PR demonstrates its main value in conditions of risk, uncertainty or crisis and therefore, “risk and crisis communication is the core of PR theory and practice” (2006, p. 181). Their point overlooks the utility of business-as-usual relationship building with publics, but it does underscore the fact that in times of risk or crisis, such relationships and the communication they require often demand professional experience. This is true even though PR usually participates in rather than leads the overall organizational response to issues, risks and crises. Leadership is typically the responsibility of senior

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Developing risk literate public relations managers, who may co-ordinate the use of a range of knowledge fields, including finance, law, strategic planning and risk management as well as professional communication. PR’s usual role is to manage the strategic communication brief, not the corporate management processes which it exists to support. It must, however, be wary of “jurisdictional creep” because managers in areas other than PR, such as legal and finance, may use their subject matter knowledge to assert their own claims to controlling how the organization communicates its responses to risk. Outside the organization, this is a challenge for PR as well: in risk disputes, all actors may use PR strategies such as media relations and government relations, even if practitioners are not in charge of them.

**Merger**

Part of the answer for practitioners may in fact be a merging of PR issues management and risk communication. Heath sees this occurring “at the point where key publics feel deep concern that companies and governmental organizations create or allow risks to occur that will affect the health, safety, environmental quality, and economic well-being of community residents and users of products (1997, p. 326, in Roper et al., 2004, p. 43). He also outlines an issues management approach to risk which involves lay people “as a vital part of a complex communication, opinion formation, and decision-making infrastructure” (1997, p. 340, in Roper et al., 2004, p. 43). However, it is possible that a “vital part” may not be a determinative one, as the decision-making infrastructure may be characterised by asymmetries of power (Hayenhjelm, 2006). Williams and Olaniran suggested that crisis communication practitioners, facing “an increasing industrial reliance on new technology which might be associated with potential health and environmental harm” (1989, p. 387), might well incorporate some elements of risk communication in their work, “as risk communication offers a body of knowledge which can be of benefit to PR practitioners who must specifically deal with crises or potential crises involving technology, health and the environment” (1989, p. 387).

One implication of the professional requirement (and opportunity) for risk literacy is that academics teaching public relations would need to borrow consciously from risk and risk communication research in their teaching. This is logical in any case, as those research findings often relate directly to PR concerns such as

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5 Of whom, of course, the senior PR practitioner may be one. However, in a crisis, stakeholders tend to attribute ultimate leadership responsibility to the chief executive.
campaign development. In addition, practitioners would need to recognise the downside in focusing mainly, or solely, on issues and crises. Such an emphasis illustrates a tendency to ignore the antecedent phenomenon of risk perceptions that may be the root of the issues they and their clients face. Because such questions are often complex and fluid, managing risk - especially reputation risk -and its associated communication - needs to be active. Only in that way, can managing risk match the dynamics of social constructions of risk. With these augmentations, risk-literate practitioners will be better placed to address such professional demands and public relations educators, daring enough to expand their disciplinary vision to include risk research, will be better positioned to produce such practitioners and provide supporting research. For the profession as a whole, in a climate where institutions seek to manage their reputations through influencing people’s responses to risk, PR could position itself more strongly as offering the risk communication and perception management skills organizations require.

However, while risk research could enhance PR practice, the PR academy seems often to pay more attention to issues and crises than to the idea of risk. It displays hardly any interest at all in the notion of hazard, to which many risks relate and from which a crisis may erupt. This is significant, not because issues and crises are unimportant but because they are important. If PR is paying insufficient attention to hazard and risk then its ability both to conceptualize and to respond in practice to issues and crises is incomplete and constrained, because important aspects of pre-crisis conditions and communication are not included in its considerations. The way people think and feel about an issue links to their judgments about environmental and technological risks (Pidgeon, Simmons & Henwood, in Taylor-Goodby & Zinn, 2006, p. 108). To attempt to “manage” an issue without attending to its risk associations, or to control a crisis without comprehending the risk perceptions that helped produce it, is to overlook factors directly affecting PR’s ability to meet the brief from its clients.

Therefore risk should therefore matter more to PR than it appears to at present. This greater emphasis can be justified not only on the grounds that managing risk is inherent to the organizations that PR serves, but also on the basis that meeting stakeholder expectations is, increasingly, an important secondary aim of risk management (EIU, 2007). PR’s professional responsibility is to work with those who have an organizational risk management brief, contributing communication and relationship management expertise to all stages of the risk mitigation process.
Altered perspective

Appropriation of relevant risk research could not only help reshape PR scholarship but also develop more risk-literate practitioners, better equipped to contribute to building risk-resilience in organizations, communities and governments. An altered perspective of PR’s role in relation to risk would also see the profession complement its focus on crisis communication with a similar emphasis on risk communication as a crisis prevention strategy (Jaques, 2007). It would recognize the perceptual basis of social risk construction. It would adopt research techniques to better understand this dynamic, fluid process, including its emotional elements, such as “outrage” (Sandman, 1993), as part of its contribution to managing “risk issues” (Leiss, 2000a). The outcome could be a risk-literate profession that regularly applies risk-related research to goal-setting and problem-solving and in this way, demonstrates the validity of Palenchar’s positioning of risk communication as “one of the stronger contributions to the public relations body of knowledge” (2010, p. 448).

References


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