

Risk publics as media audiences: theorising and researching non-expert understandings of risks

Jeremy Collins
London Metropolitan University

Meccsa Conference
5-7 January 2005
University of Lincoln

The touchstone for any recent discussion of risk is of course Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, published in English in 1992. As a number of writers (Tulloch and Lupton 2001, Cottle 1998) have pointed out, Beck has acknowledged the importance of media in the risk society (Beck 1992: 46) even if he has not analysed its impact in any systematic way. This has led to calls for further detailed study of the media's role in the risk society. Cottle for instance has argued that Beck's 'suggestive' ideas "demand empirical support" (1998: 10). This paper draws on research taking both a wider theoretical perspective on risk, as well as a more specific, empirical, context-based risk audience approach, to present and discuss some of the ways in which audience perspectives on various kinds of risk might be understood and negotiated.

Beck's focus tends to be on large scale, potentially catastrophic, risks such as environmental pollution, which occur as by-products of late modern societies - what he calls modernisation risks. These risks, he suggests, to some extent threaten everyone; that is they are egalitarian:

"poverty is hierarchic; smog is democratic" (1992: 36)

Social policy and risk

This idea has provoked criticism of Beck from (among others,) the field of social policy; his suggestion that the risk society contains democratising elements has been argued to misunderstand the real effects of the shift towards a risk society.

Furlong and Cartmel emphasise the extent to which the rise of the risk society (which they see not as an epochal shift but as a more gradual process in late modernity) has led to the individualisation of risk, whereby people see solutions at the level of the personal rather than the collective (1997: 4-5). They argue that health risks such as food disorders and psychological problems for young people stem from a late modern insecurity that is linked to social changes in the spheres of the labour market, education and leisure.

Similarly, Kemshall's analysis of the impact of the risk society on the provision of welfare highlights what she sees as the 'meshing of risk, responsibility and prudent choice' (2002: 1):

"The key contention is that risk, particularly an individualized and responsabilized risk, is replacing need as the core principle of social policy formation and welfare delivery" (Kemshall 2002: 1)

The organisation of welfare provision (in Kemshall's analysis) is no longer based on the wider needs of the society it is supposed to serve, but instead is risk-based. Resources are increasingly targeted at protecting the vulnerable rather than providing a 'universal' system, in an 'economic rationalist' (2002: 88) response to the perceived risks involved.

Hudson's analysis of the judicial system also finds evidence of a statistically based targeting of risk. She describes how offenders are given a 'computer-generated score' intended to measure likelihood of re-offending, and suggests that these 'actuarial assessments' based on the typical characteristics of groups of offenders are replacing clinical assessments of individual offenders. Such approaches illustrate, in her view,

“...not only a greater concern with risk at the expense of due process and the principle of proportionality in punishment, but more clearly than anything signify a shift from risk management to risk control.” (Hudson 2003: 49)

This is also linked to the 'moralisation' of risk (Hunt 2003) whereby the individualisation of risk (implicit in the targeting of welfare and other social policy resources) goes hand in hand with a moral imperative for individuals to take responsibility for their own risk management. 'Responsible' citizens will then be driven to protect themselves (for instance via insurance) (see O'Malley in Kemshall 2002: 88), while those left are stigmatised and subjected to disciplinary forms of control.

From a more directly political perspective, Taylor-Gooby highlights the way in which Anthony Giddens' development of the risk society thesis is part of the 'third way' politics of Tony Blair and 'new Labour' (2001). Taylor-Gooby criticises this conception of risk, in which the role of government is diminished and emphasis is placed on the "proactivity of citizens" and the private sector. He notes Dahrendorf's identification of an 'authoritarian streak' in 'third way' politics' mantra of "no rights without responsibilities" (ibid: 197), and underlines the extent to which the theory 'assumes value consensus':

“Differences in the impact of the new modernity and its associated risks on different social groups are largely unaddressed. Social changes are thus presented as holistic – as applying to all members of society.” (Taylor-Gooby 2001: 199)

Qualitative focus group interview research is combined with quantitative analysis of survey data by Taylor-Gooby which suggests that the negative impacts of the risk society tend to have a greater impact on those from lower socio-economic groups, and that the politics of the third way might become an ideology that serves the interests of the privileged (ibid: 210).

In the field of housing policy, Allen and Sprigings (2001) describe the ways in which the 'risk information society' produces inequalities of access to knowledge concerning risk (in this case, the placement of sex offenders in social housing). Such inequalities map onto existing class positions, in that senior housing managers become 'winners' in the risk society as status-enhanced risk regulators and managers

with full access to risk information, while tenants – perceived by officials as ‘irrational’ - are denied such information. Thus, for Allen and Sprigings, those tenants in the social housing estates in which sex offenders are placed by housing officials become “reflexive non-runners”, disproportionately burdened by risk (2001: 404-5)¹. The subpolitics engendered by the risk society is therefore not about the death of the class society...

“...but, rather, is symptomatic of the way in which the post-welfare risk society deepens existing (social and economic class) inequalities by putting reflexive non-runners at the greatest risk.” (2001: 405)

If it is the case that the risks of late modern society not only conform to previously existing social and economic class hierarchies, but also encourage those disproportionately burdened by risk to develop individualised, responsabilized risk avoidance strategies (Allen and Sprigings 2001: 404-5), then we might find such individualistic solutions in personal ‘risk discourses’. While longitudinal studies aimed at reflecting a chronological change in attitudes to risks may be unfeasible, it should be possible to find examples of risk publics discussing risk in such terms.

Scientific rationality

Analyses such as those of Kemshall (2002) and Hudson (2003) above echo, and build upon, the wider arguments of Beck and others in suggesting that dominant forms of discourse privilege scientific rationality (Beck 1992; Wynne 1996), a narrow technocratic perspective generated by experts.

The failure of such perspectives to explain and account for risks (with BSE/vCJD being perhaps the clearest recent example; see for instance, Ratzan 1998; Reilly 1999) have led to discussions of other ways of understanding and making sense of risks. Some of these are more clearly defined than others, but each might to some extent be investigated empirically by their identification within public discourses around risk issues. Additionally, some of these ‘lay perspectives’ on risk might be considered to be ‘oppositional’ discourses, offering some form of empowerment to ‘risk publics’. The following sections present a number of these theoretical perspectives together with suggestions as to how they might be manifest in the risk discourses of publics in response to media representations of risk.

Risk homeostasis

Traditionally, risk management systems attempting to control traffic accidents have assumed that technical solutions such as straightening dangerously sharp bends in roads (at what are sometimes referred to as accident ‘black-spots’) contribute to a reduction in accidents and reduce the overall risk burden. There is evidence however,

¹ Allen and Sprigings in fact suggest that there are a “multiplicity of risk/information/risk inequalities”, firstly due to the ways in which offenders were likely to be concentrated on the estates managed by ‘risk insensitive’ landlords, and secondly because tenants risk avoidance activities, based on inaccurate and incomplete information, might paradoxically lead to a further risks (2001:404-5). This perhaps contrasts with Beck’s rather more optimistic suggestion that in such risk conflicts these kinds of bureaucracies become “unmasked and the alarmed public becomes aware of what they really are: *forms of organized irresponsibility*.” (Beck 1998: 15)

that this is not the case, and that the number of accidents and levels of injury and death remain relatively stable despite such measures (see for instance Adams 1995: 141). Similarly, Wilde (1994) describes the failures of flood defences in the USA to reduce the number of victims of flooding. While the construction of levees made previously susceptible areas less prone to flooding, more people decided that such areas were now “safe enough” to live in. Subsequent floods, though less frequent, caused similarly high levels of damage.

Such apparently unexpected outcomes are explained by the notion of risk homeostasis, whereby people accept a constant level of risk despite societal attempts to reduce or minimise particular risk activities. In the same way that a thermostat is set to regulate temperature within a narrow range (a few degrees above or below the chosen level), it is argued that individuals regulate their risk exposure in order arrive at a (perceived) optimum balance between risks and benefits. Drivers who encounter roads with fewer, less dangerous corners may then feel able to speed up in order to take advantage of the potential ‘benefit’ of arriving a few minutes earlier, thereby keeping their risk exposure at its optimum level. Safety measures such as anti-locking brake systems may simply mean that drivers drive faster and less cautiously in the knowledge that their vehicles are more able to withstand such hazardous activity (Wilde 1994:Ch7). Risk taking is, therefore, a “self-regulating feedback process” (Wilde 1994: Ch3)

Adams makes a similar point in his description of ‘risk compensation’ and goes so far as to speculate that new safety regulations that insist on cardboard cars with poor brakes and “a sharp spike in the centre of the steering column” (1995: 143) might not result in any increase in deaths from road accidents, and might even lead to a reduction in fatalities. The main change, he suggests, would be a less ‘efficient’ road transport system as drivers travel more slowly. In other words, the only benefit of safety improvements is to allow faster driving:

“The potential safety benefit of most improvements to roads or vehicles is, it seems, consumed as a performance benefit; as a result of safety improvements it is now possible to travel farther and faster for approximately the same risk of being killed” (Adams 1995: 144)

Wilde argues that approaches to risk management which emphasise engineering solutions (the ‘technological fix’²), or attempt to impose or enforce risk reductions are likely to fail. He therefore advocates a ‘motivational’ approach to risk prevention in order to “offer people a reason to live longer” (1994: Ch1) and thus reduce the levels at which their own risk homeostasis is set.

It might well be interesting to explore the extent to which people’s constructions of risk in their everyday lives correspond to the notion of the risk thermostat. It could be that individuals recognise their willingness to accept a certain amount of risk as a ‘trade-off’ for benefits such as, for instance, being able to travel quickly along roads and in cars with enhanced safety features. However, this is perhaps more likely to be evident in *behaviours* rather than in individuals’ own risk understandings. Indeed, it might be argued that the most interesting element of this conception of risk is the

² Wilde compares such ‘fixes’ with that of the ‘so called Green Revolution’ in which technological innovations produced feedback effects leading to unwelcome socio-economic side-effects. (1994: Ch3)

extent to which risk understandings conflict with apparent behaviours. Media audiences confronted with risk information might well assert their intentions to reduce their exposure to risk even though their behaviours might suggest a re-adjustment of their 'risk thermostat'.

A further issue is the extent to which the risk homeostasis theory applies to most or all of the risks which people face. Clearly the emphasis for Wilde and Adams is on those risks which are to some extent voluntary and individualised. Thus, each individual has the opportunity to set his or her own 'thermostat' regarding traffic risks or whether to live on a flood plain. The risks which are discussed elsewhere are often those which are not voluntarily self-imposed, but socially or collectively imposed, and therefore cannot be readily understood via such an individualising perspective. We might attempt to apply their general perspective to societies as a whole by arguing that they each have a collective 'risk thermostat' which is reset according to changes in collective risk exposure. For instance, we might argue that as exposure to some 'natural' health risks (such as those from disease which are now largely preventable if not entirely eradicated) is reduced, other risks (Beck's environmental modernisation risks, or even those of high speed driving) are 'voluntarily' accepted. This argument however merely reintroduces the 'value consensus' assumptions which Taylor-Gooby finds in Beck (and are evident in earlier discussions of the social aspects of risk – e.g. Starr 1969), and fails to acknowledge the social inequalities and differences of interest within particular communities. Empirical audience research into the 'risk homeostasis' perspective may therefore be of use for certain clearly voluntary risk behaviours, but is unlikely to provide valid data regarding other collective kinds of (modernisation) risk.

Intuitive Risk Judgements

Slovic compares expert assessments of risk with what he describes as "...intuitive risk judgements, typically called 'risk perceptions'." (Slovic 1987: 280). He attempts to highlight the weakness of earlier approaches by contrasting Starr's 'revealed preference studies' (which take current levels of social risk as a baseline for calculations) with his 'expressed preference' approach, which allows people to explain their own assessments of risk (ibid: 281). This, he suggests, helps to emphasise the differences between public understandings, in which the more dreaded a risk, the greater the need for regulation or risk reduction, and those of experts who measure riskiness along one main measure: expected annual mortality. This uni-dimensionality of conventional risk assessment has been criticised by others, such as Hansson (1989) who attacks the "technocratization" of risk and calls for an understanding of the complexities of risk perception. It is this distinction which Slovic sees as crucial to the difference between expert and lay understandings:

"To many people, statements such as 'the annual risk from living near a nuclear power plant is equivalent to the risk of riding an extra three miles in an automobile' give inadequate consideration to the important differences in the nature of the risks from these two technologies..." (Slovic 1987: 285)

For many conventional models of risk there is no difference in outcome between the two activities, and therefore no reason to distinguish between them other than groundless irrationality; others however assert that people do differentiate between

such outcomes. Juas and Mattson for instance note the difference in public attitudes towards 'catastrophes' and 'common-place accidents' (1987: 133). Slovic makes a similar point, although his analysis tends in parts to imply that the gap which he identifies between perceived and desired risks can be closed by changing public attitudes - one suggestion is to "...broaden people's perceptions..." perhaps by including information on comparative risks. In some senses then, Slovic seems to revert to a traditional form of risk analysis; nevertheless, he concludes that risk communication and management must become a two-way process in which lay understandings ('intuitive risk judgements') are given their full weight (Slovic 1987: 285).

Empirical investigations of audience risk responses might then be sensitive to how any 'intuitive risk judgements' provide evidence of lay publics making comparisons between risks as suggested above; certainly, Slovic's own 'psychometric paradigm', while arguably restricted by an essentially scientific rationality perspective, offers some useful evidence regarding affective responses to risks (Slovic 2000)³.

'Normal Accidents'

Perrow's attempt to underline the poverty of traditional risk assessment highlights what he sees as three kinds of rationality: absolute, bounded/limited, and social.

i) Absolute rationality

This is roughly equivalent to what Irwin calls 'scientific rationality'; it "...requires narrow, precise, quantitative goals..." (Perrow 1984: 321), and is exhibited by the strict risk-benefit approach in which, for instance, nuclear power can be shown to be the 'best', and preferable to coal. Clearly, such an understanding is evident in Starr's approach (which Perrow describes as the "first body-count analysis" (ibid.: 364)) as well as in others; Perrow notes a study by Combs and Slovic (1979) which, he says, "...deplores the public's unawareness..." that diabetes causes more deaths than murder. The study implies a perceptual bias in the public, perhaps caused by media sensationalism, but Perrow highlights the lack of the social dimension, in which (in our society and many others) murder is an almost uniquely powerful social taboo, an affront to human dignity and sense of security. He further points out the assumption of equality between deaths with different causes such as fifty thousand road deaths per year and the same number killed in a single catastrophe (Perrow 1984: 308). The inadequacies of absolute rationality as a guide to risk judgements is illustrated in Perrow's hypothetical example of a corporation which takes the advice of a risk assessor and decides not to install an expensive safety device which would, statistically, save the life of one of its workers. The decision will avoid the need for product price increases and cuts in share-holder dividends, and competition for jobs at the corporation will not be significantly affected (due not least to mass unemployment). Only one, anonymous worker will die - so it is clearly worthwhile: "... in risk analysis terms, it is a good bargain." (Perrow 1984: 309). Absolute

³ More recently, Slovic has moved closer to what Lupton calls a sociocultural perspective on risk – and away from the 'technico-scientific' approach of much of the 'psychometric paradigm' - by acknowledging, the "limitations of risk science", the "subjective and contextual nature of risk" and that "the public is not irrational" in its understandings of risk. He thus suggests that "Defining risk is thus an exercise in power" (Slovic 2000: xxxvi)

rationality, in effect, takes a positivist view of risks, and is therefore insufficient as a framework for the understanding of public attitudes:

"For most [risk assessment], the focus is on dollars and bodies, ignoring cultural or social criteria." (Perrow 1984: 314)

ii) Bounded/limited rationality

Derived from cognitive psychology, this form of understanding takes into account the human factors which limit our ability to take in all the possible information which would aid decision-making. Here, rationality is limited due to memory and attention span; to lack of education and training; and also to the 'heuristics' - that is, the rough estimates - that people employ to make decisions, which may not follow a strictly rational pattern. Perrow gives the example of the availability heuristic, in which people base decisions on the examples or choices most easily available to them rather than on the full range of possible alternatives. Basing your holiday plans on the news of the latest plane crash, rather than on the longer term safety record of commercial flights, is an illustration of the application of the availability heuristic to produce a form of limited rationality. Clearly this approach exhibits more sympathy for public resistance to absolute rationality, and an understanding of the reasons for such "technically faulty" logic; it is still however considered to be an 'error', and ultimately implies a solution in public conversion or education to the expert view.

iii) Social rationality

Perrow proposes a third form of rationality which values and takes seriously the psychological limits which constrain attempts to think and act on a purely rational basis. He accepts the 'psychometric' dimensions of risk judgements posited by (among others) Slovic (1987, 2000) whereby the public make decisions on the basis of their perceptions of whether a proposed risk is, for instance, voluntary, well understood, controllable, has catastrophic potential, and presents a threat to future generations. However, Perrow views these 'perceptions' not as examples of flawed logic, but as valuable traits. The different emphases which individuals place on these limits represent the social diversity which enhance co-operation and promote "social bonding" (Perrow 1984: 321). These psychological limits also provide a framework in which different values can confront each other in a legitimate debate without being dismissed as 'irrational'. Perrow suggests we should learn to love our limits, and accept their role in the process of risk assessment:

"A technology that raises even unreasonable, mistaken fears is to be avoided because unreasonable fears are nevertheless real fears." (Perrow 1984: 321)

Risky technology may, by the definitions of absolute rationality, be considered 'safe', but may nevertheless cause psychological harm, and is therefore to be avoided. Perrow sees social rationality as providing a 'thick' explanation rather than the 'thinness' of the explanations offered by a narrow, quantitative, absolute rationality (Perrow 1984: 328).

Audience discourses on risks might well exhibit preferences for certain kinds of risks which from the perspective of absolute rationality would be seen as undifferentiated

from others. Perhaps more particularly, from Perrow's perspective we might also expect to find conflicts (either expressed or implicit) within audience responses between these social rationalities and the absolute, scientific rationalities of traditional risk analysis.

Popular Epidemiology

Other attempts to take into account public understandings of risks have focused on specific incidents within the sphere of medicine and health. A study which highlights the differences between lay and professional approaches to epidemiology takes as a case study the pollution and resulting childhood leukaemia cluster which emerged in Woburn, Massachusetts over a period of more than a decade beginning in the early 1970's (Brown 1992: 267). Brown notes that in this particular case, as in others (such as the earlier Love Canal case), a 'popular epidemiology' develops in which local people challenge traditional epidemiological approaches by emphasising social structures and taking a broader approach. While conventional epidemiology studies the distribution of a disease and the causes for that distribution in an attempt to explain and prevent the spread of the disease, its 'popular' variant involves the affected community (rather than outside experts) in the gathering of scientific data and the marshalling of knowledge and resources. These lay people include social structural factors as part of the causal chain, and ignore the boundaries (an essential part of the scientific conception of traditional epidemiology) between science on one side and judicial and political action on the other; that is, they become both scientifically and politically active (Brown 1992: 269). Nine stages of 'citizen involvement' are suggested:

- i) Both health problems and pollutants are noticed by local people.
- ii) A connection between the two is hypothesised.
- iii) The residents share information and develop a common perspective.
- iv) The group contacts officials and requests information on the subjects concerned.
- v) The group becomes organised, develop pride in their own researches and learning.
- vi) Official agencies investigate and deny a link, asserting their own unique authority in definition and ownership of the problem.
- vii) The residents recruit their own experts to conduct scientific research.
- viii) Confrontation and litigation occurs.
- ix) Group presses for acceptance and corroboration of its findings.

Brown conceives of popular epidemiology as a way for communities to take control of science by directing it in their own interests:

"While epidemiologists admit to the uncertainties of their work, their usual solution is to err on the side of rejecting environmental causation, whereas community residents make the opposite choice" (Brown 1992: 271).

This provides the basis for a critique of the notion of a 'value-free' science; the citizen-activists of Woburn saw themselves as tackling problems which traditional approaches had failed to investigate due not to any objective weakness of their case, but because of the various social forces which had defined their situation as non-hazardous. The experts' assertions of impartiality were countered by the argument,

derived from the sociology of science, that all science occurs in a social, political and economic context.

The disputes between the two approaches to epidemiology are evident in a number of areas. Firstly, the standards of proof demanded by scientists and officials are often higher than seem necessary for those involved, and the experts are seen as grasping for an impossible perfection in the construction and analysis of their research. This often becomes a demand by the residents concerned for a 'better safe than sorry' approach which may be more in evidence in clinical medicine than in the laboratory science standards of traditional epidemiology (Brown 1992: 274). Institutional constraints also work to direct scientific investigation. Brown notes the increasing reliance of (US) universities on corporate and government research, and official reluctance to support scientists who challenge orthodoxies or existing canons (ibid: 275). Also, official information and research data can be lacking; the data from the Department of Public Health was found to be poorly constructed and methodologically weak. A further dispute concerns the mystification of scientific understandings which Brown suggests occurs when traditional epidemiology asserts its unique status. Citizens groups help to de-mystify scientific authority and to move the issues from the purely technical arena to that of political action. In a parallel situation, Wynne's studies of the use of dangerous herbicides found that the assumptions concerning working conditions made by toxicologists were idealised, and that the real conditions of use of such products (initially dismissed by the authorities as anecdotal) did represent a serious health risk. The assumptions made by the experts illustrate a purely technical rationality; as a model of the real world, they were completely inadequate (Pidgeon et al. 1992: 117).

Brown contrasts his notion of popular epidemiology with that of an anti-scientific 'folk knowledge'. The former works with scientists, but explicitly includes lay perspectives and concerns. In this sense it can be seen as an alternative, more explicitly inclusive kind of science rather than an alternative to scientific enquiry (ibid: 278); this, as we shall see, is echoed in Beck's call for a more reflexive science (Beck 1992)⁴. This approach implies that public understandings need to be incorporated not just at the stage of policy-making (or risk management), but during the scientific analysis conducted in risk assessments.

Brown's conception of popular epidemiology describes active public involvement in struggles around risk definition and construction, and it can clearly be applied to those instances where local communities have attempted to recast risk analyses using the kinds of (anecdotal, qualitative, contextualised) evidence traditionally excluded from mainstream epidemiological studies (such as recent concerns over possible health problems linked to the siting of mobile phone masts). Empirical studies of protest groups at various stages of action and group cohesion might generate useful data concerning the constructions of risk within which such groups operate, and the notion of popular epidemiology could provide some theoretical support. Nevertheless, the application of this approach to wider publics – particularly with those who have not taken up any clearly defined oppositional stance – is likely to be limited.

⁴ Beck's apparent reliance, in the last instance, on science has drawn criticism from theorists such as Wynne (1996).

Risk biography

Tulloch and Lupton approach the issue of risk communication from the perspective of recent media studies theory in their emphasis on the public as “‘audiences’ of risk”:

“...that is, following Alasuutari, as people *constituting themselves* as audiences in their everyday practices rather than seeing audiences as somewhat passive ‘effects’ (‘blind citizens’) of forceful expert and counter-expert systems, as in Beck’s account” (2001: 14).

Their criticism of Beck also takes in Brian Wynne’s arguments, which confront expert scientific knowledge, with claims to universality, with public, lay knowledge, which is local and contextual. Wynne argues for a negotiation between expert and lay knowledges in which the latter acts as an ‘inspiration’, rather than an alternative to the former (Wynne 1996: 78). Tulloch and Lupton suggest that this nevertheless omits a detailed analysis of the role of the media in the representation of risk. They thus quote approvingly from Allan et al (2000) concerning the “crucial role” of the media in both the circulation of expert perspectives on risk and the opening up of space for potentially alternative perspectives – “counter-definitions” (Allan et al (2000) quoted in Tulloch and Lupton 2001: 8).

The importance of the media is especially underlined for Tulloch and Lupton in Beck’s emphasis on ‘invisible’ risks – environmental risks such as radioactivity, toxins and pollutants – which ‘elude sensory perception’ but are made available via media representations. They therefore call for “a sustained ‘media and risk’ analysis” with a focus on the ‘audiences’ of risk (ibid. 12); but they are nevertheless careful to place their studies of risk audiences in the everyday lived experiences of their respondents. That is, they adopt the approach of theorists such as Ang (1996), Alasuutari (1999) and Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) in their critical ‘ethnographic everyday’ analysis. The emphasis for them is on the personal biographies of their respondents, and the ways in which risk information is woven into their lives at the level of the private, personal and everyday.

Tulloch and Lupton refer to previous research focused around the topic of AIDS which suggested people sometimes make use of expert knowledges, sometimes their own personal, experiential, grounded knowledges, and sometimes combine both⁵. Their more recent discussion supports this, noting that most respondents preferred to rely on their ‘personal experience’ or ‘intuition’ rather than on the expert knowledges generally found in mass media accounts of risk. Their focus on one particular interviewee as a case study provides useful data on the extent to which the expert knowledges around HIV/AIDS are linked to the individual’s own personal biography to delineate a “very precise narrative historicizing of [the respondent’s] sense of risk” (Tulloch and Lupton 2001: 17).

⁵ Frankel et al make a similar point in their research: "... individuals interpret health risks through routine observation and discussion of cases of illness and death in personal networks and the public arena, as well as from formal and informal evidence arising from other sources, such as television and magazines." (Frankel et al. 1991: 428)

One of their conclusions suggests that public constructions of the risks they face are rooted in the “‘embedded’ (family, class) traditions” which Beck’s risk society thesis suggests is being replaced by the ‘ontological insecurity’ of individualisation. In this sense then, we can suggest a link between the criticisms of Beck emanating from the social policy arena (see above) and those derived from the empirical media/audience research of Tulloch and Lupton. From both positions, some aspects of the risk society thesis, in emphasising the supposedly ‘democratic’ elements of late modern risks such as environmental pollution seem to be ‘bracketing out’ the influence and relevance of traditionally ‘modern’ categories of (for instance) class and gender in people’s understandings of, and negotiations with risk on an everyday level.

“... ‘class’ (‘scarcity’, ‘industrial’) modernity is still with us in our reflexive biographies to a much greater degree than Beck is prepared to acknowledge.” (ibid: 25)

A further contribution to a “sustained ‘media and risk’ analysis” by Tulloch and Lupton is not so much in their empirical results but in the questions and suggestions for research which arise from their discussions.

They highlight for instance the extent to which people rely on ‘experts’ and the extent to which other ‘communication circuits’ – informal, non-expert sources of information – are also part of their understanding of risk. How do people negotiate these two sets of ideas and support if and when they contradict each other? How are audience risk responses woven into the ongoing ‘narrativisations’ of their own personal biographies? What moral agendas are present in these narratives? Tulloch and Lupton highlight Beck’s notion of ‘radical uncertainty’ and suggest a need for such a notion to be empirically investigated. Are people really concerned with the ‘invisible’, democratic risks of late modernity? Do they feel cut adrift from traditional certainties concerning toxic and environmental risks? Or are they more likely to focus on those risks which are more immediate and everyday? Can ‘radical uncertainty’ be ascertained empirically? (Ibid. 12-13).

The distinction between the large-scale environmental risks which Beck tends to emphasise and the risks that emerge within and as part of everyday life (e.g. road accidents, food poisoning) is highlighted by Tulloch and Lupton in order to suggest a wider perspective on people’s perceptions of the various risks they attend to. This distinction also underlines the different situations that tend to be subsumed under the more abstract discussions of risk. More particularly, if empirical risk research is being called for, such research will need to tailor the theoretical approach adopted to each specific risk. In each case, research might consider what specifically is being threatened by any particular risk. From global to more local and individualised risks, threats and hazards might be directed at the planet, whole cultures, nations, communities, families and individuals; there might be risks to health, home, economic status, or social status. Each of these might be threatened by any particular risk, and any empirical audience research should therefore investigate the perceived ‘target’ of any risk. Nevertheless, Tulloch and Lupton’s suggestion of investigating the use of ‘personal networks’, and the complex interweaving of personal histories with risk assessments, suggests a further fruitful avenue for empirical ‘risk audience’ research.

Conclusion

The theoretical debates around risk and the role of the media in the construction and dissemination of risk information have provided a useful basis for further empirical research. However, a number of issues around the differentiation of risk and risk perceptions needs to be taken in to account in such research.

Collective risks are likely to be understood in ways which reflect their 'invisible' and therefore (primarily) mass mediated existence. Research into audience responses to such risk information needs to begin with a clear understanding of how these risks are differentiated in audience perceptions from individualised risks, and how in each case they might impinge on specific social groups rather than uniformly across class and other social boundaries. The ways in which particular risks are more likely to become 'moralised' is a further question which needs to be addressed in the planning of risk-media research; the 'voluntariness' of risks is, for instance, clearly one element which will affect the extent to which media representations of risk, and public perceptions of risk, can reflect a moral agenda.

Alongside this, the availability of risks to immediate experience (as 'lifeworld' risks) also becomes an important issue. If (as Tulloch and Lupton, among others, suggest) social networks are important in the construction of public perspectives on risk, then the presence of anecdotal information, on an 'everyday' level, via these networks is more likely in such cases. In contrast to this, mediated risks of future catastrophes are likely to remain less amenable to local contextualisation and thus mass media representation and construction takes on an even more important role. It may also be the case that while certain risks can be subject to popular epidemiological study, others disallow an 'active' public response, in which case public discourses might well be more 'open' to the constructions of media and expert-led scientific rationality.

In general, the specific contexts of risks and their reception by 'risk publics' needs to be clarified in empirical research in order to provide situated understandings of audience responses that extend, complexify and challenge the 'grand theorizing' (Tulloch and Lupton 2001: 9) found in some of the risk literature.

Bibliography

- Abercrombie N and Longhurst B (1998) *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, London: Sage.
- Adams J (1995) *Risk*, London: UCL.
- Alasuutari P (1999) 'Introduction: Three Phases of Reception Studies' in Alasuutari (ed) *Rethinking the Media Audience*, London: Sage.
- Allen C and Sprigings N (2001) 'Housing policy, housing management and tenant power in the 'risk society': some critical observations on the welfare politics of 'radical doubt'', *Critical Social Policy* 21:3, pp. 384-412.
- Ang I (1996) *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, London: Routledge.
- Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.
- Beck U (1998) 'Politics of Risk Society' in Franklin J (ed) *The Politics of Risk Society*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Brown P (1992) 'Popular Epidemiology and Toxic Waste Contamination: Lay and Professional Ways of Knowing', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 33, (September): 267-281
- Cottle S (1998) "Ulrich Beck, 'Risk Society' and the Media: A Catastrophic View?", *European Journal of Communication* Vol. 13(1): 5-32.
- Frankel S, Davison C and Smith G D (1991) 'Lay Epidemiology and the Rationality of Responses to Health Education', *British Journal of General Practice* 41: 428-430.
- Furlong A and Cartmel F (1997) *Young people and social change: individualization and risk in late modernity*, Buckingham: OUP.
- Hansson S O (1989) 'Dimensions of Risk' *Risk Analysis* 9, No.1: 107-112.
- Hudson B (2003) *Justice in the Risk Society*, London: Sage.
- Hunt A (2003) 'Risk and Moralization in Everyday Life', in Ericson R V and Doyle A *Risk and Morality*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Juas B and Mattson B (1987) "Valuation of Personal Injuries: the Problem" in Sjoberg L (ed) *Risk and Society*, London, Allen and Unwin.
- Kemshall H (2002) *Risk, social policy and welfare*, Buckingham: OUP.

Perrow C (1984) *Normal Accidents*, NY, Basic Books.

Pidgeon N, Hood C, Jones D, Turner B and Gibson R (1992) "Risk Perception", in Royal Society Study Group *Risk: Analysis, Perception and Management*, London, Royal Society.

Ratzan S C (ed) (1998) *The Mad Cow Crisis: Health and the Public Good*, London: UCL Press.

Reilly J (1999) 'Just another food scare?' in Philo G (ed) *Message Received*. Harlow: Longman

Slovic P (1987) 'Perceptions of Risk', *Science* 236: 280-5.

Slovic P (2000) *The Perception of Risk*, London: Earthscan.

Starr C (1969), 'Social Benefit versus Technological Risk', in *Science*, 165:1232-38

Taylor-Gooby P (2001) 'Risk, Contingency and the Third Way: Evidence from the BHPS and Qualitative Studies', *Social Policy and Administration* Vol. 35, No 2, pp. 195-211.

Tulloch J and Lupton D (2001) 'Risk, the mass media and personal biography', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol 4(1), pp. 5-27.

Wilde G J S, (1994) *Target Risk: Dealing with the danger of death, disease and damage in everyday decisions*, Toronto: PDE Publications.

Wynne B (1996) 'May the Sheep Safely Graze? A Reflexive View of the Expert-Lay Knowledge Divide', in Lash S, Szerszynski B and Wynne B (eds) *Risk, Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*, London, Sage.