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PR Roles and Risk in a Post-Katrina Climate

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PR people often deal with risk to clients’ and employers’ reputations. However, practitioners are less visible in communicating about more tangible threats to health and well-being. The literature is slender in terms of contributions from public relations scholars, other than noted researcher, Robert Heath. He assumes rather than details a public relations responsibility in risk communication. This paper discusses risk communication with practice issues in mind, using Heath’s writings as a basis from which to explore and expand possible dimensions of a PR role in communicating risk.

Horrific hurricanes and egregious failures in handling the aftermath. Terrorism, tsunami, earthquakes – and a potential avian flu pandemic in the wings: Beck’s (1986) “risk society” concept has never appeared more apt, nor communication about threats, global or local, more vital.

To concerned citizens, hazards, or sources of harm, seem to hover around every corner. Risks, or assessments as to how likely it is that harm will actually occur, appear ever more acute, whether rationality concurs or not. As people feel more vulnerable, reducing risks and communicating about them gains a sharper edge (Heath et al., 2002). In the fragile atmosphere of social anxieties, communication can help authorities reduce or prevent the likelihood of a possible risk becoming a risk event. It can educate publics on protecting themselves, and help to build trust. Absence of effective communication is problematic, to say the least. According to the Final Report of the U.S. House of Representatives Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, “The lack of a government public communications strategy and media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns and further delayed relief” (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006, p.4). Risk, and crisis-level risk events in particular, demand high-order communication skill, skill professional communicators – PR practitioners – say they can provide.

Yet, when risk is considered, public relations appears puzzlingly low-profile. Risks to corporate reputations seem to loom larger, much larger, than perils to public well-being. Certainly, clients and employers demand “reputation risk management” services. But limiting the profession’s risk engagement to reputation obscures opportunities in the expanding domain of communicating about hazards and the risks they pose, or are perceived to pose. Such openings challenge both public relations practitioners and employers who tread more familiar (and, arguably, easier) ground in issue management and crisis communication. They may seek to subsume risk discourse in the terminology of these cognate fields. Yet conflating risk, issue, and crisis communication renders PR’s ability to manage risk messaging and risk campaigns opaque. One result is the lacuna in the public relations literature about risk communication. Analyses of issue management and crisis communication are relatively frequent; risk communication commentary, rare.

This is why Robert Heath’s work is particularly useful. While others publish periodically on risk communication, Heath, based at the University of Houston, is the only public relations scholar to sustain a lengthy research program on risk communication, working together with associates. This paper, therefore, uses his writings to help scope public relations’ role and relevance in risk communication. Heath does not specifically argue that communicating risk “belongs” to public relations; he simply assumes that it does. Nonetheless, his work can support a viable conception of public relations’ role, illustrating not only PR’s risk-related practice potential, but also placing issue management and crisis communication in a new perspective.
**Surges, statistics and PR**

In health systems, “surge capacity” is “the ability to rapidly mobilize to meet an increased demand” (Shapiro, 2003, p.5372). It is an emergency response concept (OCHA, n.d.) about being able to move quickly when the confines of the normal and expected are breached, as they were in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina’s furious storm waters overwhelmed levees protecting New Orleans. Events demanding surge capacity can have a leveling effect on technical communications systems: in the aftermath of the hurricane, with infrastructure laid waste, Mississippi National Guard commanders resorted to runners to relay orders (Fordahl & Meyerson, 2005).

Yet Katrina’s havoc is only one dramatic example of a risk-related “predictable surprise” (Bazerman & Watkins, 2004), demanding much more than technological communications surge capacity. It does not take howling hurricanes to rouse publics’ concern about local, state, federal and even global risks. Clarke (2005, p.1) argues that hubris, interdependence and population concentration leave even wealthy societies “at greater risk for worst-case disasters today than in the past.” Official statistics seem to support him. According to the Belgian Université Catholique de Louvain’s Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters and the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 18 per cent more disasters struck in 2005 than in 2004, although a trend to lower death rates continued (ISDR, 2006).

Even in the face of these statistics, the idea that the world is more objectively dangerous than it was previously is open to challenge (Power, 2004). Human disasters do not always result from natural phenomena (Braine, 2006). Ropeik and Slovic (2003, p.1) comment that “there is both good risk news, and bad,” noting, however, that despite mixed evidence many people say they think (added emphasis) humanity is living in riskier times. A lot of risk talk and practice may be driven, as Power (2004, p.10) asserts, by a “functional and political need to maintain myths of control and manageability.” Even if he is right, modern media reportage allows people remote from danger to participate vicariously in a crisis, and some become the “worried well” (CDC, n.d.).

“Risk society” (Beck, 1986) is subject to spreading “fear contagion” (Orent, 2005) about hazards and risk assessments, changed – at least in the US – by a “Chicken Little-type mentality” (Russell, 1988, p.2) perpetually fearful of catastrophe. According to Furedi (2002, p.2), “Society’s difficulty with managing risk is driven by a culture of safety that sees vulnerability as our defining condition.” Risk communication focuses on that flimsy state, informing and engaging publics about hazards and risks. Although closely related to issue management, crisis communication and recovery communication, risk communication differs in its focus on the possibility of direct danger to the well-being of humans or the physical environment. As publics experience heightened risk awareness, the need to recalibrate risk communication to accommodate the “epidemic of fear” (Furedi, 2002) gains weight, although such communication carries its own controversy: “One person’s risk communication may be another person’s propaganda” (Lowance, cited in Russell, 1988, p.2). Acknowledging the potential for risk communication to be implemented with mixed motives, it seems clear that in some cases, at least, risk communication is needed on scales rarely seen before.

For example, bird flu’s creeping progress across the globe has prompted many countries to respond to a UN call for at least $1.5 billion to battle the flu in its breeding grounds and prepare for a possible human pandemic (BBC News, 2006). The World Bank believes such a deadly outbreak would have enormous potential economic impact, measured in hundreds of billions of dollars over a calendar year (The World Bank, 2005). Australia’s Lowy Institute for International Policy agrees that there would be a drastic economic effect. Its assessment is that even a “mild” pandemic could kill 1.4 million people worldwide and chop approximately US$330 billion from world economic output.
Communication is considered crucial both before and during a pandemic period (Health Canada, 2005).

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Health budgeted $NZ2.2 million for pandemic-related public education in the 2006 financial year, including information posters and videos, advertising and staff (Andrew, 2006). Its campaign began with radio public health messages, but will extend to television commercials and a nationwide mail-drop to all 1.4 million households. In due course citizens will receive a mail package including a brochure and a magnet with a free-phone number and website details. Results to date indicate that nearly two-thirds of New Zealanders have seen information on how to prepare for a pandemic, and about one-third are doing something to specifically prepare themselves or their household (Hodgson, 2006). One outcome of this saturation public communication may be to bolster trust in official capacity to respond. In disasters, people rarely panic unless they have lost faith in public authorities (Fischhoff et al., 2003) – indeed, according to Glass and Schoch-Spana (2002), panic – to the extent it exists – may be “iatrogenic”, i.e., determined by emergency managers’ actions.

Managing multi-pronged campaigns such as the New Zealand one is part-and-parcel of PR practice: for example, Newsom et al. (2004) list six different types of public relations campaigns. Communication’s center-stage positioning in risk debates ought to spotlight practitioners’ ability to contribute vitally to risk messaging and campaign management. Confronting concern that scientists and technicians might acquire valuable information that could prevent a pandemic but not know how to communicate the information “to the right people in the right time” (Greco, 2005, p.1), PR could advance a claim to provide the necessary expertise. However, it is not clear either that public relations people are fully alert to the possibilities, or that their ability to contribute is sufficiently recognized. If this is the case, it may be due to practitioners not recognizing and articulating clearly the role they are able to play in risk communication.

There are good reasons for recruiting PR professionals to risk communication projects, some of which can be inferred from papers published by Robert Heath and his associates since 1990. Heath’s purpose is not to make a case for involving public relations in risk communication – as mentioned earlier, he assumes it has a key part to play. However, it appears that in one case, this assumption leads to a leap from a broad context of crisis to risk communication, without outlining why such a jump is justified. In Today’s Public Relations Heath and Coombs (2006) list a range of contemporary risks. They report, for example, that “Greedy executives can ruin a company, leading to hundreds of employees being laid off and investors ruined” (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p.207). They continue:

Note that once this sort of risk occurs, crisis communication is needed. Because of this role in society, public relations practitioners serving all types of organizations are at the forefront of risk communication. (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p.207)

The reference to “this role in society” seems opaque. Nevertheless, Heath’s research can provide a basis for conceptualizing a rationale for PR involvement in risk communication and an outline of the contribution it can make. Later sections of this paper seek to elicit both from his work.

**Communicating the elusive and the controversial**

Risk communication is a relatively recent phrase, first used in 1984 by Leiss (cited in Gurabardhi et al., 2004). In the public relations sphere it seems largely to lack the theorizing that has surrounded concepts of issue management and crisis communication. Its development has been prompted both by new emphases in discourse about organizations’ relations to their environment and by particular problematic events. As Power (2004, p.18) notes, referring to the UK after the BSE crisis in 1995, “ideals of stakeholder engagement and the importance of communication began to
figure prominently in generic risk management blueprints.” The effects of the BSE crisis on the UK government saw risk communication “accepted as necessary to manage public expectation and its potential disappointments” (Power, 2004, p.19). Risk itself remains an “elusive, contested and ‘inherently controversial’” concept (Power, 2004, p.14), so it is not surprising that definitions of risk communication vary according to the disciplinary lens being used. Baram (1989), whose focus is specifically on commercial organizations1, helpfully distinguishes between risk communication’s “hazard” and “risk” components.

“Risk communication” generally denotes the disclosure of both hazard and risk information by firms to government officials and persons at risk. It should be recognized hazard information differs from risk information. Hazard information pertains to the dangerous attributes of an activity in the abstract (e.g. the carcinogenicity or volatility of a particular chemical), whereas risk information is the estimated effects of the hazards on persons who may actually have been exposed. Therefore, risk information considers factors such as emission levels, exposure levels and human biological response. (Baram, 1989, p.85).

Seeger et al. (2001, p.165) link crisis and risk in a new definition, describing public relations as “a crisis and risk management function responsible for understanding the role of communication in crisis incubation, the development and maintenance of crisis management plans and response capacities, and the contingent elements of effective postcrisis communication.” This definition does not explicate the envisaged “risk management function,” perhaps because, as Julin (1993) points out, it was not PR or public affairs people but rather risk assessors and managers who originally created the communication discipline of risk communication.

More commonly, risk communication is simply about organizations, private or governmental, engaging publics about hazard and risk information with a view to influencing their attitudes to risk and, often, their behavior. For example, risk communication focused on a possible avian flu pandemic may not only seek to gain audiences’ attention and convince them of the serious nature of the threat, but also to provide guidance on actions people can take to protect themselves, such as keeping an emergency survival kit (New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2005).

For PR practitioners, campaigns with such aims are familiar: public relations activity typically aims to capture audience interest and to steer it towards a desired result. However, just as mere awareness of an issue is useful but, in itself, insufficient for a campaign whose aim is behavior change, so merely providing people with facts about hazards and risk assessments falls short. Robert Heath discusses possible links between risk communication and citizen empowerment, suggesting that a sense of control may engender trust in authorities and citing research indicating that perceived lack of personal control over risk exposure may stimulate opposition to the siting of hazardous facilities (Lindell & Earle, cited in Heath & Palenchar, 2000, p.137). Heath is scathing about definitions of risk communication that feature information exchange while ignoring its outcome. In Strategic Issues Management, Heath (1997, p.338) poses a rhetorical question as to whether being informed is the limit of risk communication, arguing that “superior risk communication” should produce “an increased sense of control of the part of the persons who feel themselves to be at risk.”

Heath seems to be on target in claiming that the language used in defining risk communication is often passive and merely process-oriented. For example, in a definition that implies one-way linear information transmission, Julin (1993, p.14) describes risk communication as “the process of conveying scientific data, often about health and environmental hazards, to a lay audience in a manner that is both understandable and meaningful.” The US National Academy of Sciences is similarly exchange-centered and process-centered rather than outcome-oriented, although it does refer to interactivity. For the Academy,
Risk communication is an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly to do about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management. (cited in Covello et al., 2001, p.383)

In effect, however, this interactive ideal can be vitiated by personnel who, as Covello et al. (2001, p. 386) point out, may lack the necessary knowledge, sensitivity and skills, resulting in their choosing to adopt a “‘decide, announce, defend” (DAD model” [of communication] and proceed with “limited understanding of the various stakeholders' values and concerns.” Such a lofty approach is likely to run foul of demands for a more broadly-based, participative approach to assessing risks and determining appropriate responses. No longer will publics put up with risk messages being thrust at them by expert sources whose assumption is that “if you knew what I know, you’d think the same.” Publics expect to be involved in assessing the nature of risks to which they are exposed and to share in developing a response strategy.

This “democratization of risk policy” (Power, 2004, p.20) has brought “the principles for accepting risk – ‘risk appetite’ – in the language of private sector risk management standards – into public question” (Power, 2004, p.19). The extent to which the trend is actually democratic remains problematic and some observers are dubious about both the concept of risk democracy and whether it applies to public relations. One reviewer of this paper commented, “I am skeptical about risk democracy…The role of PR is not to create a risk democracy (how could it do that?) but to persuade (and in doing so build confidence) and to counter media bias” (personal communication, February 15, 2006). His comments highlight the need for clarity about PR’s role in risk communication. For example, it is not argued here that PR creates risk democracy, but rather that it has opportunities to facilitate the use of participative approaches in communicating about risk assessments and responses. Such engagement is business-as-usual for practitioners working in community relations and can be applied in a risk context, although the path to doing so may not be smooth. Renn (2003) is so apposite on this point that he is worth citing at length:

The popularity associated with the concepts of two-way communication, trust-building and citizen participation, however, obscures the challenge of how to put these noble goals into practice and how to ensure that risk management reflects competence, efficiency and fair burden sharing. How can and should risk managers collect public preferences, integrate public input into the management process, and assign the appropriate roles of technical experts, stakeholders, and members of the public? Who represents the public? The elected politicians, administrators, stakeholders, or all persons who will be affected by the risk? (Renn, 2003, p.13)

Public relations can help provide answers to these questions. As an integrative discipline whose scope includes stakeholder relationship building, consultation and organizational emergency (crisis) communication, public relations is well equipped to assist. However, for this to occur, both practitioners and academics need to better define the scope of PR’s role in communicating risk.

**Reputation risk: only part of the picture**

The limited PR literature on the subject reveals scant effort to argue the case at all for such a role, in contrast to crisis communication, where Fall (2004, p.1), for example, writing about the US tourism industry after 9/11, notes “the increasing role of public relations as a crisis management function.” There seems to be no discussion about why public relations practitioners should drive risk communication. Should it not be managers with line responsibility for risk-producing activities, or their technical advisors? The debate simply is not joined, although Gay & Heath (1995) do suggest
PR should integrate technical experts into communication programs. Silence should not necessarily suggest support from risk managers, clients and employers: it is not axiomatic that practitioners can “own” a broad risk communication role. A putative competence in “reputation risk management” might not stand them in good stead when dealing with hazards and risks, even though both domains demand engaging with involved and often detailed technical issues.

Reputation is a complex and multidimensional concept (Deephouse, 2000) reflecting “the extent to which external stakeholders see the firm as ‘good’ and not ‘bad’” (Roberts & Dowling, 2002, p.1078). Reputation risk management is itself an emerging field. According to Coombs & Holladay (2002, p.166), “We have just begun to unpack how to use communicative responses to protect reputations.” It seems also to be an equivocal field, regarded with cynicism by some commentators. In one case, public relations practitioner David Bernstein (2003, p.275), reviewing Larkin’s 2003 *Strategic Reputation Risk Management* and the author’s description of the “reputation risk manager,” commented, “I have never knowingly met one.” Bernstein went on to suggest that if reputation risk management exists, “then surely it is a subset of reputation management or risk management?” He noted that “risk” is a “sexier theme” than reputation management – the real focus of the book, in his view. Skepticism is found elsewhere, too. Writing about the state as risk manager, Power (2004) notes that in this context,

…the growing enfranchisement of publics and stakeholders in risk regulation has much to do with managing the perceived legitimacy of regulatory activity and decisions. There is more than a hint that risk communication strategies are as concerned with managing the secondary or reputational risk to regulators, public bodies and government as they are about the primary risk to be regulated. (Power, 2004, p.20, original emphasis)

Notwithstanding Bernstein’s somewhat acid analysis and PR’s possible confusion over terms, practitioners often see themselves as “keepers” (Hyde, 2002) of clients’ and employers’ reputations. Dealing with potential damage or decay to corporations’ standing with key publics is considered core communications business, assigned priority because reputation “may be an intangible resource leading to sustained competitive advantage” (Barney; and Dierckx & Cool, cited in Deephouse, 2000, p.1091). A positive reputation signals stakeholders about the attractiveness of the firm; they are then more willing to do business with it (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Weigelt & Camerer, cited in Deephouse, 2000). According to Roberts & Dowling (2002, p.1078), reputation-building does not need to have a direct impact on today’s bottom line to provide future benefits. Even “activities that have no positive impact on current financial performance (e.g. McDonalds’ houses for sick children or Philip Morris’s anti-smoking campaigns) are still critical as they generate reputation assets that allow above-average profits to persist over time.”

The idea of reputation risk is that these vital intangible assets are susceptible to damage or even loss, with consequent financial implications for the business concerned (Larkin, 2003; Rayner, 2003). Both public and private sector managers take reputation risk very seriously. A 2005 AON Ltd survey in the UK found respondents regarded loss of reputation rated as their companies’ single biggest threat, moving up from a fifth placing in 2003 (AON Ltd, n.d.). Public relations is called in to ride shotgun against this danger: reputation guardianship is “part of the traditional function of corporate affairs and communications departments” (Webley, 2003, p.9). However, while practitioners may regularly be briefed to ward off reputation risk, they seem much less visible when the larger sphere of risk communication is considered: communicating about hazards and risk. As one instance of this apparent reticence, a search of the archive of *Communication World*, a flagship publication for the leading practitioner group International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), produces only six articles on risk communication from 1993 to the present. In contrast, issue management rates 63 articles and crisis communication, 83. (Practitioner inattention to risk
communication may be changing, however not before time. As this paper was being completed, IABC announced that the February, 2006 issue of its CW Bulletin, an electronic newsletter supplement to the magazine, was titled “Communicating Risk before Crisis Strikes.” The issue featured several articles on risk and risk communication (CW Bulletin, 2006).

**PR and risk communication’s low profile**

By and large, this low practitioner profile for PR and risk communication carries over to the academy, although there is one notable exception. Redoubtable scholar Robert Heath has, with colleagues, authored at least 12 papers on the subject since the early 1990s. He has also, on his own account, written about risk communication in books, such as a chapter in his Strategic Issues Management (1997). Other academic authors have produced valuable but only occasional contributions rather than the rich corpus that Heath has built up over time. One can only speculate as to why more researchers have not followed Heath’s lead. Issue management is an older concept, dating from 1976 (Issue Management Council, 2005), while crisis – arguably – offers a simpler frame within which the elements of a problem stand out starkly. Risk communication, associated with uncertainty and probabilistic assessments, may be seen as a more challenging and possibly less interesting field, because it is less dramatic when conducted pre-crisis.

Heath and his associates seem in no doubt as to risk communication’s status vis-à-vis PR. Writing in the Encyclopedia of Public Relations, edited by Heath, Michael Palenchar (2005, p.753) calls risk communication “a sub discipline of public relations studies.”. Palenchar and Heath (2002, p.129) also identify risk communication as a public relations sub discipline, “intended to increase the quality of risk decisions through better communication.” Without so directly bringing risk communication under PR’s wing, Heath et al. (2002, p.318) assert that “risk communication has emerged as a specialized field with solid implications for public relations.” Palenchar and Heath (2002, pp. 130-131) set their concept of PR’s role in a relationship frame: “Public relations is a practitioner and scholarly discipline increasingly devoted to understanding the quality of relationship construction, maintenance and repair. For this reason, practitioners and scholars have reason to understand variables that affect the risk communication process.”

Yet apart from Heath’s seminal work, both individually and with colleagues, there is little substantive indication in either the academic or the practitioner PR literatures that risk communication is yet taken particularly seriously as a sub-discipline. Outside Heath’s research, there appear to be no public relations empirical studies examining topics such as the number of practitioners involved in risk communication and the nature of their involvement. One example of under-emphasis on risk communication is Risk Issue and Crisis Management (Regester & Larkin, 2005) published in conjunction with the UK Institute for Public Relations. In the book, the subject of “Dealing with Risk” merits only five pages in a total of 186 and the topic of “effective risk communication”, merely a single reference on page 16.

Amongst a slender tally of non-Heath academic papers, Gordon (1991, p.28) does assert, without support, that “communicating about risk is an important and challenging aspect of public relations today.” The article is largely a compendium of advice to practitioners. Adams (1992) refers to risk communication expert Peter Sandman’s contention that communicating about risk shouldn’t be left solely to public relations “technicians” but rather, should be considered the responsibility of plant managers and environmental officials. “In reality, though,” Adams (2002, p.28) suggests, “risk communication is a public relations function; and it’s especially true in media relations [the focus of Adams’ paper], clearly the purview of the communications professional (although other managers should be schooled in such concepts)” (original emphasis).
However, more than an italicized emphasis is needed to press home a point. Jones (2002) provides a more nuanced approach:

Given the increased focus on publics in the management literature and the demands from industry for more effective ways of dealing with critical publics and avoiding crises, public relations appears perfectly placed to meet these demands. In particular [this paper focuses on] the emergence of risk as a major facet of production of contemporary society. With organizations producing risk as much as they produce goods and services, risk communication becomes a prerogative of public relations. (Jones, 2001, p.58)

Possibly, public relations people are not particularly involved with risk communication because risk managers (such as Sandman’s plant managers and environmental officials) may not see them as possessing sufficient relevant technical competence in a particular risk domain to warrant holding overall communication responsibility. Equally, PR people might shy away from risk communication because it often centers on technical data and complex scientific assessments. A cynical colleague might be right: “PR people have decided there’s no future in risk communication, therefore they don’t do it. The clients are averse to dealing with risk and consultants have decided there’s no money in it” (personal communication, February 17, 2006).

Others have more to say about risk than PR

Medicine, environmental studies, science, and commercial risk management and analysis all have much more to say than public relations about communicating risk. For example, the United States National Library of Medicine counted 847 citations for health risk communication from January 1990 to October 2000 (Zorn & Ratzan, October, 2000). Gurabardhi et al. (2004), who focus on environmental and technological risk communication, undertook a survey of the peer-reviewed risk communication literature between 1988 and 2000 listed in the electronic databases ISI Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI Science Citation Index, and ISI Arts and Humanities Citation Index. Their list of the nine most relevant journals for risk communication with five or more publications recorded in the survey period does not include a single communications-oriented publication: the fields represented include risk analysis/assessment and management, hazardous materials, radiation protection, health physics, environmental health and medicine, and environmental science and technology. It may be that in interpreting risk communication as narrowly as “communication to do with reputation risk,” public relations is allowing category-bound thinking (Sunstein et al., 2001) to isolate it from a productive and valuable area both of academic inquiry and practice.

The risk communication literature is not, however, without passing reference to public relations. For example, Kasperson & Kasperson (2005), discussing early risk communication efforts, note that by the end of the 1980s, the limits of such programs were becoming “painfully evident.” They continue:

Obviously, risk communication, heretofore the domain of advertising and public relations firms, needed to be informed by psychometric and cultural studies of risk perception and, equally importantly, communication needed to be integrated with empowering of those at risk and with more democratic procedures in risk decision making. (Kasperson & Kasperson, 2005, pp.7-8)

Waddell (cited in Grabill & Simmons, 1998, p.416) sees communicating the risk of both natural hazards and consumer products as “an increasingly important aspect of the work of both technical experts and professional communicators.”
Issues management and crisis communication

In contrast with discussion about risk, analysis of issue management and crisis communication abounds in both professional and academic public relations discourse. In the academic literature, for example, a search of the *Public Relations Review* archive back to 1991 reveals 39 articles about crisis communication, 30 on issue management and only another five referring to risk communication. While many issues and crises could be described in risk terms (such as the risk of oil spills from tankers or toxic chemical releases from industrial plants), typically they are not described in these terms, nor is the substantial risk communication literature drawn upon in any significant way.

Some commentators attempt to merge risk communication with issues and crises. Williams and Olaniran (1998, p. 387), for example, propose “the use of elements of risk communication for use by crisis communication practitioners who will find an increasing industrial reliance on new technology which might be associated with potential health and environmental harm.” Similarly, The Center for Risk Communication (www.centerforriskcommunication.org) advertises itself as offering “applied science for critical issues management.” Both references seem to conflate risk and crisis communication in a way that recognizes points of intersection – but does acknowledge each field’s specific attributes and practice requirements. Hyde (2002, p. 1) suggests distinctions when, speaking in the context of developing responses to organizational threats, he says that this demands “evaluating what constitutes an issue, risk or crisis.”

Heath (1997, p. 358) seeks to link issue and risks in arguing for “an issue management approach to risk assessment, management and communication.” In doing so, he is advocating a community-centered, dialogic strategy – now accepted as representing best practice. Heath’s angle and linkages like his make sense, as they help to clarify the challenges for practitioners. There is no point, from either academic or practice perspectives, in slotting communication about issue, risks and crises into rigidly separate silos. However, a wider view may be more useful, both to scholars and to the profession. From a PR perspective, risk communication – whether about managing reputation risk or about hazard-related risks – should be seen as one of a quartet of closely tied but also distinct sub-disciplines. These are issue management, risk communication, crisis communication and recovery communication. In concentrating on communicating about issues and crises, public relations may have largely turned its back on risk and recovery.

Distinctions and praxis

When looking at public relations’ potential contribution to risk communication, it is as important to recognize related field distinctions as it is to acknowledge commonalities. Doing so helps to isolate specific characteristics with practice implications. For example, environmental scanning is a key aspect of issue management; in crisis communication there may be little time for it. Gaunt and Ollenburger (1995, p. 202) distinguish between crisis management and issue management. They also discuss issue management and risk management, asserting that “the two are not the same.” They note that “issue management is sometimes misunderstood: in particular it is frequently confused with crisis management or risk communication” (Gaunt & Ollenburger, 1995, p. 199). Writing in the context of recovery from Australian bushfires, Nicholls and Glenny (cited in Galloway & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005, pp. 41-42) similarly differentiate recovery communication from issue management and crisis communication. They say they seek to show “how communication during recovery, not just issue/crisis communication before/during a crisis, is critical to the ongoing success of the affected parties, be they businesses, governments, community groups or individuals.” This recovery communication may include, but is not limited to, communication about “restoring image beyond the crisis” (Baker, 2001, p. 513) – what Benoit (1997) calls image repair.
As noted above, the question of distinguishing issue, risk, crisis and recovery communications as well as recognizing links between them is not academic alone. It is particularly a matter of *praxis* – of using one’s comprehension of these fields’ characteristics and practice requirements to develop appropriate communication strategies. Such an understanding will, for example, recognize that issue with potential implications for an organization’s standing or even its survival may have nothing to do with possible harm from hazards. An extensive literature is available to those interested in how to recognize and respond to issue, especially as issues move through a “life cycle” (Mahon & Waddock, 1992, p. 72). Equally, advice and analysis on crisis management and its communication aspects abounds. A crisis may mature into a public policy issue or be sparked by such an issue (Millar & Heath, 2004). While organizations may have the luxury of time to develop responses once an issue has been identified, when a crisis erupts, it demands immediate action.

A crisis may be precipitated by a major risk event, such as the now classic examples of the oil spill following the grounding of the tanker *Exxon Valdez* or the release of a toxic chemical from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India. While these may be extreme cases, communicating about risks requires a different calculus from that often employed in issue management and crisis communication. Risk communication centers on uncertainty and assessments of probabilities. Success demands understanding both lay and expert assessments and learning how to connect them productively. The result may not necessarily be lay publics’ meek acceptance of expert assessments and recommendations. If a dialogic process is used, based on the notion of “risk democracy” (Heath & Abel, 1996a, p. 36), the outcome may amend both expert analyses and lay opinions. Technical considerations of risks, such as the likely toxicity of particular chemicals to humans and the physical environment, may need to be taken into account. In contrast to crisis and risk communication, post-crisis or risk event recovery communication informs citizens about help available to pick up the pieces of their lives, and also – when considered as image restoration or repair – helps organizations piece together shattered or damaged reputations.

Against this backdrop, can public relations practitioners afford to remain outside the ambit of risk communication as it is now understood across disciplines including “public relations, risk management, psychology, rhetoric, political science, and sociology” (Palenchar, 2005, p. 754) – and others, such as environmental and health communication? Professional communicators may best serve their interests – and those of their clients and employers – not only by identifying a role for themselves in risk communication broadly defined, but also by advocating that they should assume it, collaborating with those who have direct responsibility for the physical, technical and technological facets of risks.

Submerging risk communication in issue management and crisis communication denies practitioners the recognition that would see them drawn in to work alongside expert risk assessors, people who “often lack the motive and ability to communicate with the lay public” (Heath et al., 2002, p. 345). Nor does it provide a platform from which they could help build relations of trust with risk communities. A risk communication role for public relations need not be conceived purely within defensive or negative frameworks. Rather, when effectively handled, risk communication can enhance stakeholder trust and willingness to collaborate in risk assessment and mitigation.

**Roles and Robert Heath**

If PR people do have a role in risk communication, what are some of this role’s attributes? Given that the public relations literature outside Robert Heath’s work is relatively slim, it makes sense to explore this question primarily within the context of his writings. This next section reviews key points and makes inferences about PR’s risk communication role by drawing from selected journal articles for which Heath has been either a lead author or a co-author.
Writing in 1990, in *Public Relations’ Role in Risk Communication: Information, Rhetoric and Power*, Heath & Nathan (1990, p.15) set PR’s involvement in risk communication against the backdrop of “a revolution in environmentalism and personal health” that demands the use of communication to change behaviors and help people understand and accept “regulated levels of risk.” “In this effort,” they go on to say, “public relations practitioners are asked to employ risk communication to serve many public and private interests.” They point out that most public relations problems, especially those related to risk, have “political realities of involvement and interest” (Heath & Nathan, 1990, p.17) as central factors. The authors make this comment in attacking the linear, “informational model” of risk communication advanced by writers such as those cited in Covello et al. (2001) that focuses on providing information from expert sources in order to create a desired level of understanding about risk.

Heath & Nathan (1990) offer some specific advice for practitioners, including the following:

- Provide information the public wants to reduce its uncertainty [about risk]. Message design should meet the public interest.
- Ensure that you understand the evaluative epistemology people use when making and communicating risk assessments. When protecting its well-being, “the public uses an epistemology that distinguishes between legal and ethical issues by relying more on what is ‘right’ (perhaps as interpreted in the public’s self-interest) than what is legal…Public relations practitioners make a grave mistake when they miss this point, arguing that some action is legal – as though that will satisfy the public’s sense of ethics and security” (Heath & Nathan, 1990, p.20). PR people should understand the epistemologies of the factions [within the public] and to “use a sense of community to guide their practice” (Heath & Nathan, 1990, p.21).
- Be sensitive to the degree to which key audiences are self-interested with issues and tailor messages accordingly.

Beyond this sound but generalized guidance, one may infer some views the authors appear to hold about PR’s role in risk communication by drawing from their commentary in the 1990 paper and in subsequent writings.

1. Risk communication is an issue management tool

According to Heath & Nathan (1990, p.15), one category of risk communication helps people to understand and agree to regulated levels of risk – such as risk created by chemical companies. The authors note that this kind of risk “leads to public policy discussions whereby harmed parties seek to regulate those who are liable.” This is reminiscent of Heath’s (1997) discussion about corporate responsibility in his *Strategic Issue Management*. In this book, he notes that “when firms’ operations offend stakeholder expectations, legitimacy gaps foster the desire by stakeholders to correct those operations” (Heath, 1997, pp.119-120). Heath refers to Frederick & Weber and Sethi in support. He sees issue management and public relations as intertwined: “Issue management is a means for linking the public relations function and the management function of the organization in ways that foster the organization’s efforts to be outer-directed and to have a participative organizational culture” (Heath, 1997, p.6).

Against this backdrop, risk communication may be thought of as an issue management tool involving intervention in public policy discussions. This could see professional communicators acting, for example, to highlight the benefits of a technology some publics characterize as risky. In so doing, they would be providing interpretations of risk assessments, not just information about them. As Nathan et al. point out (1992, p.253), risk communicators need to do more than provide information, as mere awareness has been found to have little bearing on risk tolerance. Such a finding, the authors comment, “can trouble those who believe that information, a stock tool of public...
relations, can produce desired results in risk situations.” In fact, Heath et al. (2002, p.325) assert, “knowledge is not the same as information…information requires interpretation to become knowledge.” There is, however, a base of necessary information that must be made available so that community members know what help is available and how to protect themselves from risks. Writing in the context of community relations and risk communication, Health & Palenchar (2000) suggest that

Public relations practitioners engaged in enlightened community relations can work with emergency response teams…to create warning and other emergency response measures…practitioners can help to get information to potentially [risk] affected communities so that they know (a) that emergency and warning response systems are in place and (b) that measures can be taken to reduce personal exposure to the risk if it occurs. (Heath & Palenchar, 2000, p.135)

2. **PR can help establish common ground on the battlefield of risk**

According to Plough & Krimsky (cited in Heath & Nathan, 1990, p.15), “Conflicting interests and epistemologies unique to the battlefield of risk have prevented communicators from finding ‘common ground’ between the social world of risk perceptions guided by human experience and the scientists’ rational ideal of decisionmaking based on probabilistic thinking.” Yet if public relations practitioners are able to act as boundary-spanners (van Ruler, n.d.) and the public relations manager role includes acting as “mediator of organizational environments and power consequences for the function” (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992, p.205), PR people should be ideally placed to help establish the common ground Heath and Nathan refer to, even if it is less stable (i.e., more vigorously contested) than clients or employers might like. Health & Palenchar (2000) explained how they see boundary-spanning working in relation to risk issues:

Community-relations programs need to acknowledge local citizens’ fears and worries. [Community and public relations] practitioners can create dialogue between their managements and those citizens. Community-relations programs can help practitioners to monitor those concerns by listening to citizens. They should report citizens’ concerns to senior managers and encourage appropriate changes in operational performance and communication tactics that can reduce these concerns and increase the health and safety of community members. (Heath & Palenchar, 2000, p.135)

3. **PR can help create accurate understanding of safe risk levels**

Heath and Nathan (1990) comment that:

The correct risk communication model – the one public relations practitioners should use – will accurately account for what needs to be done to protect public interests while enjoying the economic and health benefits toxic materials such as chemicals offer for our lifestyles. The wrong model will generate inaccurate understanding of safe risk levels, thereby leading to unacceptable levels of toxic substances in the environment or unreasonably restrictive legislation or regulation. (Heath & Nathan, 1990, p.17)

By inference, then, risk communication is about creating **accurate** understanding of safe risk levels in a way that is guided by public interest considerations – and doing this is a public relations role. Going further, risk communication can promote the economic and health benefits of toxic materials if an accurate understanding of safe risk levels is established on a public interest foundation.

4. **PR may seek compliance with risk assessments – or confront resistance to them**

Heath and Nathan (1990, p.17) make the valuable point that power is a key factor in risk communication: “a rhetorical struggle by parties to decide what levels of risk and regulative or legislative control are appropriate.” They further note that to accommodate power, risk communication needs to deal with considerations of influence, uncertainty, evaluation (judging what
is equitable, fair, safe and aesthetic) and involvement (expressing self-interest or altruism). Here practitioners might find themselves in an equivocal position. Heath and Nathan (1990) also quote Ellen Silbergeld of the Environmental Defense Fund as saying that publics need equal access to resources in order to understand the issues and make risk assessments. PR people often are advocates for organizations whose power makes them the dominant participant in policy debates, including rhetorical contests surrounding risk assessments. In these cases, practitioners’ brief may be to wield influence to obtain compliance from publics that will allow their clients or employers to proceed on the basis of the client’s risk assessment rather than, perhaps, that of the lay public (Heath & Nathan, 1990).

Heath and Nathan (1990) recognize that audiences may adopt a strategy of resistance, refusing to accept risk assessors’ evaluations and seeking to influence companies and governmental agencies and officials. In such cases, PR clients and employers may seek to use public relations techniques to develop responses to public pressure, including trying to shut it down, or to negotiate or open dialogue with active publics. However, as Palenchar & Heath (2002, p.132) point out, “risk communication processes and statements are more likely to be effective to the extent that they empower citizens of a community of risk.” Such citizens are likely demand that their voices be heard as authorities and companies develop risk prevention and mitigation strategies.

5. PR can recruit and support credible spokespeople on risk topics

Heath and Nathan (1990, p.19) emphasize that “risk communicators must recognize how uncertain key audiences are on risk matters;” noting that audiences seek information to reduce uncertainty and “may seek to reduce uncertainty by controlling sources of risk information – especially those they do not trust.” The authors discuss the question of trust as being closely related to the degree of control audiences see themselves having over sources of [risk] information and assessment. Public relations texts identify source credibility as a key factor in public relations campaigns (Cutlip et al., 2006; Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005). Public relations theory also addresses publics’ information-seeking behavior, relating it to levels of involvement, problem recognition and constraint recognition (Aldoory & Van Dyke, 2004). On this basis, public relations practitioners should be well placed to identify and support credible spokespeople in risk communication activities, with the aim of reducing publics’ uncertainty and addressing publics’ information-seeking with an awareness of its motivational impetus.

Gay & Heath (1995, p.211) note that, “Public relations practitioners often cannot serve as primary sources of information but must assist others in this endeavor.” The authors argue that PR people must both understand technical issue and the roles technical experts play in relaying risk messages and interpretations to community members. “The challenge is to work with these experts to assist their efforts to work constructively in community dialogue. Savvy practitioners need to help technical experts to serve as community opinion leaders to help lay persons comprehend and weigh the information they obtain from myriad sources” (Gay & Heath, 1995, p.212). Gay & Heath see these experts as able to participate in community networks which form part of risk communication infrastructures. PR people, they say, “need to know who the members of a community turn to and think to be more trustworthy in matters of risk assessment” and integrate these trusted expert sources into the communication process. According to Heath & Gay (1997, p.369), experts form invisible colleges (original emphasis) of technical expertise available to communities. They suggest that “Public relations practitioners and community outreach professionals may foster the invisible college by conducting forums.” In a sense, PR’s role can include helping to make invisible colleges visible to community leaders and members who can then directly access the expertise available.
6. **PR can research the values on which audiences base their risk assessments**

Even where publics demand a share of voice in risk-related debate, it remains tempting for risk communicators simply to seek endorsement of expert risk assessments. The issues, however, are more complex. In publics’ minds, logic and fact may take second place to more visceral considerations. Ahmad (2003, p.3) notes that “risk assessments necessarily involve value assumptions” and Heath and Nathan (1990, p.19) advise risk communicators to “realize that risk evaluation requires that values be imposed on risk estimations.” They note that while the traditional risk communication model equates understanding and agreement, these are not the same. As experienced practitioners know, mere awareness will carry a campaign only so far: understanding, agreement and desired action are distinct (though, they hope, related) variables. Audiences’ existing assumptions need to be taken into account in campaign planning, and the process of influencing people to change their beliefs and behaviors is complex: according to Lazarsfeld’s two-step flow of communication theory, individuals seldom make decisions based solely on their own beliefs (cited in Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005).

Practitioners engaged in risk communication have an extensive persuasion literature from which they can draw. Public relations people are also enjoined to build campaigns on a foundation of research (Guth & Marsh, 2005). Such research can include publics’ attitudes as well as information about other attributes, such as existing levels of knowledge about a topic and media consumption patterns. Practitioners should readily be able to adapt insights from the persuasion, public relations research and campaigns literatures to the task of communicating about risk. Heath & Abel (1996 b, p.170) advocate a “proactive model” of risk communication which “assumes the need to address risk issue from key publics’ point of view” (emphasis added), an approach which likewise assumes research to identify those viewpoints. Health & Palenchar (2000, p.146) discuss the need to discover community “zones of meaning” – shared assessments – which can then be explored further using survey instruments.

Fischoff (2005) also argued for message research. In testimony before the U.S. House Science Committee examining Gaps in the National Flu Preparedness Plan, he commented:

Even the most experienced communicators cannot accurately predict how their messages will be interpreted, especially with novel topics (like pandemic flu) and unfamiliar audiences. As a result, messages must be systematically evaluated, before they are disseminated – just the way that drugs must be. (Fischoff, 2005, p.1)

Reinforcing the research theme, Fischoff (2005, p.3) noted a call by Senator Frist for a communication structure “to update the public every 6-8 hours about symptoms, cases, deaths and outbreak locations.” Fischoff commented,

We have the science base for delivering such communications. However, it must be deployed now, in order to be ready for a pandemic, and to convince the public we are on top of the problem. Without that research we will lose the battle for public trust well before a pandemic. (Fischoff, 2005, pp. 3-4)

7. **PR can highlight benefits rather than risks in media reportage**

Heath and Nathan (1990, p.20) assert that “Even though media spokespersons claim that they provide impartial and balanced reporting, the media are biased in reporting of risk,” citing a media content analysis by Singer and Emdreny which found a dearth of information about the benefits of complex technologies and a failure to mention the ratio of benefits to costs. “The implied ratio, based on the relative space given to harms versus benefits, suggests that risks outweigh benefits” (Heath & Nathan, 1987, p.20). Two considerations are relevant here. Media relations is an element of public relations practice (Cutlip et al., 2006). PR people may be briefed to act as advocates for the benefits of complex technologies, translating these into terms readily understood by lay publics as they
consume media – or practitioners may lead coalitions of parties interested in advancing the use of controversial technologies, as in New Zealand over the genetic engineering issue (Comrie, cited in Galloway & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005).

Part of PR’s risk communication role, then, may be to seek to rebalance media coverage by highlighting benefits rather than risks. This may be useful even if media coverage is not notably biased. In a five-country project examining risk perception and the media Sjöberg (1999, p.7) found no support for a simplistic, negative view of media coverage on risk. He reported that, “Media gave a fairly balanced picture of risks and accidents. It was also not true that media gave priority to risks of the type small probability/large consequence.” Sjöberg (1999, pp.7-8) suggests that “there are several alternatives [to mass media] worthy of consideration” when it comes to accounting for people’s risk perceptions, including movies, television dramas, rumor and personal contacts, as well as the connotations of risk terms such as “nuclear waste.” While all of these (and movies and tele-dramas are arguably forms of mass media) may contribute to forming risk perceptions, PR people may usefully seek to influence the weighting of their treatment of risk issues. The aim would be the ideal of balance or (as, realistically, is often clients and employers’ expectation) favourable framing.

8. **PR can help establish the legitimacy of risk management approaches**

Heath & Nathan (1990, p.20) highlight the public’s tendency, when protecting its well-being, to focus more on what it considers to be right than on what is legal. “They believe that laws can be changed to correspond to what is right. The rightness of decisions depends on whatever version of their self-interests key audiences believe needs to be advanced (seeking rewards and avoiding losses).” Here Heath and Nathan identify a central concept in issue management – that of legitimacy. As they point out, claiming an action is legal when publics do not see it as legitimate or right is fruitless. Coombs (1992) theorizes that members of publics will not support the position of an organization unless they believe that the issue is a legitimate one and that the issue manager and the organization’s policy proposal are legitimate. PR’s role in risk communication may be not only to establish that organizations are managing risks within the established legal framework, but also to help ensure they are doing so in a way publics see as legitimate.

9. **PR can build rapport with interested parties on a two-way symmetrical basis**

According to Heath & Nathan (1990, p.21), “the two-way symmetrical [communication] model advocated by Grunig & Hunt (1984) challenges risk communicators to build rapport with interested parties…” Grunig and Hunt articulated a four-part model of public relations practice which included concepts of two-way asymmetrical communication, “whereby organizations listen to their stakeholders but use the information thus obtained to tailor their communication to allay the concerns of stakeholders, but do not make a corresponding alteration to their behavior” and symmetrical communication, which is “characterized by a willingness of an organization to listen and respond to the concerns and interests of its key stakeholders” (Roper, 2005, p. 69), implying a balance of the organization’s and the public’s interests (Grunig, 2001, p.12).

Grunig & Hunt’s ideas have been much explored and critiqued since they first outlined them, and Grunig later (2001, p.12) accepted the idea of a “mixed motive model” in which “organizations try to satisfy their own interests while simultaneously trying to help publics satisfy their interests.” Roper (2005) questions whether symmetrical public relations represents excellent practice or merely a cloak for sustaining hegemony. Notwithstanding such contrary views, Heath and Nathan’s (1990) advocacy of symmetrical relationship-building with parties interested in risks aligns with the consensus in contemporary risk communication literature.

This consensus centers on the idea of “risk democracy” (Heath et al., 2002) that produces “co-created risk estimates” (Palenchar & Heath, 2002, p.133), as opposed to the traditional model of
expert sources disseminating their technical probabilistic views to lay publics. As Gay & Heath (1995) note:

After decades of experience, researchers and public relations practitioners are realizing that complex, controversial technical issue cannot be solved by mass-mediated hypodermic communication; risk issue require community decision-making based on dialogue, which the National Risk Council (1989) calls risk democracy. (Gay & Heath, 1995, p.212).

PR practitioners can have a role in structuring, facilitating and reporting on such dialogue, using its outcomes in communication programs designed to help communities develop aware, resilient responses to risk. Such a community focus would be in line with Hallahan’s (2004, p.28) argument that public relations performs two key functions: “providing counsel about community interests and facilitating communication.” It would, however, demand awareness of the fact that often, as Grabill and Simmons (1998, p.423) point out, disputes and communication “problems” in a risk situation “are a public contestation over the meaning of risk – the ‘truth’ about risk is actually a product of such disputes.” Dialog may be desirable, but it can also be difficult.

**Further research**

The limitations of this study include the fact that, due to the paucity of other academic analysis, it necessarily concentrates on the work of only one scholar and his associates. As it is not a comprehensive study either of risk communication or of related public relations commentary, it is possible that important perspectives have been neglected. However, what this paper does highlight is the fact that an important field some commentators see as a sub discipline of public relations has yet to be treated seriously as such – and that public relations, rich in latent ability to contribute vitally to communicating about risk, may be able to do more to realize that potential.

As a starting point for further research, this paper infers some PR risk communication roles and functions from Robert Heath’s writings. The literature to date assumes that public relations has a role in risk communication without delineating it in any detail. The attempt to sketch an outline of that role needs to be built upon by further research. Such study would examine specific cases of PR involvement in risk communication. The objective would be to discern whether, in practice, the nature and scope of the public relations responsibility aligns with the potential contributions Heath and his associates highlight in their writings. A related research strand could be to study perceptions of risk managers with overall responsibility for managing risk, including communications. What is their view of PR’s role? How do they deploy communication resources, with what results? Has experience painted a different picture from that held initially about how PR can help manage risk?

As our “risk society” confronts threats that seem to be defined in ever-more stark terms – such as expert assessments of the probability rather than the possibility of an influenza pandemic – questions of this nature take on acute relevance. They deserve sustained attention, both in the academy and in the world of practice, in terms that recognize both the particular requirements of risk communication and its relationship to issue management, crisis and recovery communication – a relationship that, itself, warrants deeper exploration.

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**Endnote**

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Other Robert Heath writings on risk, not referenced in this paper, include the following:

