More than ever before, in the current day, organizations act in a social environment characterized by a high public awareness of uncertainty, threats and dangers. Political organizations, public authorities and corporations have to make and communicate strategic decisions fraught with risk: deliberately or not, they are involved in risk communication. However, what level of risk is perceived as tolerable is inherently subjective and constantly renegotiated in public. Strategic risk communication is confronted with various and contradicting perceptions of risk by actors and groups inside and outside an organization. The purpose of this chapter is to bring theories of risk communication research to the field of strategic communication. Strategy is an under-researched topic in risk communication research (Chess & Johnson, 2010) and, likewise, scholarship on communication management is barely concerned with matters of risk communication.

A baseline in sociological risk research is the recognition of risk as socially constructed. Another common albeit disputed assumption in risk research is the distinction between public risk assessments and expert ones. Furthermore, the influential social amplification of risk (SARF) concept takes into account the distortions by socially “amplified” risk perceptions in public discourse. Thus risk communication is confronted with various and often conflicting risk perceptions. Strategy within the framework of risk communication must respond to divergent risk perceptions and therefore it will be conceptualized as an emergent sense-making and framing activity under the conditions of perceived uncertainties and dangers. By developing this conceptual framework for examining strategy in risk communication, this chapter aims to enhance the research on risk communication. Next to this, it offers a new perspective on strategic communication by applying risk communication theories to the field of organizational communication.

Risk and Risk Communication

Defining Risk

Risk relates to occurrences in the future associated with damage and loss, sometimes also with opportunities (Ale, 2009). While societies have always been exposed to risk and dangers, modern societies seem especially prone to risks (Beck, 1992). According to Beck (1992) present societies create modern risks such as ecological risks, technological and radiological hazards, and risks related to globalization. The threats and dangers related with these risks are not easily detectible and are difficult to quantify. Furthermore, dealing with these risks is always confrontational, as the risks and benefits are not equally distributed in societies.
The dominant paradigm in defining risk, however, stems from the exact sciences. Specialists who are professionally engaged in the study of risk work mainly in the health sector, in the domains of technology and engineering, and in insurance companies. The relevant categories within which risk experts think are statistic probabilities, projections and limit values. A baseline definition poses risks as “probabilistic occurrences that can have positive or negative outcomes of various magnitudes” (Proutheau & Heath, 2010, p. 40). Risk assessment consists of the identification of potential adverse events, of modeling and quantifying probabilities, and of consequences (Ale, 2009). Within that context, risk is defined as the likelihood of a specific event occurring multiplied by the magnitude of consequences associated with that event. Based on that definition, risk assessment aims on minimizing over- or underestimations of vulnerability to risk and hazards (for an overview, see Renn, 1998a).

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Peter Sandman (1987), a communication professional, challenged this notion from a risk communication perspective. He pointed to the gap between risk as framed by the rationality of hard sciences and the public way of perceiving risks. According to Sandman, there is a (low) correlation between a risk’s hazard (how much harm it is likely to do) and its outrage (how upsetting it is likely to be to many people). His formula $\text{risk} = \text{hazard} + \text{outrage}$ added the public perception of risks to the definition of risk.

Underlying this definition is the assumption of a gap between public perception and experts’ perception of risk. It was this assumed gap that prompted social scientists to re-define risk. Risks were no longer considered solely as probabilities that could be measured and quantified. Also, the distinction between the “objective” risk assessment by experts and the “subjective” risk perception by the non-professional public was questioned (Fischhoff, Watson & Hope, 1984). Social and cultural sciences consider the perception of risk as principally contingent. Whether a condition is regarded as hazardous is based not on “hard” facts and first-hand experience but on second-hand information and the documentations of experts (Beck, 1992). One important contribution of social and cultural sciences was to demonstrate the importance of social values in risk perception and risk acceptance (R. E. Kasperson et al., 1988; Rayner, 1992; Sjöberg, 2000). Such assumptions are part of what Ben-Ari and Or-Chen (2009) called the contextualist perspective in risk research. Also, socio-cultural approaches stress the fact that risks are inseparably linked to conflicts over the distribution of power in society (Beck, 1992; Tansey & Rayner, 2010).

Thus, with risk definitions in the social sciences, context is seen as decisive in determining which occurrences constitute a risk and which do not. However, depending on their underlying theoretical framework, scholars disagree on how to judge positivist risk assessments. Some authors, especially those who argue from a behaviorist point of view, have accepted that there is some “truth” in probabilistic risk assessment. Yet they have claimed that there is another, additional “truth” grounded in the way human beings process information (J. X. Kasperson, R. E. Kasperson, Pidgeon & Slovic, 2003). Information processing is naturally biased and managerial decision making under the conditions of risk is especially likely to be guided not only by some degree of overestimation but also by risk avoidance (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). From this perspective, calculating risk is one of the many ways of dealing with the problems of decision making in the face of uncertainty. Others argue from a more radical constructionist view and claim that positivist risk assessments are themselves constructions. Slovic (1999) summarized the constructionist view in the simple statement: “[T]here is no such thing as ‘real risk’ or ‘objective risk’” (p. 690). Beck (1992) argued, moreover, that experts who deal professionally with risks are not at all independent or objective. Instead, they are inherently value-driven, so their risk perception is as subjective as is the public risk perception.
Apart from the ontological dimension that all that we perceive can be regarded as socially constructed since there is no straightforward correspondence between our experiences and the world outside our heads, there is also a political dimension inherent in the social-constructionist perspective. Scholars have stressed the fact that experts are part of a societal conflict on framing a problem as risk: Risk assessment has become a “battlefield” (Slovic, 1999; see also Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Fischhoff et al., 1984; Stern, 1991). Altering the fundamental question of risk–benefit analysis—"How safe is safe enough?" (Fischhoff, Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1978)—Rayner and Cantor (1987) proposed to ask, “How fair is safe enough?” (p. 3). Competing and conflicting interests negotiate risks and their consequences; the question as to which definition of risk becomes the generally accepted one becomes a question of power. As Stern aptly stated: “Risk communication is not information transfer, but a type of political discourse.” (Stern, 1991, p. 100).

Drawing on those insights, risk communication research widened its perspective. Originally, risk communication ought to ventilate and translate expert knowledge and educate the public as to how to behave in the face of risks. The basic idea in risk communication research in the 1980s and 1990s was that understanding public risk perception would promote the design of effective risk communication models (Gurabardhi, Gutteling & Kuttschreuter, 2004). The focus of empirical risk communication research was on measuring the effectiveness of risk messages. In fact, until the present day, communication effects research has formed a large part of risk communication research. Moreover, with the paradigmatic turn in media effects research from its previous concentration on a more or less passive audience, risk communication research became more refined in terms of specifying attitudes, information-seeking behavior and knowledge of special target groups as important variables for explaining the success or failure of risk communication campaigns (McGuire, 2001). This approach towards risk communication is commonly defined as instrumental or technical (Hayenhjelm, 2006; Renn, 1998b).

With the proliferation of constructionist, contextual, and situational perspectives, scholars and professionals acknowledged that risk communication must accomplish more than merely conveying experts’ knowledge to the public. Risk communication now includes participatory practices like public hearings, stakeholder decision groups and referenda (Heath, Palenchar & O’Hair, 2010; McComas, Arvai & Besley, 2010; Renn, 1998a, 1998b). This new approach towards risk communication is categorized as democratic or dialogic (Hayenhjelm, 2006; Renn, 2003). Interaction is now part of the US National Research Council’s definition of risk communication as “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 about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management” (cited in Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2010, p. 184). Participation and deliberation have become buzzwords in parts of risk communication research. But although there is a general agreement that the public has to be involved in order to be reached by risk communication efforts, there is considerable disagreement on the degree to which the public should also be involved in risk decision making. The expectancy is that people condone a decision if they have been involved in the decision-making process (Heath, Palenchar & O’Hair, 2010). However, the success of participatory risk communication is difficult to evaluate empirically (Renn, 2003; McComas, Arvai & Besley, 2010). Also, participatory risk communication may result in a relativization of power relationships. After all, as Coombs and Holladay (2010) state dryly in their textbook on public relations: “effective risk communication requires corporations to share their power with constituents” (p. 230). The option for more participation in the risk decision-making process depends on the political and social values of its proponents (R. E. Kasperson, 1986). When one sees experts’ and public perceptions of risk as principally equal, or when one even claims that the public has a better intuition for what is potentially harmful, then the participation of the public in the risk decision-making process is vital. On the other hand, when one acknowledges that there is a gap between the experts’ and the public risk assessment, but regards the experts’ view as better informed, then the focus is on involving the public in the risk
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communication process in order to gain understanding and acceptance. Hayenhjelm (2006) provides a helpful suggestion for seeing this problem in a differentiated way. She distinguishes between different roles in the risk communication context. Participants in the communicative role possess the power to define the agenda and take the initiative for the communication. The informational and epistemological role is characterized by influence in terms of expertise and knowledge about hazardous activities and its consequences. The risk role is associated with influence over precautionary and mitigating decisions. Based on that distinction, Hayenhjelm (2006) identifies three dimensions of asymmetry: communicative, informational and risk role asymmetry. In principle, all participants in a risk communication process can take on all three different roles, but usually the roles and the distribution of influence are clustered around specific parties. For example, the party who initiates the communicative process—for example, the regulating governmental agency—is most likely also the one with the most knowledge and influence over a situation. In light of that fine-grained picture of the risk communication setting, Hayenhjelm (2006) concludes that when the aim is to provide impartial information about a scope of potential dangers, “then asymmetry as such need not be a problem” (p. 13). In the decision-making process, however, asymmetries must be handled with care.

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework

A deficiency in much risk communication research is that the complexity of communication is not adequately reflected. Risk communication involves various groups of players—not only risk managers, experts and the public. One notable exception is the concept of social amplification of risk (J. X. Kasperson et al., 2003; R. E. Kasperson, 1992; R. E. Kasperson, et al., 1988). This concept regards risk communication as a process that is amplified by several social processes, which together lead to a spread of impact: the much-cited “ripple effect” of risk events. One core argument of the concept is that risks that experts estimate to be relatively low will be amplified by societal and social political developments whereas other, potentially more harmful hazards will receive less public attention, leading to risk attenuation. The social amplification of risk framework acknowledges that not only professional risk communication agencies but also other agents play an important role in the risk communication process: individuals, groups, news media, politicians, public agencies and interest groups can and do function as amplification stations. Risk signals in the mass media often lead to dramatic shifts in the risk discourse, its symbols and pictures.

The mechanistic metaphor of amplification may provoke the association of linear information processing. But as the authors stress there is no simple causal relationship between, for example, amplification by mass media and the public perception of risks; a greater amount of media coverage does not necessarily lead to the amplification of risk (J. X. Kasperson et al., 2003). Nevertheless, critics argue that the role of the news media is simplified (Murdock, 2010; Murdock, Petts & Horlick-Jones, 2003; Petts, Horlick-Jones & Murdock, 2001). When it comes to risk and crisis communication, possible effects of news media are highly dependent on how the people make use of them and of other means of communication (Neuwirth, 2010). Also with regard to the content of media coverage, there is no clear media effect. While, for example, intense media coverage could result in amplification, messages of self-efficacy may attenuate this effect (McComas, 2006; Wahlberg & Sjoberg, 2000). Furthermore, amplification is dependent on other factors, such as trust. Trust in communication refers to the expectancy that the information provided is true. Therefore, trust and credibility are seen as important variables in risk communication research (Renn & Levine, 1991; Siegrist & Cvetkovich, 2000; Siegrist, Cvetkovich & Roth, 2000).

The analytical value of the social amplification of risk framework lies in the integration of “patterns of interacting amplification mechanisms, the nature of risks and risk events, and social contextual effects” (J. X. Kasperson et al., 2003, p. 40). Yet, the framework should be augmented in order to better depict the non-linear interaction processes between the actors and the feedback processes
that constantly shape risk perception. Also, whereas the original model focuses on the impact of risk in economic terms, an enhanced model that takes into account various types of organizations—such as public authorities or non-profit organizations—must take into account intangible impacts like the loss of credibility.

The Peculiarities of Risk Communication

When it comes to applying the concept of strategy to risk communication, one may ask: What distinguishes risk communication from other forms of strategic communication? Both risk communication and public relations are, after all, forms of strategic communication that, according to Palenchar and Heath (2007), may add value to society. But risk communication has two peculiarities: first, more than other forms of communication, risk communication deals with uncertainty (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2010). As techniques of risk assessment become more sophisticated, so too grow the challenges for risk communicators to inform others about variability and uncertainty (Thompson, 2002). Secondly, risk communication is an exceptionally conflict-ridden field of communication (Plough & Sheldon, 1987; Slovic, 1999; Stern, 1991). Its practitioners must deal with conflicting perceptions of risks, crises and disasters. The public is highly sensitive to risks nowadays, and many groups and individuals want to be included in making policy choices (R. E. Kasperson, 1986; Palenchar, 2010b). These communicative challenges stress the importance of a proper understanding of strategy in risk communication. However, up to now only a few authors have explicitly addressed the role of strategy in risk communication. Smillie and Blissett (2010) propose a model for risk communication strategy that takes into account the varying risk appraisals of the stakeholders. Leiss (2003) explicitly addresses the controversial nature of risk issues in his account on the relevance of public policy in risk communication. From a managerial point of view he stresses the importance of managerial competence as decisive for trusting public risk managers. But the major part of risk communication research has attended, as Chess and Johnson (2010) notice, “to public perception to a greater extent than organizational behavior—even though organizations vitally shape the communication process and messages” (Chess & Johnson, 2010, p. 323). That explains why the formation of risk communication strategies—as organizational behavior—is barely explored in detail. In the next part of this chapter, research on strategy in communications will be outlined. This forms the basis for the last part in which the role of strategy in risk communication will be discussed.

Strategy, Strategic Communication and the Strategic Role of Communication

Strategy research, particularly in management, originated several prescriptive concepts for strategic decision making. As the concept of strategy originally stems from the military, strategy relates to situations in which opponent parties compete with each other (King, 2010). The aim of applying a strategy is to have an advantage over the opponent. In prescriptive strategy literature, strategy is regarded as the result of a planning process that consists of a sequence of decisions: on the evaluation of the current situation, on formulating goals, on specifying suitable ways of implementation and, eventually, on evaluating the effectiveness of the decisions.

Also, in strategic communications literature, the prescriptive perspective on strategy prevails. In many textbooks on public relations and strategic communication, strategic communication is depicted as a chronological sequence of several steps. Recently, however, scholars in communication management have reconsidered the presumptions of the prescriptive approach and developed new perspectives on strategy in communications, such as the strategy-as-practice-approach, emergent, interpretive or constructionist views (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008; Frandsen, 2010; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2010; King, 2010;
Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; Ströh, 2007). In contrast to the prescriptive view those approaches can be subsumed as descriptive perspective, as the common focus is on the question of how and why strategies are developed (Frandsen, 2010; King, 2010; Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012). An important issue in descriptive strategy research is the notion of “bounded rationality” (March & Simon, 1993; March & Olsen, 1975). The assumed rationality of strategic decision making is limited by a lack of time, by insufficient information, and by other factors of the decision-making environment. Going against the prevailing rational and technical approaches in his day, Lindblom (1959)—in an effort to get a better description of the daily decision-making processes in administrations—coined the phrase “the science of muddling through.” Mintzberg (1978) specified strategy formulation by drawing a distinction between intended and realized strategies, unrealized strategies, and strategies that were unintended but that have been realized. The latter he specified as emergent strategies.

Recently, communication scholars who stress the interactive nature of communication and the resulting unpredictability have taken on the idea of emergent strategies. King (2010) illustrated by an in-depth analysis how an organizational strategy emerges. Murphy (2007) drew on complexity theory, and stated that while the interactions of agents are dynamic, patterns of communication emerge that have an impact on the communicating system. The strategy-as-practice framework (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006; Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2003, 2006) examines on a micro-level the process of how strategy is enacted in daily practices. As in complexity theory, the strategy-as-practice-framework also links strategy to organizing and thus attributes a structuring function to strategy (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006).

Scholars of public relations and communication management have addressed the question of how communication strategies contribute to an organization’s strategy (Christensen et al., 2008; Cornelissen, 2008; Zerfass, 2008). Public relations scholars have long demanded the involvement of public relations in corporate strategic decision making. In doing so, these scholars have also engaged with the concept of power. The question of power is addressed with particular regard to internal conflicts concerning the degree of influence public relations mangers should have in shaping an organization’s overall strategy (Berger, 2005; L. A. Grunig, 1990; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002). A participative organizational culture and flat hierarchies should enhance the scope of action for public relations and corporate communication. Scholars argue that public relations and communication management should participate in overall strategic decision making because organizations have to act in complex environments. Segments of an organization have to develop their own rationalities of action in order to respond to the requirements of their particular environment. Steyn (2004; 2007) argues that as functional strategies, communication strategies should direct overall organizational strategy. The importance of communication management at the level of the overall organization lies in its capacity to legitimize organizational decisions by interpreting and evaluating the organization’s environment so as to provide information on stakeholder expectations (Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012; Steyn, 2007). This “outside-in approach” (Steyn, 2007) defines the special importance of public relations to an organization. Organizations make use of various functions to this end, such as environmental scanning or issues management (Daft & Weick, 1984; Heath, 1997, 2002). Scanning procedures can serve to collect information (Choo, 2002). Through interpretation and transmission of environmental information inwards, communication strategies contribute to changing an organization’s self-perception and self-descriptions.

Communication strategies have long been regarded as supportive strategies for an organization’s overall strategy. Recently, however, as Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008) proposed, communication has been attributed a far more strategic role for the organization. These authors distinguished between first- and second-order-strategies: the former aims to analyze an organization’s environment and to react to contingencies from within; the latter aspire to actively influence
and shape the organization’s environment. “Organizations apply second-order strategies when they seek to define and shape the conditions for their strategies” (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 27). Communication contributes to an organization’s strategic ability by actively enacting the organizational environment. The strategic function of communication management is thus considered to contribute to the creation of favorable preconditions for organizational strategy making.

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The aim of this section of the chapter is to bring together insights from research on strategy with risk communication research. In doing so, the concept of strategy in risk communication will be discussed along two dimensions: a process-oriented dimension, and a structural one. The process-oriented dimension refers to risk communication activities enacted by individuals, and to the question of how risk communication strategies are formulated and enacted. The structural dimension, on the other hand, covers the organizational factors that constrain and shape the process of strategic risk communication. It highlights the strategic environment for risk communication.

**The Process of Developing Risk Communication Strategies**

Risk communication is expected to serve different purposes. As pointed out earlier within this chapter, institutional risk communication has the task to inform, to educate the public and to initiate risk dialogues. Developing strategies for those ends means to apply various instruments and to react constantly in the ever-changing organizational environment. In order to meet growing public expectations of transparency and participation, risk communicators are expected first of all to provide as much information as possible on a certain risk. Providing information seems to be a basic and rather uncomplicated communication strategy, compared to two-way communication strategies (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). But in risk communication, even informing is a challenging task. That is because what is defined as a risk is ambiguous and open to various and conflicting interpretations (Fischhoff, et al., 1984). Also, risk information is usually provisional and must be updated constantly (Slovic, 1987). The preliminarity and ambiguity inherent in risk messages allows competing actors to frame the risk according to their own interests and rationale. This holds true not only for the public communication of risks, but also to communicating risks within an organization. Risk communicators do not only inform the public and relevant stakeholders about potential threats and hazards, they also inform decision makers within the organization. And not only is it the public arena of risk communication that is highly politicized. When one applies the idea of politics and politicking to organizations (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Pfeffer, 1992), the internal risk perception and the assessment of risks become a disputed issue as well. Internal stakeholders, like political decision makers or members of the top management, hold their own definitions of risk based on their specific cognitive frames. Kaplan (2008) portrays managerial framing in strategy making as highly contested and intertwined with the political pursuit of interests. It is likely that varying definitions of risk will lead to internal risk framing contests as well. Wittingly or unwittingly, those who implement risk communication are involved in internal processes of sense-making and framing risk issues.

The strategic value of risk communication is that as risk communicators are situated in boundary-spanning positions of an organization, they are not only confronted with internal risk assessments but also with public perceptions on risk issues. By scanning and monitoring the organizational environment, risk communicators may bring additional definitions of risk to the other organizational members. Informing on risks means first of all to make sense of the various and potentially conflicting perceptions of risk within the organization and in public.

The educational function of risk communication comprises the task of raising awareness for risk issues. This is an especially difficult task because risks are by definition related to future events. In
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contrast to crisis situations, which can be seen as manifested risks (Heath, 2006) when public attention is high, educational risk communication is concerned with non-obtrusive issues for which it is difficult to get public attention (Covello, 2010; Neuwirth, 2010). As there is no direct demand for information that has no current relevance for most people, one could draw the conclusion that there is also no demand for risk communication management. After all, why should there be risk communication management at a time when there is no public problem? Organizations also could perform internal risk assessment and only communicate when there are substantial threats (but when is a threat “substantial”?). The strategic task of risk communication in those (commonly occurring) phases of low risk awareness is first of all to conceive communication in itself as strategic. Its function is to serve as an early-warning system by scanning the organizational environment and detecting potential threats. Also, as risks can easily turn into crises (Palenchar, 2010a; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow & Seeger, 2008), scanning the environment serves as part of a pre-crisis communication strategy.

As risk communication management has a legitimizing function, initiating and maintaining a dialogue with potentially affected groups is another strategic goal of risk communication (Hayenhjelm, 2006; Palenchar & Heath, 2007; Renn, 1992, 1998a). Developing a participatory communication strategy is the most demanding task in risk communication. Processes of organizational decision-making become transparent and have to be explained. As mentioned above, engaging the public to participate in risk decision-making may also result in a loss of decision-making power of an organization. In the long run, taking part in collaborative decision making may improve the strategic ability of an organization. But in the short term, collaborative decision making is often seen as impracticable. The reservations about deliberative and participatory risk assessment are strengthened by the mixed results of evaluations. As Renn (2003) illustrated, the possibilities of deliberative and participatory risk assessment processes and risk decision making are limited. Discursive procedures seem to dissolve fundamentalist views but it is unlikely that conflicting parties will give up their previously held positions. Public authorities, corporations and activist groups will maintain polarized views on risk definition.

What follows on from that in terms of considering the role of strategy in risk communication? The underlying concept of strategy in risk communication management, be it informative, educational or dialogic, has to be that of an adaptive and emergent strategy. Developing strategies in risk communication involves an ongoing process of sense-making of ambiguous information and the detection and interpretation of weak risk signals. Furthermore, it comprises processes of framing and re-framing risk issues in highly confrontational settings. As risk communication can turn into crisis communication quite easily, communication strategies must be malleable at short notice.

Organizational Factors Influencing Risk Communication

The process of developing risk communication strategies is shaped and constrained by external factors, that is, the structural dimension of risk communication. The social amplification of risk framework takes into account the importance of external factors like the organizational environment and the societal risk culture for the process and outcome of risk communication.

Institutional theorists in particular stress the impact of external factors on organizational practices (Scott, 2008; Zucker, 1987). The organizational environment is composed of norms, values, and beliefs, which make up the organizational field in which an organization operates. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) speak of an organizational field as a set of organizations that develop similar features. In order to understand how risk management strategies are developed by risk communicators within organizations, one has to consider the specific organizational fields of the organizations that are involved in the risk communication process. For example, a governmental agency that is responsible for risk assessment has to adapt to certain normative, legal and political requirements. The agency
will establish rules and activate resources that are equipped to meet the legal and political expect-
tancies. A social movement organization concerned with nuclear risk issues, on the other hand,
faces different institutional requirements and will employ another risk communication strategy; most
likely a more partisan and mobilizing one.

Next to the organizational field, the prevailing risk culture of a society is another institutional fac-
tor that shapes risk communication management. A risk culture is characterized by the way societies
deal with (un)certainty. Hofstede (1991) categorized cultures along several dimensions. One of them
is what he called “uncertainty avoidance”: the way a society deals with ambiguity and uncertainty.
The more rules there are regarding safety and security, the higher is a culture’s uncertainty avoidance
level—and vice versa. Risk culture manifests itself in rules and laws; it is reflected in the way the
news media depict risks and dangers and in the way specific risks are attributed to individual or cor-
porate actors, or to abstract entities or higher forces. The relevance of different manifestations of risk
culture is especially important in light of the transboundary character of risks and crises (Boin, 2009).

Notwithstanding the impact of the organizational field and the societal risk culture, pro-active
risk communication strategies are possible. Risk communication is a rather dynamic and interactive
process, and although their respective organizational environments shape their organizational foun-
dations, organizations also play an active role in shaping and creating those environments (Daft &
Weick, 1984; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Risk communication management interprets signals as risk
issues and defines the organizational position towards matters of risk and uncertainty. Strategic risk
communication includes first- and second-order strategies in the sense of Christensen et al. (2008).
By detecting and defining risks, risk communication contributes to the strategic capability of an
organization.

Much risk communication research treats organizations as “black boxes”. In view of the above it
becomes clear that organizations are not unified entities or solely “amplification stations”. Strategizing
risk communication rather includes sense-making and framing divergent interpretations of risks
within an organization and in public. By engaging in strategic risk communication management,
organizations contribute to risk amplification not only by magnifying risks in an assumingly negative
way. They also collectively manage meaning by defining and framing risks and thus contribute to
the origin of public risk discourse.

Discussion and Perspectives

The purpose of this chapter was to elaborate the concept of strategy with respect to risk communi-
cation. It was argued that risk is a highly contested social construction that depends on contextual
factors. Risk communication is a conflict-laden negotiation process. Several agents, each of them fol-
lowing specific rationales, take part in risk communication. Literature in risk communication, espe-
cially as an applied field, offers plenty of advice on how to communicate risks. One might think that
success lies in finding the right strategy, but the peculiarities of risk communication demand a critical
and reflective approach to strategy. Linear, prescriptive concepts of strategy are insufficient to grasp
the complexity of risk communication. Instead, constructionist and practice-oriented approaches to
strategic decision making are considered especially useful for exploring the role of strategy in risk
communication. In the light of those concepts, risk communication has been elaborated as a sense-
making and framing activity under the conditions of contingency and perceived uncertainty.

What are the implications of that conceptualization of risk communication? First, a clear separa-
tion between risk management and risk communication appears to be nearly impossible. Risk
management is based on risk perceptions and definitions and in turn influences risk perception. Risk
communication is of strategic importance for risk management, and it is a constitutive part of the
risk management process. In the context of risk societies (Beck, 1992) that are characterized by an
ongoing dispute on the degree of uncertainty and safety a society is willing to accept, situating risk
communication as subsidiary to risk management is insufficient. Second, there can be no generic organizational risk communication strategy (Stern, 1991). Risk confronts organizations with multiple situational requirements, conflicting goals, and irresolvable conflicts. This results in ambiguity, which may affect strategic decision making in a negative or positive way. Eisenberg (1984) pointed to the fact that ambiguity is not necessarily an appalling characteristic but forms a part of the strategy itself. He regarded strategic ambiguity as essential to organizing, as it facilitates organizational change. Arguing along the same line, Christensen and Langer (2009) suggested that organizations use inconsistencies and differences proactively to highlight their potential for change and improvement. Developing strategies in risk communication should be seen as an occasion for organizational learning.

The implications for strategy making have been referred to in a general way in this chapter. Empirical researchers on risk communication could step forward to distinguish between the strategic use of different modes of communication in dealing with different types of risk and different phases of the risk communication process.

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Juliana Raupp


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