

Sander van der Linden and Ragner E. Lofstedt (eds): *Risk and Uncertainty in a Post-Truth Society*

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Has the world finally become a 'risk society'? German sociologist Ulrich Beck, in his seminal 1992 book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, defines a risk society as '...a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself' (p. 10). The eminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens summarises a risk society as a society increasingly preoccupied with the future – as well as safety – generating the idea of risk. With the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, 2020 ushered in the concept of risk like no other time in history. As the world negotiates the new environment, overwhelmingly influenced by Covid-19, everyday situations such as going to work, attending school, even shopping for essentials take on new levels of 'risk'. Governments warn of risk. Businesses consider risk. Even the average citizen weighs risk almost daily. Risk could be considered 2020's 'Word of the Year'.

Pertinent in today's milieu, the editors of this book bring together leading experts in the field of risk assessment and management to explore the '...communication of risk and decision-making' in what they designate as a 'post-truth world' (p. 1). Van der Linden, a professor of Social Psychology at the University of Cambridge and the director of the university's Social Decision-Making Laboratory, and Lofstedt, a professor of Risk Management at King's College London and director of their Centre for Risk Management, both have pedigree when it comes to the subject of risk management. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines post-truth as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal be-

lief'. Today, known more popularly as 'fake news', it has gained greater attention over the last few years, exacerbated by the pandemic. While fake news has always been an issue, now, with digital social media's immediacy, this is more of an issue than ever before. This, together with the growing importance of the concept of risk, makes for a complex contemporary world.

Risk, decision-making, and uncertainty are words that characterise most, if not all, governmental and popular responses to the pandemic. Terms such as 'risk profile', 'risk assessment', 'risk aversion', 'threshold of risk', and 'risk communication' are becoming a part of the common lexicon. The editors have brought together people who work or have worked for the British government in roles related to risk assessment and management from different perspectives; in positions such as risk communicator and president of the Royal Statistical Society (Chapter 1), Head of Policy at the Royal Society (Chapter 2), Director-General of the UK's Statistical Authority (Chapter 3), Chief Scientific Advisor at Department of Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (Chapter 4), and Chief Executive of the Foods Standard Agency and the European Food and Safety Authority (Chapter 5). In the introduction, the editors note that it is not just their knowledge but also their 'real world experience' which is significant because it illuminates their concepts with applied situations. Although risk is viewed from different perspectives, the common thread among the essays is the facilitation of risk communications between those who create and disseminate those communications and those on the receiving end. The issues covered throughout this book are being played out regularly in the news.

The first chapter, 'Trust in Numbers', sets the focus of just this idea. Considering the UK's daily televised coronavirus update, with accompanying charts and graphs, along with news coverage (with their own numeral graphics), the informa-

tion included in this essay is very enlightening. David J. Spiegelhalter juxtaposes the concepts of claims of reproducibility crisis in science and 'fake news'. These two can come together to create an environment of mistrust in scientific expertise and the accompanying numbers. This could prove to be problematic when dealing with cooperation from the public while battling significant amounts of fake news about the virus – some coming from what are deemed 'reliable sources' such as presidents and heads of states. As the author states, '...we are in a time of populist political discourse in which appeals to our emotion triumph over reason' (p. 10).

The next chapter also directly relates to the UK's pandemic response. Using the lens of climate change, Emma Woods, Head of Policy at the Royal Society, sets out the idea that scientists and policy makers have a different relationship with evidence, causing complications when dealing with the public and public health issues. This can be highlighted by the UK easing of the lockdown where there seems to be a growing rift between the scientific advisors (official and unofficial) and those who make the policy choices (i.e. government ministers) that the public ultimately follow. Directly focusing on the issue of science policy in a post-truth world while drawing from her own experiences, the author identifies two significant issues; evidence synthesis (which includes diverse types and sources of information) and public dialogue. Pointing out that science and public policy have different '...values, constraints, and approaches to risk and uncertainty, as well as different levels of trust afforded to them by the public' (p. 28), bridging this gap can prove problematic. The author gives a 'crude characterization' of policy makers using 'multiple lenses' to make policy choices. The advising scientists are more 'myopic', wanting their research to hold up to scrutiny, thus reducing uncertainty and bias.

The next chapter, 'Trustworthiness, Quality and Value: the Regulation of Official Statistics in a Post-Truth World', continues along the same lines, with issues presented paralleling events of today. Ed Humpherson begins the essay with the same definition for post-truth stated earlier, mentioning how it was the Oxford dictionary's 2016 'word of the year'. He goes on to emphasise the growing importance of the word as well as the concept itself by giving examples of several books rushed to print on the subject. Bringing together the ideas of post-truth and statistics in an increasingly 'data-rich world' with problems of data processing and loss of confidence in our appointed experts, the chapter 'summarizes changes in response to these factors to the governance of UK statistics', which, the author says, 'involved the creation of a new Office of Statistic Regulations (OSR 2018) and a refreshed Code of Practice' (p. 45). Again, this subject can be poignantly mirrored with the UK's pandemic response, particularly with issues revolving around easing of the lockdown – such as the reopening of schools and businesses and the introduction of 'local lockdowns' in response to localised spikes in infections.

The next chapter, 'Risk and Uncertainty in the Context of Government Decision-Making', speaks most directly and comprehensively to the initial UK response and the seemingly more complicated 'easing of the lockdown'. As a past Senior Civil Servant and Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK government, Ian L. Boyd, if employed in the same position now, would most likely be working on the pandemic response. Boyd starts by saying that he 'will present a view of how risk manifests in government and how it is managed' (p. 54). He concludes that 'risk, at least in the context of government, is mostly a social construct...and is as much a matter of perception as it is of a problem set within a physical reality' (p. 70), making a distinction be-

tween 'perceived' and 'real' risk. He concludes that timing and circumstances are just as significant as the actual physical manifestations of the risk. Early in the essay, when giving an example of a previous health issue the UK government was dealing with, he mentions 'the perception of the risk had changed in the intervening time rather than the risk itself' (p. 54). This statement sums up the development of the pandemic so far.

The final chapter, 'The Handling of Uncertainty', sums up the whole book's approach to the subject of risk management and risk managers' handling of uncertainty, a constant in social policy making. Using examples from his time professionally concerned with issues of UK food safety standards, Geoffrey Podger succinctly lists four factors that would best serve risk managers in communicating with the public. First, there is a need to develop the work on scientific uncertainty in scientific assessment, meaning embracing the idea of uncertainty. Second, one ought not to underestimate the public's ability to cope with uncertainty. This factor is even more crucial when dealing with something as pervasive as a pandemic which requires full involvement of the public for successful containment. Third, further discussions of uncertainty in isolation should be avoided. And lastly, experts should 'state uncertainties more fully and plainly explain why the opinion is nevertheless valid on present knowledge' (p. 77).

Risk has now taken a prominent place in society. The unprecedented health crisis and subsequent economic fallout introduced by Covid-19 has brought on a feeling of general uncertainty around the globe. Much like there was no precise date for the formation of a class-based society, this holds true for a 'world risk society'. As quoted above, a risk is 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself'. Not only the first appearance of the

Covid-19 virus, but also climate change, the global financial crisis, the growing feeling of war in Europe, as well as the prospect for international terrorism have made the world increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), generating the atmosphere of greater risk. This situation has been made vastly more complex by the rise of a designated 'post-truth society'. This volume of essays directly 'reacts' to such a scenario. The 'common thread' is the emphasis on the two-way process between public (and private) 'experts' and those they serve, albeit from different disciplines and perspectives. The underlying purpose of these essays is analysing how to regain and keep public trust. A laudable aim in pandemic times.

The writings included in this volume have application for contemporary concerns. Unlike any other time in recent history, as the world tries to ease lockdown, the feeling of uncertainty enters almost every aspect of life. As many governments have moved in that direction, cases of the virus have spiked, prompting 'local lockdowns' and creating systemic responses 'on the fly'. And if true what many health experts are predicting, the world must brace itself for potentially more global pandemics. These essays, using past professional situations as a reference, make a direct connection to the ongoing issues cropping up on a daily basis. This gives these writings added policy relevance, making them useful even for the non-scientific layperson.

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References

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