

The Relationship between Hazard and Outrage (p. 1)

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1. Outrage is as real as hazard.

Consider the dose-response curve of dimethylmeatloaf for pancreatic cancer (a typical hazard issue) versus how often the plant manager has misled the neighborhood about dimethylmeatloaf emissions (a typical outrage issue). Both questions are empirical. In either case we may be right or wrong, calm or emotional. Neighborhood opinions about the integrity of plant management do not constitute misperceptions of the dose-response curve.

2. Outrage is as measurable as hazard -- often *more* measurable.

Measuring the effects of dimethylmeatloaf on people's attitudes (how upset they are and why) is usually a whole lot easier than measuring its effects on their health or environment.

3. Outrage is as manageable as hazard.

The most effective strategies of outrage management are unpalatable and uncomfortable ... but they *are* effective. You don't have to just batten down the hatches and wait for the storm to abate; you can cope. You can even act pre-emptively to prevent outrage before it arises.

4. Outrage is as much a part of risk as hazard.

The correlation between hazard and outrage is ridiculously low ... about 0.2. Hazard is most of what the experts mean by risk; outrage is most of what the public means by risk. They are thus two nearly independent variables, both called "risk" by different groups of people.

5. Outrage is as important to people as hazard.

When hazard is very high -- one-in-three, say -- it obviously trumps outrage; everyone focuses on the emergency, not the relationship. But for routine hazards, even fairly serious ones, the outrage trumps. A one-in-three-thousand hazard may be tolerable if outrage is very low; a one-in-three-billion hazard may be intolerable if outrage is very high.

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6. Outrage affects hazard perception more than hazard perception affects outrage.

High outrage and erroneously high perception of hazard go hand-in-hand. The question is which is mostly cause, which is mostly effect. If people are outraged because they misperceive the hazard, the solution is to explain the hazard better. But if people misperceive the hazard because they are outraged, the solution is to manage the outrage better. The second causal link is by far the stronger.

7. Outrage is as much a part of the risk management job as hazard.

When hazard is high, manage the hazard. When outrage is high, don't ignore it, and don't manage the hazard: Manage the outrage. (When both are high, obviously, manage both.) If your problem is an outrage problem to begin with, outrage management is easier, cheaper, and more effective than hazard management. If what people need is an apology and a Community Advisory Panel, in other words, don't install a dimethylmeatloaf vapor recovery system instead.

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Four Kinds of Risk Communication (Apr 2003) -- www.psandman.com/col/4kind-1.htm

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