

Risk = Hazard + Outrage: A New Answer to an Old Problem

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The Problem:

The risks that do damage according to the experts are not usually the risks that upset people. Correlations between public concern and actual harm (mortality, morbidity, ecosystem damage) hover around +.2 – accounting for a mere four percent of the variance.

Traditional Answers:

1. *The conservative's answer:* The public is stupid, irredeemably irrational on risk issues. So protect public health, but ignore public opinion.
2. *The liberal's answer:* The public is educable but ignorant. So explain the data better.
3. *The corporation's answer:* The public is manipulated by sensational mass media or radical activist groups. So fight the propaganda battle better.
4. *The activist's answer:* The public is right; the experts have been misled or bought off. So base public policy on public opinion.

A New Answer:

The experts respond to hazard; the public responds to outrage. When hazard is high and outrage is low, the experts will be concerned and the public will be apathetic. When hazard is low and outrage is high, the public will be concerned and the experts will be apathetic.

So if you wonder why the public is responding as it is to some risk issue, and what you should do about it: “It’s the outrage, stupid.”

For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Getting to Maybe: Some Communications Aspects of Siting Hazardous Waste Facilities (Spring 1986) – www.psandman.com/articles/seton.htm
- Dealing with the Public (Nov 1986) – www.psandman.com/articles/explain3.htm
- Tips on EMF Risk Communication (Summer 1993) – www.psandman.com/articles/risk.htm
- Risk Communication (1994) – www.psandman.com/articles/riskcomm.htm
- Misleading connotations of the word “outrage” (Apr 2002) – www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#thomsen

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