

Transnational Risks

The responsibility of the media and social sciences

1.1 Transnational Risks

National and international politics are increasingly dominated by risks that transcend national borders and trigger reactions that are equally widespread. The causes of such risks are miscellaneous. We're talking about natural calamities (e.g. floods), industrial accidents (e.g. Chernobyl), corporate meltdowns (e.g. dot-com crashes), macroeconomic crises (e.g. Argentina) as well as expeditions (e.g. space missions), the exploitation of natural resources, U.N. peace missions or drug launches. Do all these extremely diverse phenomena have something in common?

Risks surface whenever the consequences of events and developments cannot be calculated precisely. Risks carry dangers as well as opportunities. They tend to have negative and positive consequences that are disproportionately great. They pose the question of responsibility and necessitate action. The fall-out from transnational risks occurs in many countries and prompts reactions that frequently involve international organizations.

It seems, therefore, that transnational risks are not anyone's specific responsibility. Rather, the players involved can decide on a course of risk-specific action within the framework of varying action communities. When regular regulations and laws don't apply, however, human rights and democratic values are called into question. The key issue is whether a transnational civil society can stand up to transnational risks and whether such a society is already developing. Media and social sciences could make an important contribution toward the formation of this civil society.

The term "risk" is a product of Western military, economic and social thinking and has been spread all over the world. Indeed, the concept is so widespread that academics have employed it since the mid-1980s to characterize contemporary society. It's a concept that is complex and ambivalent.

- The classification of events, developments and procedures as "risk" isn't based on any intrinsic and self-sufficient quality. Rather, the concept is a political and social construct whose utilization can lead to political and economic advantages and disadvantages.
- Risks can be perceived as threats and as opportunities. Although these perceptions reflect two sides of the same coin, they provide the basis for differing viewpoints and procedures.

The activities of the Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality will focus on the issue of how transnational risks arise and play out in the context of the relationship between the developed and the developing world. The Western concept of risk has imposed itself on traditional patterns of thinking and behaviour in the developing world, thereby changing and superseding them. In spite of the transnational nature of risk, there is no unified crossborder-concept of risk.

1.2 Containing Transnational Risks

"Containment" means that transnational risks are defined as such, that certain "players" appear and act in a risk-specific manner, that specific rules apply or do not apply, and that the question of responsibility arises.

The first question is who decides what to define as risk. Some rules apply but there is leeway, too. Traditionally, a declaration of war was a necessary prerequisite for war. No longer. The U.S., for example, defined the attacks of September 11 as an act of war, even though there was no formal declaration. The use of the military in disaster-areas (e.g. after floods) is usually preceded by the declaration of a state of emergency. A filing for bankruptcy protection applies to corporate failures. Macroeconomic crises are a little more complex: Governments declare that they have defaulted on their debts, terminate payments and negotiate with banks and international organizations. Epidemics trigger travel and export bans, quarantine measures as well as compulsory immunization and slaughter programs. The risks inherent in industrial developments, exploitation of natural resources or drug launches, on the other hand, are not classified as such by formal declarations. Instead, they are typically accounted for by all kinds of special government licenses and regulations. Although all of these risks transcend borders, they are typically defined and diagnosed within the political and legal framework of nation states. One pivotal question: Who has the authority to classify an event that concerns many countries at once as a risk?

The answer is less than clear. Transnational risks involve certain players. They create, regulate, utilize, fight and describe risks. These players include multinational corporations, insurance companies, organizations, powerful nation states, worldwide protest campaigners, the international press, other media and information-technology institutions, national and international research organizations, sometimes even powerful individuals, less often those who are directly affected or even 'the people.' Although the precise constellation differs from time to time, these players form something of a transnational-risk community. Of course, this formation doesn't exclude opposing interests and confrontations. Quite the opposite: it is often based on them.

Members of such communities – perpetrators, victims, observers and others – typically look at risks from different perspectives.

The players primarily act according to their duties and responsibilities. Multinationals do business and make profits or losses, researchers do research, protest organizations voice protest, international organizations aim to solve conflicts. But transnational risks also prompt risk-specific behaviour. When people knowingly take on risks, they throw caution to the wind. Human lives can be at stake. The assumption of risk is often linked to higher profits. Risks are a sensitive issue in public relations, especially when they are transnational. In many cases, government regulation is not welcome. Government aid, on the other hand, is sought when damage does occur. International organizations have developed their own transnational risk policies - as evident in U.N. peace missions or IMF conditions for billion-dollar bailouts. Protest organizations, too, have created risk-specific tactics that guarantee a maximum of international attention at minimal cost. Simultaneously, protesters also aim to mobilize opponents of risk politics, hoping to draw as much international attention as possible. There is a kind of 'risk journalism,' that is typically based on live-coverage-events. The sciences, too, have developed a research field called "risk research." There's even an academic journal called Risk that addresses risk issues.

Transnational risks do not create cultures of lawlessness. Nevertheless, neither national nor international laws seem to fully apply to them. Rather, transnational risks bring along their own state-of-emergency-type laws. These laws either legitimate risk for political or economic reasons, or counter risk for social and humanitarian reasons. It is conceivable that the increasing importance of risk is going to give rise to a whole new set of "risk laws" that regulate and control risk and might impact non-risk legislation as well.

1.3 About the responsibility of media and social sciences in the face of transnational risks

The Berlin Roundtables are going to address the issue of transnational risks in three subsequent steps. A workshop and a conference will be held on each of the following topics.

1. Risk communication
2. Regulation, containment and management of risks
3. Risk politics

The first event – Transnational Risks, the Responsibility of the Media and the Social Sciences – takes place in January 2002 and deals with communication. Communication is crucial when transnational risks occur. It is a determining factor in how risks are created and contained. The timing of information about corporate meltdowns or technological accidents can result in billions of dollars recovered or lost. It can save or cost thousands of lives. The generation of such information is the responsibility of all the members of a community that is active in a case of risk. But the media and social sciences bear a particular responsibility because communication is their business.

- The first issue is the generation of knowledge.

The media conduct research. Often it takes the media to validate a given assumption that a case, indeed, qualifies as a transnational risk. Journalists might explore the extent of losses and the responsibility of executives in a bankruptcy. Or they examine the responsibility of engineers and the subsequent consequences in an industrial accident.

The social sciences collect data and conduct statistics that are indispensable to the diagnosis of transnational risks. Their research might concern, for example, corporate failures or technological accidents, the possible damages and psychological consequences.

- The next point concerns the distribution of knowledge.

The role of the media in this process need not be explained. It is an essential part of their job. The social sciences form communication communities that are pivotal to the process of swapping information. They serve as sources of information for action communities when transnational risks occur.

- Less obvious but even more important is the evaluation of information. Evaluation on the basis of data is crucial in determining whether corporate losses are business-as-usual or represent a risk, whether a malfunctioning of technology is insignificant or dangerous. Such evaluation does not only occur in opinion and analysis pieces but creeps into the information given or omitted in news stories as well. The social sciences, too, make evaluative judgments not just by providing analysis but also by deciding what topics merits research. Some events whose possible consequences deserve a closer look might get ignored.

1.4. Possible Issues

- Action communities:

The media and social sciences are part of the group of players that become active when transnational risks occur. We have characterized these groups as action communities. What role do the media and social sciences play within this greater framework? Which significance do they have? Do governments and corporations give preferential treatment to certain media and researchers when handing out information? Do media and academics know more than they say? Do media and researchers hype or deflate transnational risks?

- Who defines risk?

The crucial role played by the media and the social sciences in defining transnational risks, raises the question of whether certain events and issues are emphasized at the expense of others. Why do certain issues fall into oblivion after dominating the headlines for years? Acid rain is one example. Why is the industrial development of China often ignored in debates about climate changes? Which role do federal funds have in the exploration of transnational risks? How does AIDS research in Europe and the U.S. differ from research done in Africa?

- Transnational Corporations:

Transnational risks are inextricably tied to the globalization of the economy. The media and academia, too, have become more global. But there are cultural differences affecting media coverage and use as well as academic research, especially in the context of relations between developed and developing world. Who reports regularly and thoroughly on the activities of multinational corporations? Who examines the responsibility of multinationals for transnational risks? What's the role of public information agencies and scientific-research NGOs, especially in the developing world?

- Criticism and Protests:

A growing number of critics and protesters are raising their voices against globalization and against those who they deem responsible for transnational risks. This community is dependent on the support of research organizations and on the (sometimes favourable) attention of the media. Organizations such as Greenpeace, Attac or Human Rights Watch would not have as much clout, if it weren't for the media and academia. But why is it so difficult to build and sustain partisan media and research organizations? What discrepancies exist in the coverage of criticism and protests - especially in the context of relations between developed and developing world?

- International Organizations:

The activities of international organizations – including their risk-related campaigns – have received a lot of attention. But it seems that this attention is more intensive in the media than in the social sciences and, again, more intensive in the developed world than in the developing world. What are the media exactly focusing on when they report on the activities of international organizations? Is there a special focus on humanitarian activities and objectives? What is the scientific rationale when international organizations interfere in risk-type situations – especially when they're dealing with economic issues and poverty?

These topics will be discussed among others during the first Berlin Roundtables on Transnational Risks. A matrix can help to identify and group types of risk and approaches.

		Issues						
		Industrial accidents	Corporate meltdowns	Epidemics	Natural calamities	Implications of research and technology	Conflicts, war	Etc.
Perspectives	Generation of Knowledge							
	Scientific documentation and analysis							
	Media coverage							
	Actions of multinational corporations							
	International politics							
	Mobilization of victims							
	Protests							
	Etc.							

The Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality not only intend to facilitate scientific and journalistic exchange during the workshop and the conference on transnational risks. They also want to establish a sustainable network of communication. This network is supposed to initiate further research and media coverage. The Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality could thus contribute to a better understanding of transnational risks and shape international debates about the issue.