Cornell University
PROGRAM ON SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY
632 CLARK HALL
ITHACA, NEW YORK 14853
TELEPHONE 607/256-3810

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George Gerbner
Annenberg School of Communications
University of Pennsylvania
3620 Walnut Street C5
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3858

Dear George:

Enclosed is a copy of my remarks at the conference.

I enjoyed seeing you there and hope we can continue to be in touch.

Sincerely,

Dorothy

Dorothy Nelkin
Professor

sk

for lecture at Annenburg Center

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE REPORTING OF RISK

Dorothy Nelkin

The reporting of technological risk is one of the most controversial areas of journalism. The widely recognized communications fiasco at Three Mile Island, the confused reporting of the saccharin dispute, and the controversial coverage of the toxics waste disposal problem provoked by the problems at Love Canal and Times Beach, all created awareness of both the importance and the extraordinary difficulty of communicating information about risk to the public. They have generated debates on the biases, inaccuracies and sensationalist tendencies of journalists, but they have also called attention to the interests at stake in controlling and manipulating public communication about controversial technological choices. These interests are reflected in a remarkable increase in public relations activities organized around problems of risk.

The pressures of public relations are of course not a recent problem for journalism, but they assume particular importance in shaping the news about risks. The character of risk events leaves reporters especially vulnerable to public relations activities. Few journalists have the background to understand the scientific complexity of risk situations, and the constraints of newswork -- the deadlines, the competition for space -- leave them little time to develop the relevant technical competence. Thus they

often fail to place risk events in an appropriate technical context. For example, the misleading news reports on the rat experiments in the saccharin controversy reflected a widespread failure among journalists to understand a standard scientific procedure based on extrapolations from large-dose experiments. Similarly, the reporting about possible explosions at Three Mile Island reflected the failure to understand the technicalities of reactor safety.

Risk events are also characterized by technical uncertainty and pervaded by scientific disputes. In many cases uncertainties reflect the unavailability of adequate scientific information. This has become a problem; for example, in the reporting about the health effects of exposure to toxic chemicals. Of the 63,000 toxic chemicals that are in commercial use, relatively few have been adequately tested for health and safety. Compounding the lack of scientific knowledge is the difficulty of drawing precise causal associations between human exposure and long-term health effects. As a result, the scientists assessing risk often arrive at conflicting conclusions about the relative dangers of particular hazards. Conflict prevails over the severity of risk, the methodologies for evaluating risk and the appropriate means of regulation. Deluged by excessive and conflicting information, journalists may not know whom to believe.

Risk reporting is also politically controversial. Defining the nature of risk creates the context for accountability. The terms used to describe an event, the voices heard, the perceptions conveyed, point the finger of blame.

News about risk can affect consumer behavior, especially if alternatives are available. People, for example, reduced their use of aerosol spray cans after the media reports on the potential risks of fluorocarbons to the ozone layer. The media also set the context for public policy. It was the local press publicity about Love Canal that forced the Department of Health to issue a health alert. This in turn jettisoned the issue into the national press and onto the Congressional agenda. Often journalists, especially when they report on local events, are under editorial pressure to consider local commercial realities. As one reporter put it, "We are trained subtly not to cover the corporate sector and other private institutions the way we cover City Hall." Studies of press reports on environmental risks suggest that journalists are reluctant to challenge projects that are important to the local economy, a habit sometimes referred to as the "Afghanistan syndrome," the tendency to cover problems occurring in distant places.

When time is short and information complex, disputed and also politically sensitive, journalists tend to rely on the pre-selected news that is readily available in press releases. They are especially vulnerable if this selection of news is backed by scientific authority. In an analysis of the influence of sources on environmental reporting David Sachsman found that during an eight week period, eleven environmental reporters received 1,347 press releases. Over half of the published stories could be traced to these public relations

efforts, and most adopted their language as well as their content. Reporting on risk may simply require opening the mail. Those sources who are best organized to provide authoritative facts in a manageable and efficiently packaged form have an unusual degree of power. Recognizing this, the technical community has responded by creating increasingly sophisticated public relations techniques to meet the needs of the press.

Most public relations efforts in the arena of risk have been generated by those industries (nuclear power, chemicals and drugs) that are involved in controversial science-based technologies. Industrial public relations developed at the turn of the century, first as an adjunct to advertising and later as a means to influence public policies that might bear on government regulation. Industries create and expand their public relations departments in response to crises that affect their image. Dupont, for example, formed its PR department in 1934 after a Senate investigation of the gunpowder industry created an image of the company as "a merchant of death." As regulatory pressures have developed with increasing public concern about risk, many firms have expanded their public relations activities. And, interestingly, they are engaging scientists as an increasingly important part of these efforts. Indeed, scientists are increasingly employed to communicate technical information, to enhance corporate credibility and to legitimate corporate claims.

For example, during the controversy over nuclear power the nuclear industry developed an elaborate public relations apparatus that engaged scientists, both at the national level to convince the public of the safety of the technology, and at the local level to show that utilities were good neighbors. Public relations officers developed strategies to enlighten the press, recommending that industry spokesmen do some "semantic soul-searching" to eliminate language that might work against them. "Palatable synonyms for scare words such as 'hazard' or 'criticality' would facilitate the public understanding of nuclear energy," advised one PR officer. In the press releases that followed nuclear sites became "nuclear parks" and accidents became "aberrations." Electric power industry consultants also developed a "nuclear acceptance campaign," a strategy to use "the right medium to communicate the right message to the right target audience." The consultants advised the industry that scientists were the right medium: "The public has faith in science, believes scientists, and would listen." Accordingly, Westinghouse developed the Campus America program designed to increase positive media coverage of nuclear power. It hired public relations firms specialized in running political campaigns to train their scientists and engineers to deal effectively with reporters. Between 1976 and 1982 Westinghouse scientists made 300 public appearances and held 300 newspaper interviews.

The chemical industry began to use similar strategies after the news coverage of Love Canal and Times Beach. They

employed scientists to provide "the facts" and to counter the "erroneous stories" that were being printed and broadcast about the hazards of toxic wastes. Chemical industrial leaders generally feel under siege. They believe that the press is disseminating biased information that is creating irrational and unreasonable fear about chemicals. They have coined the terms "cancerphobia" and "chemophobia" to describe the public response. The press claims a chemical company spokesman is poisoning America: "If there is any poisoning of America going on, it is not chemicals that are the culprit, it is the media. Journalists have helped to create crises where none exists (the cancer epidemic), have blown out of proportion legitimate stories (Three Mile Island), and avidly hunted for crises to come (acid rain)." The industry has expanded public relations in order to counter these tendencies, "to get across to the public the value of chemicals in our lives." Accordingly Dow Chemical established a "visible scientist" program, sending scientists, professionally trained in communication skills by public relations firms, on media tours. In 1982 16 scientists visited 26 media markets, held 24 newspaper interviews, appeared on 62 TV and 76 radio shows, reaching an estimated 9 million people. Following up the press coverage, I found their arguments were duly reported in local newspapers as facts.

The New York City public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, also runs a visible scientist program, arranging meetings between corporate scientists and "the right edi-

tors." Hill and Knowlton orchestrated public relations for the Calorie Control Council when it opposed the saccharin ban, and it worked for Metropolitan Edison in order to increase its press credibility after Three Mile Island. Other public relations firms have developed so-called "parachute teams" or "truth squads" of scientists who are ready to move into risk situations in order to defuse opposition and to present the "facts."

Environmentalists also use PR techniques to enhance their credibility, though they are usually less professional and less well organized in their efforts. The Union of Concerned Scientists kept in regular contact with reporters during the nuclear debate. Anti-nuclear scientists worked with folk singers, rock artists and Nobel laureates, all in order to influence the press. Love Canal neighbors geared their demonstrations to attract maximum media attention. Indeed, all the interests involved in risk disputes see the press as a resource through which to create public attitudes sympathetic to their position.

From the earliest days of public relations journalists have regarded such efforts with cynicism. The influence of public relations on the news once prompted Upton Sinclair to define journalism as "a business in the practice of presenting the news of the day in the interests of economic privilege." Today reporters are more skeptical that ever; however, the fact that journalists resent manipulation by PR professionals does not diminish their influence. For sensitivity to manipulation is dulled by the vulnerability of journalists in

reporting complex technical information and by their uncritical belief in science as an authoritative source of objective information. While the reporting about risk is often problematic, the most serious problem may be less one of bias, inaccuracy and sensationalism than the reluctance of journalists to challenge the sources of risk information. There are few I.F. Stones or Walter Lippmanns writing about technological risk. There is no tradition of investigative or critical reporting of science and technology. Too often the press is simply a conduit for the many interested parties who use the authority of science to shape the public view about technical choices. As these choices become an increasingly important dimension of public policy, they must be approached by journalists with the spirit of independent, critical inquiry that has guided good investigative reporting in other policy areas.