

Media Coverage of Risk Controversies: Seven Principles

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1. The amount of coverage accorded an environmental risk topic is unrelated to the seriousness of the risk in health terms. Instead, it relies on traditional journalistic criteria like timeliness and human interest.
 2. Within individual risk stories, most of the coverage isn't about the risk. It is about blame, fear, anger, and other nontechnical issues – about “outrage,” not “hazard.”
 3. When technical information about risk is provided in news stories, it has little if any impact on the audience.
 4. Alarming content about risk is more common than reassuring content or intermediate content – except, perhaps, in crisis situations, when the impulse to prevent panic seems to moderate the coverage.
 5. Exactly what information is alarming or reassuring is very much a matter of opinion. The media audience tends to be alarmed even by information the experts would consider reassuring.
 6. Reporters lean most heavily on official sources. They use more predictably opinionated sources -- industry and experts on the “safe” side, activists and citizens on the “risky” side – when they need them.
 7. Although the competition for journalistic attention is tougher for sources seeking to reassure than for those seeking to alarm, coverage depends even more on a different distinction: skillful sources versus inept ones.
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For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Dealing with the Media (Nov 1986) – www.psandman.com/articles/explain2.htm
- Mass Media and Environmental Risk: Seven Principles (Summer 1994) – www.fplc.edu/RISK/vol5/summer/sandman.htm
- Media Sensationalism and Risk: Talking to Stakeholders with Reporters in the Room (Sep 2006) – www.psandman.com/col/media.htm

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