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Review of: Eleanor Singer & Phyllis M. Endreny, Reporting on Risk

Mladen Singer

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Eleanor Singer & Phyllis M. Endreny, *Reporting on Risk* (Russell Sage Foundation 1993). Acknowledgments, index, notes, preface, references, tables. LC 92-40130; ISBN 0-87154-801-1. [256 pp. Cloth \$24.95. 112 East 64th Street, New York NY 10021.]

People acquire risk information from personal experience, directly from others and indirectly from others by the way of media.¹ The importance of mass media in contemporary society has been generally researched very thoroughly and is not treated in this book; rather, as indicated by the title the focus is on reporting on risks.

Mass media's influence on observers' perceptions of risk and their behavior is easily seen. For example, a 1986 terrorist attack on a TWA jet caused a substantial decline in U.S. tourists traveling in Europe and the Middle East, although more U.S. citizens drowned in bathtubs than were killed by terrorists that year.² Media consumers need objective, helpful information about risk related issues, and media producers should try to provide it. But do they? That is an important question. To address this and other related issues, the authors examined how selected mass media — both print and electronic — reported on risk from September 1 to December 31, 1984 and during September 4–10 and 18–24 and December 11–17 and 25–31, 1960.³

The book divides risks into seven categories:⁴ *natural hazards*, *energy hazards*, *material hazards* (e.g., chemicals, nuclear reactors and alcohol), *activities involving benefits and costs* (e.g., various dangerous recreational activities), *chronic and acute illnesses*, *complex technologies* and, a bit inaccurately, *activities with costs only* (terrorism and crime). It thoroughly examines the quality and quantity of media coverage of the first six, but, because coverage has been extensively analyzed by others, the last is not dealt with.⁵

1 At 2.

2 At 1-2.

3 See at 16–17.

4 Detailed listings of risks classified in each particular category can be found in Appendix A, at 183.

5 At 9.

In discussing their research, Singer — a senior research scholar at the Center for the Social Sciences, Columbia University and analyst with the U.S. Bureau of the Census — and Endreny — a Chicago consultant and former assistant professor of communication and media at the University of Illinois — provide many tables and much statistical analysis of media reports on risk and how this changed between the two periods they studied. They also analyze media sources, report accuracy, who is blamed for harm and the role of geographical location on media coverage.

So, how does the mass media report on risk? To that question Singer and Endreny answer in part:⁶

Our analysis suggests that media coverage of hazards is similar to the coverage of other news. It focuses on individuals and events rather than on social and economic forces, on drama and conflict rather than on long-term conditions. Thus, [as found in a 1988 study] it presents “a superficial and fragmented view of reality.” It is, in addition, a view biased by journalists’ dependence on institutional sources, as well as by their assumptions about the media audience and its interests.

Although sometimes overburdened with the statistics, their book provides very interesting and critical analysis about media coverage of risks. It is a study recommendable to all who are interested in risk-related issues.

Mladen Singer[†]



⁶ At 64.

[†] Mr. Singer received an LL.B. from the University of Zagreb Law School (Zagreb, Croatia) and the Masters of Intellectual Property from the Franklin Pierce Law Center. He is a Research Fellow at FPLC.