

RISK: Health, Safety & Environment (1990-2002)

Volume 5

Number 3 *Symposium on Technical Risk in the Mass Media*

Article 7

June 1994

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Repository Citation

William Lanouette, *Reporting on Risk: Who Decides What's News?*, 5 RISK 223 (1994).

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Reporting on Risk: Who Decides What's News?

William Lanouette*

Introduction

Some editors take offense when a "news release" arrives on their desk, but look more kindly on a "press release" — because they think it's their job to decide what's news. At times, however, it takes more than an editor's whim to decide what's news, especially among the national news media, as two stories about the radiation risks posed by federal government programs demonstrate.

The first story broke in the national media in October 1988 with revelations of serious nuclear reactor accidents and radiation risks to workers, the public, and the environment; the second, in December 1993, identified six of the eighteen persons injected with plutonium in federal radiation experiments, cited scores more subjects of similar federal programs, and reported hundreds more experiments on unidentified persons as well as deliberate radioactive releases from federal facilities close to inhabited areas.

Yet both stories were known generally to reporters for years before. Both stories had already been covered in a few regional, specialized, and national publications. And both stories had been the subject of congressional hearings and reports. On their own, these two stories about radiation risks had been considered marginal, or regional, or too specialized for widespread attention. Both became national stories only when new elements were added.

The public and public officials learn the most about various risks from the news media, often in dramatic and abbreviated forms: in

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The views expressed in this paper are his alone and do not represent the position of the GAO.

breathless news “updates” and banner headlines. Health and safety issues, as well as subtler questions about environmental destruction or medical ethics, must filter through an information system that thrives on specific events, novelty, and drama. In that context, a general risk such as radiation exposure is usually too subtle or too complex to gain national prominence. But add an ingredient or two and the subtle can become simply sensational.

Both the radiation stories in this comparison involve the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), a federal agency that traces its roots to the Manhattan Project that built the first A-bombs during World War II. Since then all information about the atom was considered to be “born classified,” an obsession that had forced reporters to use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the most basic information about federal programs — or to rely on leaks from within the DOE bureaucracy. Such breeches of secrecy can make almost any disclosure seem newsworthy, although with the two stories here considered reporters had help from the highest inside source possible: the Secretary of Energy.

- In October 1988, the issues that made for a national story were national security, raised by reporters, and the federal budget deficit, raised by the Energy Secretary’s call for increased spending on the nuclear weapons complex. At the time, the Secretary admitted using disclosures about problems throughout the complex to gain more money from Congress and the White House.

- In December 1993, the issues that made for a national story were the names and personal histories of previously anonymous human subjects in radiation experiments involving plutonium injections, augmented by the Energy Secretary’s offer to compensate victims. At the time, the Secretary admitted using her further disclosure of details about radiation victims and secret nuclear weapons tests to enhance the department’s credibility and to gain public trust for her department — and for the Clinton Administration.

October 1988: The Nuclear Weapons Complex Scandal Becomes a National Story

For more than a decade, pieces of a nationwide scandal had surfaced from the vast and sprawling system that produces America's nuclear weapons; as health, safety, and environmental stories at the eighteen federal facilities in twelve states. News accounts had appeared for years in the regional and local press, and, occasionally, as feature articles in specialized magazines such as *Science*, *Technology Review*, and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. But with few exceptions, the weapons-making system itself was never considered to have national significance. Its costs were buried in the Energy Department's budget, its policies and procedures were concealed in military secrecy, and its dangers were only seen in remote areas by workers and local residents who depended on these very facilities for their livelihood.

But in October 1988, problems created during decades of urgent Cold War production suddenly attracted and held full attention as front-page features in the country's leading newspapers, as cover stories in the weekly news magazines, and as sensational items on the commercial television news programs.¹ Coverage began after a September 30th congressional hearing on tritium production at the Energy Department's Savannah River Plant (SRP) near Aiken, South Carolina. Nuclear reactors at SRP made two products essential for H-bombs: tritium, a form of hydrogen gas used to boost thermonuclear explosions, and metallic plutonium, the principal explosive ingredient. The hearing chairman released a 1985 memorandum by an engineer with E.I. duPont de Nemours & Co., the contractor that had operated SRP since it opened in 1952. His memo offered the first public tally of 30 serious accidents involving the site's nuclear reactors. Some of these accidents had melted radioactive fuel. Some had released radiation into the atmosphere and ground water. Some had been rumored, and one or two were even covered in local news accounts of SRP operations. But

¹ The national newspapers monitored for this study include the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*; the news magazines include *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*; the television networks monitored include ABC, CBS, and NBC.

military secrecy and employee loyalty had kept most of these alarming details from the national press and public for as long as three decades.

During the previous August, the national media had reported that SRP's last operating tritium-production reactor had to shut down for safety problems. But that closure and then the memo's details still failed to turn the faltering weapons complex into a national news story. In fact, it took a dedicated effort by writers and editors at the New York Times to draw attention to the weapons-production story: first by running front-page articles of their own; second, by attracting other news media to cover the story; and third, by weaving together old and new information about the twelve-state complex and its problems. The New York Times had been preparing a four-part series on problems with the military atom even before the DuPont memo's release, but that document provided both the "news" (30 accidents) and the "peg" (the hearing) on which to hang the paper's more thorough coverage.

On the day after the hearing, the New York Times played the DuPont memo on page one. And for the first eleven days in October, it alone among national publications featured front-page articles on the weapons-production scandal. No other national paper carried its own story until October 6, a day the Times ran two front-page articles and a third inside.

With the New York Times clearly in the lead, two other nationally important papers eventually picked up the story on October 7: the Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor. From October to December 1988, the Washington Post carried 21 articles, seven on the front page; the Los Angeles Times ran 46 articles, seven on the front page; and the Wall Street Journal ran 21, also seven on the front page.

Yet none of these matched the constant and aggressive coverage of the New York Times, which during October ran 20 front-page stories about the weapons-production complex, and another sixteen inside. From October 1, when it broke the DuPont memo story, until the end of December 1988, it ran more than 85 articles about the weapons complex, 39 played on the front page.

Some Times articles were based on interviews with Energy Department officials, some on congressional hearings and investigations, and some on documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. But many Times stories were “recycled” from pieces printed years before and from work for the four-part series.² By late October, it was clear that the Times had begun something rare in modern journalism: a “crusade.”³

What ultimately made the Times effort a national phenomenon was not the paper's own zeal, however, but the addition of two new elements to an already familiar regional and specialized story: fresh fears about the federal budget deficit and national security.

First, beginning in the spring of 1988, the Energy Department had warned its oversight committees in Congress that maintaining and modernizing the weapons complex would be far costlier than had been estimated earlier — a message that shocked the White House during an election year in which the federal deficit was an issue dividing Democrats and Republicans. In this context, DOE's usually arcane budget had serious national significance.

Second, when safety problems at the Savannah River Plant halted all tritium production in August, breaking a vital link in the chain of weapons-production sites, the whole complex was finally seen as a failed national network. For the first time since the atomic age began in 1945, the U.S. could no longer make and maintain its nuclear arsenal. This raised new national-security fears.

The New York Times was the first national publication to highlight the tritium-production issue, in an October 9 front-page article. Keeping the SRP reactors out of service, an administration official said, “is tantamount to unilateral nuclear disarmament.” Fear of a tritium shortage provided DOE with a new justification for boosting its weapons-complex budget, creating a “press agent's dream” for Energy Secretary John Herrington as he appeared on national television

² Keith Schneider interview, Nov. 21, 1988.

³ William Lanouette, *The Half-life of the Tritium Story*, Deadline (Center for War, Peace, and the News Media; New York University) Jan./Feb. 1989.

programs to explain the predicament. Two days after the Times made this national-security point, Deputy Energy Secretary Joseph F. Salgado announced costly new plans for re-starting SRP's tritium-production reactor, thus promising that DOE could "assure a continued strategic deterrent." Risks posed by the complex were no greater than before, and may even had diminished with no reactors running. Yet, for the press and public, fearsome coverage was just beginning.

Prime-time television documentaries had flashed alarming views of the complex as early as 1977, and in 1985 an ABC Closeup program described risks posed by radioactive wastes at Savannah River and the Hanford Reservation in Washington state, said to be two "national sacrifice areas" that were "so contaminated with weapons waste they may never again be safe for human habitation."⁴ ABC's Closeup program on "The Bomb Factories" in 1987 pointed out that at Savannah River "to over stretch a decaying plant risks a catastrophic accident which could cripple America's only source of nuclear weapons material...." That would actually happen a year later, when the tritium-production reactors failed.

Yet, except for these special reports, network television had given little time to the worsening fate of the weapons complex. In 1986 and 1987 there were only four reports on the networks' evening news programs, all about the Hanford reactor: two when comparisons were made to the Soviet reactor that had exploded at Chernobyl, and two when Hanford's plant was shut down for safety repairs. In 1988 there were no network-news items on the complex until October, when the DuPont memo became front-page news in the New York Times. By contrast, after the Times crusade began, there were 23 network reports in October: twelve about Savannah River, nine about the Fernald uranium plant in Ohio, six about the Rocky Flats bomb plant in Colorado, and two about Hanford. During the first three months of the scandal, the Times set the news agenda for television coverage but the networks soon lost interest.⁵

⁴ The Fire Unleashed, ABC News Closeup, Program No. 125, June 6, 1985, transcript at 17.

⁵ Compare story topics in Appendices A and C of William Lanouette, Tritium and

In November, with presidential elections over, coverage dropped to two items about Savannah River and one about Rocky Flats. Then in December there were ten evening-news reports: three about weapons-plant cleanup and the debate over tritium's scarcity; two about DOE's budget commitment to clean up the Fernald plant; two about new cracks discovered in a Savannah River reactor; one about Western governors refusing to accept radioactive waste from Rocky Flats; one about President-Elect George Bush's comment at a press conference that he had not yet focussed on where to find money for the weapons complex cleanup; and one about the dispute between DOE and the White House over expanding the weapons-complex budget.

Like the television networks, the national news magazines also followed the New York Times closely, and after October 1988 *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* seemed to shift focus in unison as the newspaper's crusade advanced. Of the three, only *Newsweek* had touched the subject in 1988 before the Times forced the issue in October.⁶ But following revelations from the DuPont memo by the New York Times, all three news magazines ran repeated stories from October to December 1988: *Newsweek* had four, the others had three each.

None of the news magazines identified the weapons-complex scandal as an old story, although *Newsweek* had written about Fernald in 1985 and *Time* had covered a reactor shutdown at Hanford in 1987. Nor did the news magazines see the spread of the weapons-complex story as a Washington-based media phenomenon, fed by an agency eager to publicize its budget plight and fanned by a newspaper intent on making news. Yet, these were key reasons for their national coverage.

the Times: How the Nuclear-Weapons Production Scandal Became a National Story, Research Paper R-1. Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy (John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard 1990).

⁶ In March, *Newsweek* had reported on reduced tritium reactor levels and minor radioactive releases at Savannah River.

December 1993:

Human Radiation Experiments Become a National Story

News that the U.S. Government had used “human guinea pigs” for radiation experiments in the 1940's and 1950's, and had released radioactive materials over populated areas to test monitoring techniques, became national news in December 1993. It began to break in ways similar to the 1988 weapons-complex scandal, and also needed two new elements to propel regional and specialized subjects to national prominence.

In both 1988 and 1993, the basic facts were known to journalists and public officials. In both 1988 and 1993, the issue was forced by the appearance of new information: the DuPont memo in 1988; the names, faces, and personal stories about citizens who had been injected with plutonium without their full knowledge or consent in 1993. That added personal element came from tireless research by an Albuquerque Tribune reporter, Eileen Welsome, whose series appeared in mid November 1993. As with the 1988 story, in 1993 the Energy Secretary provided the second and decisive boost to national prominence by proclaiming during a December 7 press conference that the U.S. Government acknowledged its wrongdoing in some radiation experiments, and would compensate victims and their families.

The Washington Post had reported on some human radiation experiments at the University of Cincinnati as early as 1971, and the Energy Department's predecessor, the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), had issued a six-page press release in February 1976 that offered “Background Information on Manhattan Project (MED) Injections of Plutonium into Terminal Patients.” The release explained that with several thousand MED workers handling plutonium, “accurate information [was] needed on retention and excretion of internal plutonium for setting safety criteria.” Hospitals were named in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Rochester, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. In addition, seven unclassified medical studies were cited offering more details.⁷

These eighteen plutonium experiments and hundreds more were described in a 38-page congressional report released in November 1986 by Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.).⁸ Missing, however, were the names of the patients; they were identified only by codes. Ms. Welsome at the Albuquerque Tribune spent years tracing six of the patients, and when her series named them and printed their pictures an old and unfocused story suddenly gained a personal dimension. Yet the Tribune series went unnoticed by national media for more than three weeks — until Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary held her nationally-covered December press conference.

At that conference O'Leary pledged to compensate radiation-experiment victims, giving what had been an old and unfocused story new and sensational life. Just as Secretary Herrington had publicized his department's radiation hazards in order to garner a bigger budget for environmental and safety programs, Secretary O'Leary used her revelations to garner much-needed public trust. At her press conference, she also released the size and location of the U.S. plutonium stockpile and listed 204 previously-secret nuclear weapons tests, in all issuing 67 pages of "Openness Fact Sheets" to highlight the Clinton Administration's commitment to public information.

But even then, national media attention lagged. On December 8, both the New York Times and the Washington Post reported on O'Leary's press conference, but only mentioned the human radiation experiments among other disclosures. It wasn't until the 17th that the New York Times highlighted the human dimension in a front-page article. The New York Times had already published — in early November — a front-page account of the Cold War's "human guinea pigs" in the former Soviet Union.⁹

⁷ Fact Sheet on Manhattan Engineer District (MED) Plutonium Excretion Studies, Feb. 1976, at 2.

⁸ House Subcomm. on Energy Conservation and Power of the Comm. on Energy and Commerce, *American Nuclear Guinea Pigs: Three Decades of Radiation Experiments on U.S. Citizens* (Comm. Print 1986).

⁹ Marlise Simons, *Soviet Atom Test Used Thousands As Guinea Pigs*, *Archives Show*, New York Times, Nov. 7, 1993, at 1.

Also setting the scene for the December revelations was Senator John Glenn (D-Ohio), who had co-chaired the 1988 hearings at which the DuPont memo was released. In November 1993, Glenn issued an unclassified report by the U.S. General Accounting Office about four areas in which radiation was released over inhabited areas in Washington state, New Mexico, Utah, and Tennessee.¹⁰ The GAO report offered the public its first detailed information about the high dosage levels and dubious purpose of these releases: to improve the U.S. ability to monitor fallout from Soviet nuclear tests and weapons production.

Conclusion

These 1988 and 1993 stories demonstrate the ways that risks alone do not become newsworthy for the general public until they acquire a national context. New facts, such as the DuPont memo or unacknowledged radiation victims, do not necessarily command national media attention until their implications are framed by broader national issues: in 1988, by new concerns with national security and the federal budget deficit; in 1993, by personal identities that humanized hundreds of statistical victims and occasioned the administration's commitment to new openness and the promise of some compensation. For, without those elements the safety and health problems in the nuclear weapons complex and the use of human subjects for radiation experiments would have continued to attract local, regional, and specialist coverage — but probably not the attention of the national news media.



¹⁰ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Nuclear Health And Safety: Examples of Post World War II Radiation Releases at U.S. Nuclear Sites* (1993).