

Blind faith?: Communicating Risk in an Uncertain World

Let me set out an argument.

1. In a democracy, the first duty of government is the safety and security of its citizens by adequately responding to threats and risks.
2. In a democracy, citizens can hold their government to account through scrutiny.
3. Thus, in a democracy, citizens can scrutinise their government's ability to respond to threats and risks.



So far so good, and hopefully not too contentious. However, this does raise a crucial fourth point:

4. Citizens can only scrutinise their government's ability to respond to threats and risks if they are themselves aware of those threats and risk.

Which goes on to raise a serious question: Are they, we, aware of those threats and risks?

The Covid-19 pandemic shocked all governments, democratic or otherwise, although most national risk registers had a pandemic of some sort as the most likely and most impactful risk around. The general public across the globe have also been somewhat surprised.

Despite political and ideological disputes, some very heated, it appears that publics generally have had blind faith in their governments to protect them from serious harm, to ultimately maintain their, albeit sometimes very basic level of, safety and security. Had those publics been more aware of the more extreme risks, might they have scrutinised their governments' approaches to them a little bit more and might they have demanded that their governments be a little bit more prepared? It can be argued that us little people are now sitting up and paying a bit more attention to such risks to our safety and security. But before now, how could we have held our governments to account over attending to extreme risks when we weren't even aware of what risks our government should have been attending to in the first place?

Public health risks now top the agenda, although the coronavirus issue isn't all there is. Antibiotic resistance failure and anti-vaccination effects also present risks, although their impacts are more slow burn.

Climate change risks have been in the public consciousness across large areas of the world for over a decade. However, even here, there are related risks, such as massive soil depletion and biodiversity collapse, which are most are utterly unaware of. And, peripheral, but with rapid and potentially devastating effect, is 'space weather' – geomagnetic storms caused by solar activity (called coronal mass ejection) and radiation pulses from even further afield which can severely disrupt electrical systems central to national infrastructures.

Disruptive technology is another potential source of extreme risk. While we enjoy the fruits of technology, from smart phones to Alexa, the underlying technology and its capabilities are advancing at an astonishing rate, often beyond the ability of humans to oversee, fully understand or regulate. The threat is less of a 'terminator' cyborg type but of a much more subtle yet severe effect of which the ['paper clip maximiser' scenario](#) is but one. Significant and diverse voices such as Steven Hawking to Elon Musk have long claimed that unregulated Artificial Intelligence poses an existential threat to humanity.

And then, of course, there's good old-fashioned conflict; no-nonsense war and terrorism. Except that the nature and mechanisms of conflict have expanded, with nuclear and conventional war now complemented by conflicts peppered with prefixes such as cyber, hybrid, information, propaganda. Traditional insurgency or violent extremism now exist as much online as anywhere else, with online radicalisation intertwined with real world effects of terrorism.

Conflict often gets the headlines but [“Governments need to think about security as just one category of risk”](#) says Rumtin Sepassour of Cambridge University's Centre for the Study of Existential Risk. Professor Toby Ord of Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute claims that we are standing on [anthropogenic precipice](#). Indeed, to reflect the inherent dangers that these new four horsemen of the apocalypse – public health, climate, disruptive technology and conflict – represent, we may refer to a long-standing, albeit representative, metric; the 'Doomsday Clock' produced by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. In January 2020, the clock switched to [100 seconds to midnight](#), the shortest time span since its inception in the 1940s. Not that many would have noticed.

And that's the point.

Natural existential risks (for example, asteroid, coronal mass ejection or supervolcanic events) aside, most but not all of these threats are man-made but all their attached risks can, to varying degrees, be mitigated or managed. Government communication, mainstream media, social media and education all potentially play significant roles in enabling debate, increasing knowledge and managing uncertainty amongst the public. And informing policy. There are precedents, as seen in the fervent public debate over nuclear weapons through the late 20th century, and similarly around climate change currently. Hope and fear are calibrated through these mechanisms, but so also is the ability to respond to risks, individually and collectively.

At a time when [trust and reasoning](#) in the political space appear severely wanting, when we are facing growing uncertainty and increasingly diverse risks, the state is necessarily broadening its involvement in and engagement with public life. So, surely it is critical that publics of democratic states are able to, firstly, understand and analyse those risks and, secondly, act in relation to those risks, at individual, community and societal levels, both practically and politically. The former is a function of communication and education, the latter a function of political agency.

Taking political agency as a given in democracies (admittedly a contentious area itself!), in the undoubtedly uncertain environment of the foreseeable future, the public understanding of risk through risk communication (yes, it's a thing), critical thinking, media literacy and mechanisms to counter disinformation/misinformation will be vital. This will be no easy task, with great potential for panic, gloom and significant political machination, but without grasping this nettle, the potential outcome is just as unsettling, even devastating.

Quoting the playwright William Congreve, "Fear comes from uncertainty". Now, more than ever, we must all abandon our casual blind faith in the system and actively address such uncertainties, or risk being paralysed by them.

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