

*Journal of Risk Research*, Ragnar Löfstedt editor, E&FN Spon (an imprint of Routledge), Volume 1, Issues 1-4, 1998.

"Yet another journal?" This question was posed by editor Ragnar Löfstedt in the first issue of the *Journal of Risk Research*. The journal has just celebrated its first birthday. A survey 10 years ago turned up over 600 journals about risk and safety. There are almost certainly many more now. So why another one?

One answer is that the growth of the risk literature mirrors the growth of concern about risk. An article in issue 3 of the journal – by Sjöberg, Wählberg and Kvist - notes that over the last three decades the number of bills relating to risk submitted to Sweden's parliament increased four-fold - an increase that I suspect is typical of most European and North American countries. But this answer evades the chicken-and-egg question - has the growth of writing about risk generated the concern, or vice versa? Sjöberg et al conclude that the question merits further investigation. I agree. The increasing regulation of the minutiae of life in the name of safety is a phenomenon difficult to explain in affluent countries with still growing life-spans. It is also a phenomenon of growing economic and social significance. This journal promises to lead this inquiry.

Most of the longer-established journals in this field show little interest in such questions. They are oblivious to the rewards of risk. They are assiduous in their search for new risks. They *assume* the need for ever-greater institutional control over them, and are preoccupied with the search for ways to manage risk more efficiently. Most of them treat risk "scientifically" - as a phenomenon that can be measured and manipulated in the same way as the material subjects of conventional science. Admittedly their measurements are often presented in the form of probabilities, to allow for the much lower degree of precision commonly claimed by risk scientists, but this main-stream risk literature is imbued with the ethos of positivist, reductionist science.

In recent years a new literature has emerged claiming that risk is a social or cultural construct. Relations between these two camps - *realist* and *constructionist* - have been strained. An attempt by the Royal Society to bring them together in 1992 was a conspicuous failure. On display in the first four issues of *Risk Analysis* is the same mutual incomprehension that bedeviled the Royal Society's efforts in 1992. In issue 1 we find Sir Frederick Warner, who chaired the Royal Society's risk group, characterizing the Seveso dioxin escape as a *sociological disaster* - a relatively innocuous event blown up into a catastrophe by scientifically incompetent and alarmist sociologists. In issue 4 we have a defence by Bruna di Marchi of the constructionist perspective accompanied by a rehearsal of the limitations of Sir Frederick's reductionism.

But more hopefully we also find in di Marchi's article, and those of others, attempts to bridge the realist-constructionist divide. There is a *reality* about which conventional science has much useful advice to offer. But the more complex, obscure or contested this reality, the more culturally constructed it becomes. And where the science is unresolved - as in, for example, arguments about global warming, low-level radiation, pesticide residues etc. – what you believe depends on who you believe - and what scientists believe depends on whose hypothesis they find the most plausible.

Risk, usefully quantifiable as probability, merges, without any clear boundary line, into unquantifiable uncertainty. It is about this non-existent boundary that the most interesting, and acrimonious, debates occur. A reading of its first year's offerings suggests that this is the territory that the *Journal of Risk Research* intends to occupy. If it continues as it has begun it will establish itself as the most important journal in an overcrowded field.

611 words

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