Engaging with Risk and the Risk of Engagement

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I. From computers to futures studies

At high school in the mid 1980s, I was the first generation who had the opportunity to play with computers. I was fascinated about the ability to simulate complex systems with computers. I had a passionate physics teacher, who taught us this possibility and I was involved in a school project in which we built a computer model to design an emission filter for a sty. So I decided to study computer sciences.

However, in the course of the first year, I realized the program was more about bits and bytes than about societal problems. At high school I had a very broad list of subjects, from French to Mathematics, from Physics to Economics, and my broad interest was not accommodated by computer science. At home at the University of Twente (Enschede, the Netherlands), I decided to move to the Philosophy of Science, Technology and Society program, hence entering the world of science and technology studies.

During my undergraduate and graduate program, I became familiar with a lot of scholarly work on technological controversies and societal risk debates. I may disappoint the reader of this special issue, to tell you that although I provided myself with a basis that is still useful today, this was not the defining experience that brought me to risk regulation. No, I was still fascinated by computer models and over time this interest focused on the role of computer models in policy support. More specifically, I became increasingly fascinated with the question how uncertainty was dealt with in such models and how policy-makers respond to the quasi-certainty such models provide.

An internship at the Dutch RIVM, the environmental assessment agency, introduced me to the field of sustainable development and the so-called integrated assessment community. In 2000, I defended my PhD about dealing with uncertainty in decision-support, with integrated assessment as an interdisciplinary attempt to provide such support. Actually, a lot of people thought that my research was about futures studies, as my case study and also the work I was doing as a practitioner next to writing my PhD, were in that domain. So I decided to turn it around: if people think my research is about futures studies, why not study futures studies, as it provides a strategic research site for my interest in dealing with uncertainty?

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II. Uncertainty and precaution

I got a career grant from the Dutch Science Foundation to research the practice of developing policy-oriented foresights. Only three young scholars of Maastricht University (the Netherlands), where I was based at that time, got that grant. One of them was Ellen Vos, nowadays well known for her legal research on risk regulation and at that time focussing on the precautionary principle. We met in person during a high potential lunch organised by the dean of the university. Of course, we both realized that uncertainty and precaution were related in one way or another. Even before we met, a copy of my PhD managed to travel to Ellen's desk. Next to our related interests, we found out that we got along quite well. So we had a couple of lunch meetings and we invited each other to workshops and other meetings each of us organised.

In 2004, a call was distributed for the Uncertainty and Precaution in Environmental Management conference in Copenhagen. Both of us were invited to contribute, and with both of our themes in the title, we decided this was an excellent opportunity to write a paper together. After three years of getting to know each other, we had the feeling that we knew each other and each other's academic fields well enough to embark on such a challenging endeavour. I still remember the afternoon in Ellen's office when she introduced the unpronounceable virginiamycin case to me. She shared her paper dossier with me, and I started to read exactly that report that she so far had ignored, namely the expert's advice into the decision-making process prior to the case. Ellen explained to me how legal scholars were struggling with understanding the ruling by the European Court, while I was struck by the ambiguity in the experts' advice. So we decided that we would do an interdisciplinary case-study analyzing the whole decision-making process on virginiamycin, used as a growth promoter in feed but questioned for risks related to antibiotic resistance, including the Court's ruling. Neither of us would have been able to do this alone: I would have been lost in the legal documents and Ellen in the scientific ones. It was challenging and outside our comfort zones, but we enjoyed the collaboration, which helped us overcoming doubts and hurdles.

Sadly in Spring 2004 the conference chairman Poul Harremous, laureate of the prestigious Heineken prize for environmental sciences, died from a virus he contracted while in Asia. All of us were sad. So it was decided that the conference be recast as tribute to Poul. As both Ellen and I really appreciated Poul, both as scholar and as a person, we decided we had to write a bloody good paper in order to be able to honour him. We were already very committed to our collaboration, but now our ambition was emotionally fuelled. To cut a long story short, in this context we wrote the first version of our currently well-known paper about the uncertainty paradox and the precautionary principle.

III. Entering the risk field

Through the work with Ellen, I learned that, next to futures studies, risk regulation is a perfect strategic research site for the phenomenon I'm interested in: how is society dealing with scientific uncertainty. Not so surprisingly, taking into account my STS-training, over time I have specialised in the governance of technological risks, as

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uncertainty is an inescapable product of innovation. But how did I get to the risk field as a community of scholars?

I knew Ortwin Renn already from my integrated assessment period, as his work on public participation was well-recognised and well-used in that community. Taking into account my growing interest in risk regulation, it was very natural to collaborate with him on our common interest in risk governance. Interestingly enough, Brian Wynne was also an active member of the integrated assessment community, as alongside his pioneering STS research on the risk society, far before the term was even invented, he had an interest in the impact of computer models on decision making; so rather early in my academic career I met him and collaborated with him on that topic. And once almost accidentally I participated in a risk conference in Rotterdam, where I met Ragnar Lofstedt. In a session that I attended, Ragnar was attacked for his critical, but in my view very fair, opinion on public participation. After the session, we met for a drink and stayed in contact. So when, through my work with Ellen, I developed a serious interest in risk regulation as relevant societal practice to study the phenomenon I was interested in, I had the luxury of knowing leading people in interdisciplinary social-science-based risk research, which helped me tremendously in entering the field and figuring how to contribute to understanding the complex policy dossiers of our time. A visiting scholarship for a year at Ragnar's King's Centre for Risk Management was one of the opportunities for which I'm incredibly grateful and which has been definitive in my development as risk scholar.

IV. The societally engaged, reflexive practitioner

It is intellectually stimulating to better understand regulatory complexities and engage in empirically informed theory development, but societal engagement is my main driver. I have always, even as a student, aimed to contribute to responsible policy-making, as in that way I believed I could make a difference and help make the world a better place. So being a scholar has never been my aim nor my ambition, but the university and the academic world turned out to be a very good "home" from which to travel into the "real" world of policy-making.

Through my risk research, I aim to contribute to more responsible decisions, while at the same time enabling society to benefit from innovation. Over the last 10 years, I have been in the fortunate and demanding position not only to research the role of experts and expertise in risk regulation, but as a member of various institutes close to the Dutch government, most recently the Scientific Council for Government Policy and the Dutch Safety Board; I also serve as an expert in the field of safety and risk policy. With all the knowledge acquired from the collective body of risk research as my basis, I try to be a reflexive practitioner.[1]

What is a reflexive practitioner? I not only disseminate risk research insights to policy-makers and society, but I also try to apply what I have learned about the role of experts and expertise in society in what I do and how I behave. So I try to be honest, especially about uncertainty, humble and transparent, while recognizing that everything an expert

[1] See Donald Schön, *The Reflexive Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Basic Books 1984).

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in my position does is part of politics. Performing an investigation into an accident is a political act; not in the sense of aiming at political gains, but that in one way or the other, it has consequences for the room for manoeuvre in the positive or the negative for politicians and it will be used, by politicians and other societal actors, in politics. What I try to do is what Sheila Jasanoff has beautifully described as inject "a much-needed strain of competence and critical intelligence into a regulatory system that otherwise seems all too vulnerable to the demands of politics".[2]

But precisely that aim, also when pursued as an "honest broker",[3] is the fundamental difference between serving as an expert and working as a scientist. This subtle, but critical distinction is not always recognized, with the consequence that experts in a political environment behave as if they are scientists, through which they become part of the problem instead of the solution. As argued in different publications, in my view, this also holds for the practice of risk assessment, which is so heavily institutionalised as an obligatory point of passage in risk regulation practice. Experts acting as scientists are not aware of the political room of manoeuvre they are co-shaping, and hence the political consequences of their seemingly apolitical acts.

V. About field and forum

Risk research is a very broad community with people from very different backgrounds working on very different but nevertheless related research questions. So in my view, it is not a field, but a forum. Within that broad forum, I consider myself part of the family of interdisciplinary, social-science-based risk researchers with a constructivist perspective.

Unfortunately, not all researchers with that profile studying the societal dossiers which also involve risk consider themselves members of the risk community. So it is quite difficult to pinpoint my primary group of peers. And as for a constructivist researcher, research is what researchers do – it is not easy to demarcate risk regulation research. Having said that, I would describe risk regulation research as the interdisciplinary study of how socially binding decisions are taken in complex societal networks of actors about societal activities and issues that also involve risks for human health and/or the environment.

In my view this type of risk research started in the 1960s, hence before I was born. Together with the growing awareness of risk, social scientists engaged with interrelated questions about risk perception, risk communication and risk regulation. As the issue is so complex, so researchers tend to search for a comfort zone. So instead of a grouping based on academic discipline, within the community of social scientists that gather around the issue of risk, I observe a thematic clustering, such as risk perception researchers, risk communication researchers and risk regulation researchers. Such specialization is not by definition problematic, but it risks themes becoming boundaries and, in the longer run, ivory towers of like-focused researchers.

Especially in risk research, most advances that have been made have been inspired by interdisciplinary challenging. That is an uncomfortable test, as I have definitely experienced in my collaboration with legal researchers, but necessary if we want to

[2] In *The Fifth Branch: Sciences Advisers as Policymakers* (Harvard 1998).

[3] See Roger Pielke for the various expert models.

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proceed in our understanding of and relevance to the modern post-trust risk society. I'm happy that I have found so many of that uncomfortable interdisciplinary challenging in the forum of researchers from all kind of disciplines and interdisciplinary careers who share an interest in the societal dynamics around risk.

VI. A POSSIBLE FUTURE

Those of you who know my work in the field of futures studies know how much I have condemned the whole notion of prediction. I don't belief that anyone has the capability to predict. A more constructive approach towards the future is thinking in terms of scenarios and reflecting on which thinkable futures you want to engage with, either in bringing them about or in preventing them.

I want to engage in the future of a risk community which aims to always build bridges between different researchers that gather around risk and to actively connect to researchers who are studying the societal dynamics that we are interested in, but who gather around different themes and in different networks. Examples of neighbouring themes are safety, security, governance, innovation, accountability and public participation, which are all rooted in a broad range of disciplines and bring about a broad range of networks. I would be proud if the people gathering around the theme of risk regulation reach out to such other researchers doing relevant and related work, but who are currently not connected.

In my view, there is great potential for synergy, which would enhance the value of all our "individual" findings and would help to shape the scholarly agenda for the future. In our field the research questions will not change that much, as the deeper question always is how to balance risks and benefits while both are unevenly distributed. But we should always innovate in how we approach this fundamental societal question, how we juxtapose the variety of insights from different perspectives and how to best make sense of society's struggle.

Furthermore, I would be proud if this hybrid and difficult to pinpoint community of interdisciplinary researchers engaging with risk would manage to be more relevant to society. I'm always surprised how few of our insights succeed in travelling to the public space. The surprise about societal controversies also involving risk surprises me. Also the strategy of framing issues as risk and all kinds of doubts as uncertainties can be too effective due to a widespread ignorance that it is not needed taking into account the scholarly understanding of the risk society. So in my experience, there is an urgent need to find ways to transform scholarly insights into wisdom of the masses. That requires innovation in the way we work and in what we value and give priority to, both as risk researchers and as scholars, being members of the global academic community.

So on my wish list for the future is a forum of interdisciplinary researchers who withstand the attractions of developing into a respected academic (inter)discipline, that is in the end primarily busy with academic targets. The possible future of the risk community I would like to engage in is an open network of open-minded but critical researchers actively reaching out, both to other scholarly communities and society at large. Journals which involve contributions from a wide range of scholars as well as practitioners and which include reflections and recommendations on actual cases and societal developments are an indispensable means to such a future.

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