Re-assembling Risk Communication

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My current research into risks deals with the question why Avian Flu (H5N1) was, almost from the start, considered to be an issue for risk communication, whereas, for example, BSE was not. My proposal is that we should take seriously Bruno Latour's work on *Reassembling the Social* and for me this is translated into a re-visiting of the 'scenes of the crime', when each of these risks were couched in different 'risk-profiles' and these – I want to argue – inaugurate distinctive risk flows. In a double movement (one might still want to call this 'reflexive modernization'), this reconstruction itself thus becomes an act of profiling. In the paper I am presenting now, I am barely making a beginning with that profiling, but, hopefully, I can paint you a picture of the road that lays ahead, like a map in an epic novel, a sketch of obstacles and dangers, of options and dead-ends, and in doing so encourage you to 'read on'.

 A sociological profiler, that is, a re-assembler of the social, should always start with what is 'obvious'. Hence, the question why BSE was downplayed and H5N1 was hyped up, points towards the actions of media. Downplaying, as in the rhetoric of containment, and hyping up, as in the rhetoric of endangerment, are distinctive acts of mediation. That what *such risks are* turns out to be so dependent on their mediation, should not surprise us, however. The risk society is also a media society, Ulrich Beck once wrote. Indeed, without media it is difficult to see how people would come to know of risks that they cannot themselves experience, that is, the risks whose indexicality (that which it points towards) operates beyond our own ('unmediated') empirical sensibility.

Yet it is this dimension of mediation, that is, its enactment of sensibility (or should we perhaps say 'affectivity'?), that often remains beyond the scope of questionability (a term I happily borrow from Michael Schillmeier – *Fragwürdigkeit*). This is not to say that risks are not discussed in relation to mediation. Quite the contrary, there is a gigantic mass of literature that can rightly be seen as constitutive of a sub-discipline of communication studies, namely that of risk-communication. Risk communication, traditionally, deals with the question of how certain risks are being communicated to the wider public. It deals with, for example, the problems of:

(1) *Translation*, i.e. how can one make people (incl. politicians) understand science accurately and adequately without them needing university degrees in science?

(2) *Signification,* i.e. how can risks be made meaningful and 'important' in the formation of political agendas?

(3) *Evaluation*, i.e. how can assessments be made about which risks are deemed more worthy of attention than others?

(4) *Organization*, i.e. how can specific institutional frameworks (including concepts, models and protocols) be developed to enable decision makers to manage risks more effectively as well as deploy them strategically?

The risk communication literature is dominated by a cognitivist conceptualization of risk as an issue of *knowing*. Knowing, however, is understood here in the western, modernist sense of the discursive constitution of statements about the world and their practical applications in technoscience, and not in the old Hebrew sense of 'becoming one' (as in *Agape*). The embodiment of the knowing subject is in such cognitivist conceptualizations never in question. Yet it is embodiment where risks begin to (become) matter. It is in the fear, anxiety, stress, trauma, the uncanny, das *Unbehagen*, that risks 'become real' or better, that the virtuality of risks manifests itself as more than mere potentiality or mere probability, and starts to concretize itself in neuro-chemical forms (i.e. the work of neuropolitics).

It is not for nothing that Latour (2005) suggests that every social scientific inquiry should start with 'the obvious' as that which lies before us. That is, we should avoid imposing our definitions, our categories, our hypotheses and our language onto our experience, but merely encounter what we experience. And mediation helps us with this because, in particular mass communication media, are highly attuned to 'controversies'. No risk without controversy, one might say, because what controversy reveals is some sort of insecurity. Latour (2005: 22) distinguishes five types: insecurities about groups (boundaries), about causes (accountability), about actors (responsibility), about facts and about the representational work called 'social science' itself.

My current work is an attempt to provide an Actor Network Analysis of the mediation of risk. More specifically, I am trying to re-write a thesis that I developed over the last few years, by taking empirical work in a different direction than I have done till date. The thesis is: "Whereas risks have always been virtual, because they are by definition suspended between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet', it is through their materialization as mediators within complex information and communication processes, that they themselves have become active agents (actants) and imbued with power (*puissance).*

This can be further specified into two subtheses:

(1) *Mediation is part of the fundamental ontology of risk.* What the risk *is,* is entirely dependent on the forms of mediation through which it comes into being, and

 (2) risks become significant within networks of mediation, that is, they are always remediated (and therefore it is better to speak of risk-flows).

When we take mediation as a constructive force in the formation of risk, i.e. when we accept that there is no risk without its mediation, because risk is virtual, and thus not independent from perception and communication, it becomes impossible however, to stick to a purely cognitivist conception of knowing. The mediation of risk is not 'merely' words, but *words-and-things.* Risk is not an abstraction but a virtuality. Hence, the knowing of risk requires a broader conception of what it is 'to know'.

Knowing as *Agape* is necessarily embodied and becomes an empirical problem for risk communication. This is because embodiment is more difficult to manipulate than textuality. Following Latour we could say that reality is what resists trials. When something is easily manipulated, for example a story of pure fiction, it will not become

endowed with a sense of reality. In legal terms this is easily understood: A hand-written signature is deemed more legally binding than a typed name on an electronic document, and legal binding is what lawyers (exclusively) consider as a means of realization. An example closer to communication might be the writing of a political speech. A political speech may go through several stages of drafts before the final document is presented, but only when the speech is performed, or the statement is published, will it be said to be real.

It is this resistance, this residual materiality (when objects ob-ject), which I suggest we need to 'come to terms with' if we are to develop a better account of the mediation of risks. That is, if risk communication does not take into account the problem of the real, that is, the question of its own realization, it will remain trapped in the impossible paradoxical position that it cannot engage with what it deals with. As long as the communication of risks is seen as a purely textual affair, a matter of assumptions, claims, definitions, enunciations, formulations, hypotheses, models, statements, etc, it will only translate one set of discourses into another set of discourses. This entrapment in self-referentiality becomes clear when one encounters the problems of risk communication, i.e. when it fails to translate a scientific account of risk into a public perception of that risk, when it cannot signify the meaning of a risk or evaluate its importance, and when it fails to 'organize' effective strategic collective action, i.e. 'risk management'.

Translation, signification, evaluation and organization are just four examples of 'associations' between 'words and things' as Foucault provocatively called them. It is not the words and not the things, however, that I want to problematize here. It is the 'and'. The 'and' stands for association and it is no wonder that Ulrich Beck - in the Reinvention of Politics – sees it as the key building block of his theory of reflexive modernization.

For Beck, the inevitable centrality of 'and' is the logical but unintended side-effect of modernization itself. Beck defines reflexive modernization as the modernization of modernization and this has led to a host of theoretical statements with which this can be qualified, e.g. especially the theses on individualization, globalization and cosmo-politanization. But I want to take this in a slightly different direction. What Beck perhaps really meant to say was that inherent in the logic of modernization is a paradox of linearity and non-linearity.

Linearity informs modernization-1, the idea of rational progress that follows the ever-increasing dominance of man over God, nature and history. It is the logic of cause-and-effect, means-and-ends, principles-and-heuristics, institutions-and-practices, state-and-market etc. etc. (lots of 'ands' there). Progress takes place through the interaction between dualisms that are oppositional but also self-annihilating (e.g. as in dialectics). Progress itself is framed in terms of an either-or, either we modernize or we perish.

Non-linearity informs modernization-2, but non-linearity also departs from a binary, except this time, however, the binary does not engage in dialectics but in multiplicities. One does not need to have a degree in computing to know that the binary code 0/1 stands at the basis of all digital forms of information processing, because the binary works as a switch. The number (n) of switches is the exponent of possibilities (2^n). The key thing is that each switch can go either way, it is independent from the other switches. Hence, the difference between modernity 1 and 2 is that whereas in the former,

the working of switches is pre-determined by a generic structure (a universal command), in modernity 2 the switches are singularities. It is for this reason that Deleuze and Guattari have said that only singularities can produce multiplicities.

When we are 'caught up' with non-linearity in a non-linear way - rather than 'captured it' in a linear way - we have entered the risky process of reflexive modernization. Reflexive modernization entails the logic of multiplicities, and as a result, we enter into discourses about 'social' phenomena in which the sociologist is no longer willing to speak about (let alone predict) likely and unlikely outcomes. This is because s/he knows that within the very nature of multiplicity is the ability to undermine itself, to take away the grounding of its own logic, like the presence of the ethnographer in an ethnological study which already transforms the so-called object of study.

Exactly in this way can we think about the mediation of risks. The 'presence' of a medium affects (in the logic of, multiplicities this could also be read as 'becomes') what is being mediated, i.e. as McLuhan (1964) once wrote 'the medium is the message'. The binary logic of medium and message is neither an oppositional one (of mutual exclusiveness), nor a dialectical one, but a multiplicity of inclusive differences. This multiplicity is an assemblage of a whole range of singular but heterogeneous components, human and non-human, that function like to proverbial switches in an information processing device.

This makes the question of the mediation of risks inevitably an empirical one. We cannot speak in general terms about how risks are mediated. We can, however, talk about differences and repetitions, the formation of patterns and shifts between them. Those are primarily empirical issues because they ask us to involve 'words and things' not words or things.

And the first step again is to deploy controversies. What are the groups? Where are boundaries being drawn and where are they being contested. Being both epizootic and panzootic means that H5N1 is a rather difficult actor to 'fix' in groups, moreover as the Avian Flu is not as yet a human pandemic, the controversies of accountability and responsibility all focused on precaution and whether enough was done or perhaps too much, i.e. that governments and health scientists were 'scaremongering'. Needless to say the stakes are very high and the potential gains and losses for governments, scientists and pharmaceutical companies but also media organizations can reach enormous proportions. One fascinating domain where I really want to have a good look is the development of pre-pandemic vaccines. They seem to me a perfect example of an anticipatory technical fix, a archetypical risk-prophylactic.

With BSE controversies are no less. A crucial one from the outset has been what exactly the risk is and who is at risk. The Philips inquiry that concluded its investigations into the handling of the whole affair by successive UK governments spoke of 'chains of institutional failures and errors', including those related to the management and communication of these risks. Risks to public health were unduly ignored in favour of risks to the British beef industry, personal careers and party-political futures. Mass communications media played a deeply controversial role as well, as being both agitators and pacifiers, whatever was – at the moment – most opportune. As for actors, well one of them is given a huge role but there is a lot of controversy about what it is: the prion, a

misfolded protein. They are difficult to research (they often form clumps), they cannot be cultivated in Petri-dishes, and it is not clear how they reproduce themselves.

Mediation and controversy are often in tandem, hence it it is a shame that so far the field of risk communication has not bothered itself with critical questions about the nature of mediation. That is, the communication medium itself has remained an obscure entity that functions as a black box, a transmitting device, whose internal switches are mysterious *and* (paradoxically perhaps) unproblematic. It seems obvious to me that what is lacking here is a phenomenology of mediation and to meet this I have started to make some modest inroads in developing such a phenomenology within the world of media studies, which is perhaps even more plagued by a lack of concern for its own object of study.

Let me immediately add that the field of communication studies itself is not as blind to the phenomenology of mediation as I seem to be accusing risk communication of. Indeed, the problem of noise, of that which interferes with communication (or bias as some may wish to call it) was from the beginning a key concern in the building of communication science (most notably by Shannon and Weaver). Noise does not follow the linear logic. In communication, noise does not stand in opposition to silence, but in opposition to sense. That is, noise is the universal condition of sense. Just as we may be asked how to make sense out of silence, we could instead be asked how to make sense out of noise. Indeed, as the case of memorials, for example, shows, silence can also be treated as another form of noise. The memorial is an actor that speaks on behalf of silence.

The mediation of risks is thus concerned with the issue of how to make sense out of noise and silence. The noise/silence consists of words and things between which certain associations must be made. When considering the instable (mutating) molecular structure of virus DNA, RNA or of prions, virologists will ask: how do they 'affect' animal tissue, how do they 'spread', how do they move between birds and humans, or between cows and humans; but sociologists of association - whilst needing to take account of the former - will necessarily go further and should ask: how they entail consequences for public health, political stability, personal careers, insurance policies, pharmaceutical economics, legally binding accountability, national security, etc etc.

It is obvious that it is neither in the nature of the things, nor in the nature of the words, that the difference between the mediations of BSE and H5N1 exist. The hardest thing to accept is perhaps that this is not a scientific issue. In both cases, all techno-science can do is create specific articulations between words-and-things that, within the confines of scientific discourse itself – are bound to hypothetical injunctions, albeit not governed by uncertainty but by probability. The discomfort this creates, not in the least among the scientists themselves, is that the languages of uncertainty and of probability is relatively indistinct when it comes to their translation into 'public understanding of science'.

It is here where the battlegrounds are drawn, where the epidemic of signification becomes a "*nomos of the earth*" (to speak with Schmitt), i.e. where sovereignties are questioned, objections are raised, and virtualities are realised. Both H5N1 and BSE/vCJD currently exist in a state of suspense, the apocalyptic scenarios have "not yet" come to fruition, but as yet there are no new actors that can inaugurate their sovereignty by

deciding that the scenarios are indeed "no longer" valid. Indeed, this is what constitutes what Schillmeier and Pohler (2006) call *a cosmo-political event*: the cosmo-politic concerns the assembling of heterogeneous elements and flows. The controversies seemed to have mellowed. The hot stage is over, we are cooling down, dead cows and chickens have been burnt, ashes have been scattered, cases have been counted, files have been made, statistics have been gathered, vaccine-stocks have been piled up. The apocalypse did not happen …..

If I leave it at that, it might be poetically complete, but probably a bit dissatisfying. The cosmo-political events of H5N1 and BSE/vCJD deserve a second look, which I cannot do justice here in the form of a 'summary' of the main points, but am condemned to do, as time is running out. But as I do not want you to leave with an intellectually empty stomach signified with the damning question 'so what?', allow me to say, a last few words, about what I have done in the form of a conclusion.

1. Mediation not only plays a key, formative, role in the creation of risks but is also fundamental to what we can understand as being 'reflexive modernization'. But we have to go back to the source. Reflexive modernization is self-confrontation, not merely self-reflection; it is visceral, objective, uncanny and psycho-somatically disturbing.

2. This mediation is an 'attuning of (our) Dasein to our being-in-the-world' (Van Loon, 2007). This attuning is an associating (an action, not a state) of words and things. It is this attuning, which concentrates on the 'and', that engenders the complex heterogeneity of inclusive rather than exclusive differences. Mediation-as-associating is a matter of differential intensities in terms if time (e.g. time scales), space (distance), frequency, motility, density, speed, etc etc.

3. These associations help us to create an 'analytical pallet' that helps us to make better, more detailed, more complicated descriptions of particular risks and controversies. These will include a lot more mediators than Wills' tetrad (human, animal, parasite, pathogen), i.e. water, air, soil, feed, knives, needles, transportation vehicles, vets, medics, diagnostic tools, hospitals, clinics, medical tools, laboratories, statistics, graphs, scientific publications etc etc and of course a whole range of communications media such as journals, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet etc etc. All these need to be involved to create a good account of the translations involved in the fabrication of risks as matters of concern.

4. From those heterogeneous hybrids it will become clear that the risk-phenomena of Avian Influenza and BSE/vCJD (a) cannot be reduced to the pathologies that give them their names and (b) cannot be reduced to being epiphenomena of some notion of 'sameness'. They are not the same 'things' that were simply differently articulated with words (i.e. the often-made mistake in Foucauldean-inspired discourse analysis, when things disappear in words). They are constellations, assemblages of different actors, heterogeneous elements and mediators and *therefore* part of different risk flows.

5.   Finally, this has consequences for sociology. If it takes mediation seriously, the sociology of reflexive modernization must itself become a mediator rather than an observer. It thus enters the very same risk flows it was set out to 'observe'. If understood as self-confrontation, a reflexively modernized sociology *of* risk thus becomes itself a sociology *at* risk. This is the true political dimension of sociology, when it takes part in the assembling of risk as cosmo-political *social* event.