

## **Risk, the mass media and personal biography**

*Revisiting Beck's 'knowledge, media and  
information society'*

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**ABSTRACT** Ulrich Beck's formulation of the 'risk society' stresses the central importance of the media, yet is surprisingly reticent about analysing it. This article begins with Beck's positioning of the media within risk modernity, and argues that in two major dimensions – the different media narrativizations of risk and expertise, and the mutability and mobility of people's risk identities in their everyday experience – his analysis is significantly lacking. In the Australian research on which this article is based, the authors draw on long interviews as a methodological device, and the 'border crossings' contained in risk biographies as a central concept, in examining people's construction and reconstruction of risk. Rather than Beck's somewhat universalizing notion of 'blind citizens' facing the catastrophic democracy of environmental risk, we find here a public which draws on a number of circuits of communication in facing a wide range of risks via very specific biographical and social histories. The article examines these situated logics and temporally articulated biographies of everyday life via case studies.

**KEYWORDS** *Beck, everyday experience, expertise, media, risk identities and biographies*

For the risk society can only be grasped theoretically, empirically and politically if one starts from the premise that it is always also a knowledge, media and information society at the same time – or, often enough as well, a society of non-knowledge and disinformation. (Beck, 2000: xiv)

**The writings of the sociologist** Ulrich Beck on the central role played by risk in late modern societies have been very influential since the



publication of his *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* in English translation in 1992. Given the centrality of issues of media and representation in alternative global theories of postmodernity (as, say, in Baudrillard), it may seem surprising that Beck is open to criticism for the paucity of a media account in his 'risk society' thesis. For example, Cottle (1998) draws attention to the lack of middle-range theories of the media in Beck's 'risk society'. He points to ambiguities, even contradictions, in Beck's somewhat scattered and fragmentary descriptions of the role of the media in risk society; including an 'ontological/epistemological slippage that renders his understanding of the actual social processes involved in relation to representation of "risks" indistinct' (Cottle, 1998: 25). Further, he indicates 'Profound ambivalences informing [Beck's] views on the media and their contribution to the private sphere, subpolitics and single-issue movements' (1998: 23).

The organizers of a 1997 conference on the media and environmental risk at Cardiff University, Allan et al. (2000) also point to the 'relatively under-theorised' status of the media in Beck's work so far. However, they note that he does accord the media a crucial role in the organization and dissemination of knowledge about the uncertainties associated with environmental risks. Tulloch (2000) argues that while for Beck the risk society sees a systemic transformation where all sectors of society – business, the law, academia, the media and politics – now talk 'risk' discourse, he has not separately analysed 'media talk' as counter-expertise. Nor does another current risk theorist, Brian Wynne, who criticizes Beck for his emphasis on the discursive conflict of competing 'experts', take us much further. This is because Wynne's interest in 'lay knowledge' is primarily in its opposition to or negotiation with scientific knowledge. Again, there is no systematic analysis of the media in its various risk-representing values of practice.

Beck himself acknowledges some of the weaknesses in his 'Foreword' to Allan et al.'s *Environmental Risks and the Media* (2000). He admits that while his work has repeatedly emphasized 'the key significance of the mass media in the risk society', this has been 'only with bold theories'. Beck continues, 'This is clearly not sufficient given the significance of the subject and is to be attributed to my limitations alone.'

In arguing in this recent piece that 'the risk society can only be grasped . . . from the premise that it is always also a knowledge, media and information society', Beck does, however, begin to map the 'script underlying' this 'key significance' of the media.

*First*, risks are usually uncovered not within, but *outside* the institutions that bear responsibility in the economy, science and politics. *Second*, the mass media play a decisive role in this, with their portrayal of conflicting definitions of risk, that is, their representation, or construction, of risks and uncertainties. As the uncovering of risks and uncertainties usually involves



complex arguments, and because risks are not perceptible by the senses in everyday life, the public eye of the media takes on key significance in the risk society. *Third*, when risks have been made public, the institutions that bear responsibility react with a *politics of denial*. This is then, *fourthly*, complemented by so-called salami tactics – only admit to what has already been made known and is irrevocable. *Fifth*, there is ultimately always just one explanation: *human error*. This chess move, usually concealed under the guise of ‘operational error’, deflects questions about the fundamental gap between decision and knowledge and about systemic errors. *Sixth*, time-consuming studies are subsequently undertaken which place their hopes in the rapid fall-off of media interest in risk conflicts – with good reason, for even in the case of potential or current catastrophes, the time span involved in maintaining the public reporting of risks in the media amounts to only a few days or a few weeks. The result, *seventhly*, is always the same: *no one is really made liable*. But the enormous costs, loss of credibility, and threat to material existence associated with the public debate about risks – because whole markets and industrial sectors collapse (think of the BSE crisis) – affect, *eighthly*, the weak especially (in the case of BSE, the farmers), and the tax payer. (Beck, 2000: ii)

Situated as the ‘Foreword’ to a book on media and risk, Beck’s ‘script’ is interesting for two reasons. First, its elaboration almost entirely *ignores* the media, except as some kind of homogeneous, potent and short-memoried ‘counter-expert’ force which has the potential to reveal risks which neither are admitted by the institutions responsible for them, nor are perceptible ‘by the senses in everyday life’. Second, it ignores the media audience, and thus what Beck rightly profiles as the ‘bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life’ (Beck, 1992: 132). In the next section we will expand on these two points.

### **Beck and the media**

At one level, Beck’s ‘script’ seems a useful descriptive statement; of, for example, the role of the *Guardian* newspaper in recently drawing public and government attention in Britain to the scientific uncertainties relating to genetically modified food. But as Cottle and Allan et al. have said, this in fact leaves out of account the very many layers, conflicts and contradictions of the media processes of representation. This aspect of problems with Beck’s media account is not our focus in this article; so suffice to say that, elsewhere, some work has been done in relation to risk, the media and HIV/AIDS which does focus on the relationship between different kinds of ‘expert’ (both inside and outside the various media genres and institutions) in designing ‘their representation, or construction, of risks and uncertainties’ (see particularly Miller et al., 1998; Tulloch and Lupton, 1997). Also, Cottle (2000) examines the



limited opportunities for lay viewpoints and emergent forms of 'social rationality' in environmental items on TV news; and points (1998) to studies of the intersection of journalists with scientific expertise according to different professional cultures; and to work on lay responses to scientific expertise according to local knowledge, traditions, customs and culture.

Beck, in contrast, tends to fall back in his analysis of media on reactive observations about 'Advertising campaigns on the part of industry, government experts, ethics committees' which attempt to 'paper over' public uncertainty. If Beck is serious that the risk society is also a media and information society, he seems to analyse it in excessively reductive ways – as, in fact, 'a society of non-knowledge and disinformation' (Beck, 2000: xiv). The larger field of the role of various media genres and institutions in the public's understanding of 'expert' (especially scientific) advice over a wider variety of risk fields is only just beginning. As Allan et al. (2000: 13–16) argue,

Important questions . . . arise as to who in the media wields [Beck's] spotlight, under what circumstances and . . . where it is (and is not) directed . . . [Their] struggle to narrativize the scientific world necessarily situates journalists at the point where, as Beck (1992) observes, the antagonisms between those who produce risk definitions and those who consume them are at their most apparent . . . [I]t is . . . important to keep in mind that at the same time the media are playing a crucial role in sustaining the imperatives of 'expert' risk assessment, they are also creating spaces, albeit under severe constraints, for counter-definitions to emerge . . . This is to suggest, then, that the identification of slips, fissures, silences and gaps in media reporting need to be accompanied by a search for alternatives.

It is in talk of those 'slips, fissures, silences and gaps' in the media text, as well as the 'search for alternatives', that some 30 years of film and media studies theory is lurking; and it seems surprising that this kind of agenda still needs to be articulated in the face of the 'risk society' thesis.

And yet there *is* space in Beck's account (fragmentary though it is) for this kind of analysis. Cottle suggests an epistemological/ontological slippage in Beck's understanding of the media. Yet in our view Cottle's following comment gets to (a quite problematic) *coherence* at the centre of Beck's critical assumptions: namely, that Beck seems 'to want to hold onto the objective nature of risks, while recognizing the role played by the media in visualizing these and rendering them perceptible – a position of critical realism perhaps' (Cottle, 1998: 12).

Let us briefly retrace via *Risk Society* and other Beck writings his theory of media significance. This develops as follows.



### **Risk and the environment**

By risks I mean . . . all radioactivity, which completely evades human perceptive abilities, but also toxins and pollutants in the air, the water and foodstuffs, together with the accompanying short- and long-term effects on plants, animals and people. (Beck, 1992: 22)

But Beck *also* speaks of a '*risk society* system of underemployment' (1992: 144), and of the risk society as that stage of late modernity where 'the two great forms of security that had remained for people in modernity' (in the family and occupation) are disappearing. 'Now both are in crisis as regards providing people's lives with "inner stability".' As Cottle notes, in these areas of family and industrial practices, Beck draws on empirical findings to a degree absent in his media discussion. So why, given his significant analytical investment in market-driven aspects of the risk society, does *environmental risk* come to be so defining in his analysis?

### **The 'democratic' invisibility of risk**

The simple answer seems to be that for Beck the main thrust of his grand theorizing is that risk is potentially both catastrophic and 'democratic': as in Chernobyl and BSE. Here what Beck actually means by his observation that the 'risk society . . . is always also a knowledge, media and information society at the same time' becomes clearer. In Beck's view people who suffer the other risks of late modernity (such as unemployment because of new technologies, or the choices of job mobility versus family stability) are highly aware of them as everyday experiences, choices and tensions. Moreover, these economic risks clearly still have gendered and socioeconomic inflections. In contrast, environmental risks that 'induce systematic, and often *irreversible* harm, generally remain *invisible*' (Beck, 1992: 23), and can affect entire populations. While (as with technologically induced environmental risks) 'risky underemployment' is 'a development whose far-reaching consequences and risks are not calculable for political consciousness and action either' (Beck, 1992: 144), its victims do have a reflexive relationship with its daily consequences. In contrast, in areas of environmental risk, the inability of scientists in risk modernity to be sure of risk calculation and avoidance can lead to catastrophes which, while invisible, 'are based on *causal interpretation*, and thus initially only exist in terms of the (scientific or anti-scientific) *knowledge* about terms' (Beck, 1992: 22-3). Just as the left realists in criminology argued that victimized people's understanding of oppression depended on their everyday experience rather than on media moral panics, so Beck sees the familial dangers of everyday life as 'drenched with experience' (1997: 123). But it is the invisibility of environmental hazards that seems to lift this aspect of the risk society out of the everyday domain; which is *why* the media become so important.



What eludes sensory perception becomes socially available to 'experience' in media pictures and reports. Pictures of tree-skeletons, worm-infested fish, dead seals (whose living images have been engraved on human hearts) condense and concretize what is otherwise ungraspable in everyday life. (Beck, 1995: 100)

In Beck's view, it is this existence of a natural and social reality beneath and behind these images to which the media can draw attention. This is an essentially critical realist reading in which there is in fact no 'slippage' of epistemology or ontology. Similarly, Beck argues, the human effects of environmental catastrophes begin to show at the surface.

What scientists call . . . 'unproven connections' are [for parents] their 'coughing children' who turn blue . . . and gasp for air with a rattle in their throat . . . The immediacy of personally and socially experienced misery contrasts today with the intangibility of threats from civilization, which only come to consciousness in scientized thought. (Beck, 1992: 61, 52)

In this experiential way, victims of risk 'themselves become small, private alternative experts in risks of modernization . . . The parents begin to collect data and arguments' (Beck, 1992: 61). How important then – both for these 'parents' and even more for those whose children don't 'gasp for air' – might the media be!

### **The potential 'cognitive' role of the media**

For Beck the media – as knowledge-processing systems – are themselves part of risk society.

As the risk society develops, so does the antagonism between those *afflicted* by risks and those who *profit* from them. The social and economic importance of *knowledge* grows similarly, and with it the power over the media to structure knowledge (power and research) and disseminate it (mass media). The risk society in this sense is also the *science, media and information* society. (Beck, 1992: 46)

When Beck does point to the differentiation of communication forms within the public sphere ('from the global television network to the school newspaper' (1992: 196) he is not, as Cottle suggests, involved in an epistemological 'slippage' but realistically pointing to both the potential 'cognitive' role of the media and the power discriminations of their varied forms. Beck no more forgets the power of 'market forces' over the mass (as compared with school) media than he does in his analysis of the family within risk society. But it is especially *because* of the potentially catastrophic, invisible nature of environmental risks that the 'risk society = media/knowledge/information society' equation becomes so important for Beck in relation to *those risks*. Given his general view



(together with other risk theorists like Lash (1994)) that class and other systemic differences within modernity would give way (as a result, for Beck, of 'risky underemployment') to differences of knowledge within the information order, the 'invisibility' of environmental risks becomes a paradigm case for his theory. Beck's particular use of terms for the potential role of the media – that they can help imaginatively to 'condense and concretize what is otherwise ungraspable in everyday life' – is identical to that of critical realist media practitioners and theorists themselves (Tulloch, 1990: ch. 5). This needs to be remembered at the same time as his more pessimistic conclusion: that 'market forces' (e.g. the media's penchant for short-term risk 'fashions') work together with PR spin-doctors employed by risk industries to control a 'media-dependent, manipulable' (Beck, 1997: 123) public. Again, Beck is close to both critical realist practitioners (such as Trevor Griffiths and Ken Loach) and theorists (like the members of the Frankfurt School) in arguing that 'Television isolates *and* standardizes' in removing people from 'bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life' (Beck, 1992: 132); but also in offering, as a wager, the potential of different kinds of media:

... the democratisation of criticism that becomes possible in risk society implies that the necessary attentiveness and clarity of criticism in the interplay of government and opposition will falter if at the same time criticism, even radical criticism, does not prove its principles and expand its footing in the public mass media. (Beck, 1997: 147)

### **Beck's 'blind citizen'**

However, unlike 'modernist' critical realists who pin their wager on contradictions between classes, Beck finds his potential for a liberating conflict in a different struggle: the dialogue over the uncertainties of science and 'expert' knowledge – in other words, in 'reflexivity' as a contest between experts and counter-experts. 'We are dealing with "scientific battles" waged over the heads of the workers, and fought instead by intellectual strategies in intellectual milieux' (Beck, 1992: 113). Environmental hazards, says Beck,

... are produced by business operations, to be sure, but they are defined and evaluated socially – in the mass media, in the experts' debate, in the jungle of interpretations and jurisdictions, in courts or with strategic-intellectual dodges, in a milieu and in contexts, that is to say, to which the majority of workers are totally alien ... (Beck, 1992: 112)

And yet, the media *might* – via its possibilities for imagistic condensing and concretizing – perform as 'cultural eyes through which the "blind citizens" can perhaps win back the autonomy of their own judgement' (Beck, 1992: 20).

Our second problem with Beck's 'script' for a media theory is that its



'blind citizen' assumption entirely ignores the very thing which he claims television reduces: the 'bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life' (Beck, 1992: 132). Further, it is our view that Beck's critical realist position on power, standardization and the media tends to efface post-structuralist approaches to the mutability and mobility of identities in his supposedly 'blind citizens'. This omission – together with his 'paradigm' emphasis on environmental risks – leads to a universalizing tendency in Beck's analysis.

So, for a sustained 'media and risk' analysis, we need not only to explore the media as industries (among many other communicating institutions) in the construction of risk, but also to conduct empirical research into the 'audiences' of risk. That is, we need to look at the everyday living of risk and the reading of 'expert' (including media) representations of risk by members of the public. Here, a focus would be on an individual's use of 'expert systems' (the media, self-awareness books, professional advisers, etc.) and other informal information systems as 'circuits of communication'. To what extent do these work in collusion or contradiction as reading formations and interpretive communities with 'moral agendas' (Alasuutari, 1999) in mediating people's negotiations of risk? To what degree is Beck right that television removes the public risk debate from 'bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life'? Alasuutari argues for a 'third generation' audience focus which synthesizes analysis of the institutional encoding and narrativization of media (of the kind Allan et al. call for) and the 'ethnographic everyday' discussion of media audiences that replaced 'big effects' research during the 1980s. Further, Ang calls for a critical ethnography in audience analysis which draws it 'away from its status as realist knowledge in the direction of its quality as a form of storytelling, as narrative' (1996: 75; also Tulloch, 2000). We have currently, then, calls both for (i) the analysis 'of journalistic narrativisation . . . to "make sense" to a public facing unknown and barely calculable risks' (Allan et al., 2000) and for (ii) a focus on the telling of narratives (by respondents and researchers alike) in audience analysis (Ang, 1996).

Is the public in fact telling stories about 'unknown and barely calculable' environmental risks, as in the Beck formulation? Is it systematically the case that people's perception of nature/culture distinctions have eroded, so that 'people have the experience that they breathe like the plants, and live *from* water as the fish live *in* the water' (Beck, 1992: 74)? Or are people telling very different, older and more unambiguous (modernist) stories about risk (as, in fact, Beck himself suggests when analysing the 'feudal/late modernity' tensions within the family)? To what extent is Beck's continuing 'paradigm' focus on 'industrial risks, nuclear, chemical, ecological and genetic engineering risks' (1996: 31) leading to the implicit assumption that it is toxic and environmental risks that concern the *public* most?



Although the public's 'radical uncertainty' is a key – perhaps *the* key – assumption underpinning the whole framework of risk society thinking in Beck's work, he has surprisingly little empirical engagement with it. Very little has been written about the ways in which notions and knowledges concerning risks are developed, understood and embedded in the everyday world of this 'public', or the different meanings 'risk' has in the biographies of those using the term. Again, the problem is apparently one of excessive reductionism – as though the public (as 'audience') does not draw actively on a whole variety of (media and other) circuits of communication in thinking about (and experiencing) risk.

### **Australians' perceptions of risk**

We have begun to probe some of the concerns described above in an empirical research project using interviews with Australians. In this project, we first wanted to go beyond risk theorists' tendency to over-focus on specific areas of (environmental or intimate) risk. It is, we suggest, *Beck's* emphasis on this risk in particular which leads to his assumption about the whittling away of 'some of the carefully erected boundaries between classes, nations, humans and the rest of nature' (1998: 11). Risk may well be more *regularly* conceptualized as a threat to one's economic status, home, gendered (and aged) relationships with others, social standing or status and emotional or psychological states. Thus, it may well be that it is via the differences between 'classes and categories' of people, not their uncertain communion with nature, that people still narrativize their accounts of risk. By broadening our categories according to our respondents' *own* understanding of risk, and by tracing the narrativization of these risks in both short- and long-term biographies, we found a rather different 'risk modernity' from Beck.

Methodologically our emphasis was on qualitative empirical research, primarily based on long interviews in 1997–8 with 74 respondents living in a range of locations in New South Wales: Sydney, the Blue Mountains tourist area on the outskirts of Sydney, the industrial city of Wollongong (close to Sydney) and the small country town of Bathurst in the central west of the state. The participants were recruited and interviewed by local residents, who used pre-existing social networks and snowball sampling for recruitment. This strategy was only partly successful in achieving a heterogeneous group of interviewees, as the group was dominated by well-educated, young and middle-aged adults of British ancestry.<sup>1</sup> As such, we make no claims for generalizability of our findings.

The interviews were semi-structured, and directed at eliciting participants' views and experiences of risk in the context of their individual biographies – in other words, their narrativization of risk in their past, present and everyday lives. Although the interview schedule included certain topics that each participant was asked to address, there



was also scope for flexibility where respondents raised their own risk anxieties, or where the interviewer probed areas of risk not initially mentioned. Our analytical emphasis was on key themes, narratives, definitions, personal/social histories, rhetorical and expressive devices, etc. emerging from the transcribed interviews.

In the second part of this article, we will return to Beck's 'script' for 'risk society = media/information society' analysis. But we will approach these questions from our own perspective of the public as 'audiences' of risk: that is, following Alasuutari, as people *constituting themselves* as audiences in their everyday practices (rather than seeing audiences as somewhat passive 'effects' ('blind citizens') of forceful expert and counter-expert systems, as in Beck's account. We will return to Beck's script via a discussion of one of our case studies.

### **Border crossings as narratives of time**

Current risk theorists have emphasized dimensions of risk biography that highlight matters of multiple identity and subjectivity. For instance, Lash and Wynne (1992: 7) comment on the multilayered response to risk on the part of lay people as a form of 'private reflexivity' which, they argue, 'must be the basis for its more public forms'. According to their formulation, this suggests the development of a questioning of expert knowledges. It blurs the boundaries between the 'private' and the 'public', for while risks may be debated at the level of expertise and public accountability, they are dealt with by most individuals at the level of the local, the private, the everyday and the intimate. This raises the question, for Lash and Wynne, about where and how the reflexivity that challenges modernity arises, and how it is expressed. That is, what are 'the sources and social dynamics of forms of reflexivity'? Lupton and Tulloch's research (1998) with young people in relation to the specific risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmissible diseases suggests that (pace Beck), depending on the context, people move between placing their trust in expert knowledges and believing in their personal knowledges of the self, the body and others. At some times expert systems are valued in the face of health risks such as HIV/AIDS; at others they are challenged or abandoned for more experiential, embodied and 'grounded' knowledges; at yet others the offerings of both are valued in combination.

A central 'critical ethnographic' strategy in our current research has been (following Ang, 1996), to focus on both our respondents' ('everyday') and our own ('expert') storytelling. This then raises the further issue of reflexivity around our 'expert' discourses and our respondents' 'everyday' narratives. This, too, is a public accountability/private storytelling matter. Because of our emphasis on multiple identity and subjectivity, one heuristic device we have used for selecting and



describing individual biographies has been that of 'border crossings' – for example, selecting and comparing personal narratives that describe changes in identity and subjectivity as a result of changing one's country or one's sexual preference, or as severe bodily ageing forces a change of self-perception and risk trajectory on us. This heuristic device of 'border crossings' is intended as a symptomatic rather than representative approach to risk biographies, in so far as we assume all biographies are composed of the 'partial perspectives' of 'insider' and 'situated' knowledges whose 'truths' are contingent on different borders of time, space, age, gender, class, sexual preference and other aspects of 'culture' and 'context'.

In other current work, for example, we examine the narratives (considered in terms of 'lack' and 'plenitude') of people who have been part of Australia's diasporic construction: the 'new home/young country' utopia of European, Soviet, South African and Asian immigrants, travelling away from the economic/political, intimate, criminal, even genocidal 'lacks' of their more risky homelands towards a better (hoped for but often deferred) narrative closure. Reflexivity about our own narratives is important here. This emphasis on a (lack/plenitude) narrative form was not intended to privilege certain terms and concepts within a particular (e.g. Proppian/structuralist) narrative account. These terms were used because they were regular discursive items in the common-sense myths about 'leaving this place of risk [Russia, South Africa, Spain, etc.] for Australia'. They are also terms which have been circulating in a range of communication forms over many years. On the other hand, quite different narrative devices and concepts may be appropriate for analysing other kinds of risk biography, such as those relating to sexual preference. In particular, the very specific (late 1970s/early 1980s) time and (bath-house/sauna) place co-ordinates of 'coming out' gay sexuality, followed by the terrible knowledge of HIV/AIDS, has made many gay risk biographies into stories of plenitude *reduced* to lack via the experienced (epistemological) 'truth' of scientific knowledge. This can lead to an interesting blurring of knowledge claims in the cases of some respondents, which is more complex than the scientific knowledge→prediction hiatus that Beck describes as central to risk modernity, and quite beyond the ken of his 'blind citizens'.

### **Talking about risk and the media**

When asked to assess the various sources of information about risks to which they had access, many of our respondents demonstrated a cynical response to the mass media. Some of the most credulous were those respondents who were not university-educated and had not completed high school. They commented on the credibility of television news in particular, which they saw as more likely to be trustworthy because this



medium presented images and appeared more immediate. Thus, a 38-year-old working class woman from Wollongong said that

I think because you can actually see it on TV, I think you've got to believe it. It's like all those fires that happened. I mean you don't really believe that it happened until you actually see it for yourself. And in the paper you're only reading it aren't you?

A 24-year-old woman, also from Wollongong and working class, agrees: she trusts television because 'It's live. Like in the radio and the newspapers they can change it around to make it sound a bit better and juicier, and on TV you get it live.' These women clearly see television as less mediated than other forms of news.

Other, often better educated respondents in middle class occupations argued that the mass media could not be trusted because they were manipulated. But some working class respondents also demonstrated this more critical approach. Thus a 35-year-old woman, also from Wollongong, says that she trusts:

Probably experts and professional advice, and incidents that happen to close friends or relatives. Where you actually know the person, I think they're more trustable. You can trust them more than the media. I still think the media alert us to risks and generally the media tells you what's going on, but I'm sure it's you know, spiced up or sensationalized to a certain degree.

Most other respondents privileged their 'personal experience' or their 'intuition' over mass media sources.

As noted above, our research attempted to site risk responses in individuals' personal biographies, to provide the detailed context and cultural inflection that has been missing both from psychological analyses of lay risk perceptions and the work of Beck and others. We have found that case studies provide a useful way of presenting biographical material in an appropriately detailed way. In the rest of this article, therefore, we will consider the lived experiences of risk as they are recounted by Robert. This 44-year-old, university-educated, health promotion co-ordinator identifies himself as gay. He also constructs his risk biography with central themes and discursive constructs that clearly emerge from his health professional location.

Discussing risk and personal control in his interview, Robert claims that he is:

- scientific in his 'epidemiological relative risk' definition – 'I have a scientific understanding of risk which is very structured . . . a risk-ratio perception of risk.'
- 'social constructionist . . . Living in a complex industrialized society means that you have a limited capacity to influence some of the major factors which affect your health, your prosperity and your social interactions with other people.'



- 'postmodernist . . . I try to look at the facts as represented by a range of people rather than just one.'

As one who seems to have both retained and distanced himself from the grand narratives of modernity, Robert may be said to have a 'layered' and 'mutable' identity. But how does he shape up according to Beck's 'risk society = media/information society' equation?

Like many of our other respondents (male and female; gay and heterosexual) Robert emphasizes his youthful risk-taking. Drink-driving in rural Australia, drug-taking, 'unsafe sex', etc. are discussed by most of our respondents as part of their self-conception now of their subjectivities then, when they were supposedly unreflexive, 'bullet-proof' earlier identities. Adopting at this point in his story his 'scientific' persona, Robert compares this youthful excess with the predicted statistical drop in his risks as an older middle class male – *except for the fact that he had 'an unusual life experience' in his mid-twenties*: 'in the early 1980s I "came out"'. This resulted, prior to any knowledge about HIV/AIDS, in 'several years when I was very sexually active'. As with others among our respondents (for example, Eric, a South African who 'came out' in Thatcher's Britain), this led to a very precise narrative historicizing of Robert's sense of risk. As well as the perception of the 'early eighties' as a time of *unknown* risk, there is also a personal (biographical) sense of ageing in the context of the AIDS epidemic since then. Living from his twenties into his forties, he is becoming aware now for the first time of the potential for loneliness as his friends and partners die during the 1990s.

Robert's response to risk in our interview is therefore a conjuncture of (a) this detailed but brief historical and biographical moment of remembered 'jouissance' prior to *scientific enlightenment* and (b) a 'social constructionist' sense of history and risk as *changing cultural perception*. He recognizes that the risks Australians have faced over the years have changed, but also that their *perceptions* of risk have changed:

There are a lot of things that were happening which were being hidden and one of the issues that's been revealed is the pain, the suffering that people faced as a result of family-located and institutionally located violence, and now people are revealing that they experienced that violence and that pain. Though if you asked people in the 1950s and 1960s if that was a risk that Australians faced they would have said 'Oh no! We don't have that problem here.' So it was not consciously recognized as a danger, but we now readily recognize the danger to the point that in some ways I think we're over-reacting to it by trying to demonize the behaviour and not looking realistically at what social factors led or precipitated that behaviour . . . So I think risks change, but also the perception of what is happening changes.

This mix of actual historical and perceived historical change in risk behaviour as a matter of rational enlightenment then works itself



through each of Robert's stories about the *different* areas of his risk behaviour: for example, in the areas of intimate risks and risk of crime. He feels it is a miracle he was not HIV-infected, since many friends from the period have died. Nowadays, though, he feels he has control of this area – 'I suppose I'm taking a hardened risk-management approach'. He is also aware of the risk to him of homophobic violence. For Robert, in all the areas of risk that he perceives and narrates, there is this continuous play between his 'scientific-epidemiological' self and his 'social constructionist' self. For instance, in the area of lifestyle risks, he is aware that statistically he is at a greater risk of dying from cancer than AIDS because of his long years of smoking. But on a daily basis he thinks about the latter not the former. Similarly, in relation to crime risk, his house has been broken into many times in recent years, and

. . . I've never been beaten up on the street, but as I said I am aware about violence in the inner city where I socialize and I've had first hand experience through nursing people who have been attacked, I have close friends who are nurses now who tell me that they've got yet another hideously disfigured young boy sitting in St Vincents [hospital] having plastic surgery because he had a bottle pushed in his face down at a hotel. So that's the stuff that's real to me and I can respond to it and think, well, has it any personal relevance to me?

There are no economic risks that Robert particularly worries about, because he believes that if he lost his job he could easily get another nursing position. However, again, he emphasizes the broader public's *perception* of risk ('Crime, the increasing ethnic mix, the perception that the world is becoming more complex and the challenge to a homogeneous, monocultural myth from the past') rather than changes in risk itself. Complexity in the world makes people uneasy, 'particularly those people who traditionally have had a position of privilege simply by virtue of some very superficial characteristics, such as being white, employed, and say adhering to a Christian religion'. He does see as real the 'global . . . risk of becoming an excessively polarised society with increasing differences between the haves and the have nots'. But overall,

. . . I have an optimistic view of life. I acknowledge that our society is becoming more complex. It appears in many ways to be fragmented; however that's not something that particularly concerns me. I don't have a strong personal reliance upon . . . cultural stability. I find that cultural stability is actually cultural stasis.

For Robert this complexity and what he calls 'postmodern' fragmentation is a sign of improvement in Australia, rather than greater risk; and he believes that his actual professional activity as a sexual health worker helps open him out to this greater complexity.



A person in my position comes into contact with an enormous cross section of people. I mean I'm a health care worker and so I'm exposed to the personal viewpoints of hundreds and hundreds of people in a week. And at an academic and professional level I'm also being exposed to lots of different ideas, but if you're living in Ashfield and you're working in a factory and you go home and all you do is watch the national television and chill out, then you very easily can get sucked into just seeing the world from just one position.

Like Beck, Robert constructs his 'blind citizen' – the factory worker living in the lower middle/working class Sydney suburb of Ashfield who relies on television for her or his view of the world. Symptomatically, it is at this point that his discussion of the media impacts on his narrative.

I try to . . . apply a methodology to my assessment of the information I get from the media instead of just accepting that it's true. Now I would suggest that most of the population accepts whatever they read in the paper or see on television as true . . . [I]f you say a word and put a picture next to it the average person tends to think it must be real . . . I am very very discriminating about what I accept as fact, and because I have a postmodernist philosophy, I try to look at the facts as represented by a range of people rather than just one person. So I'm just as interested in what the Rabid Right have to say about the Wik [Aboriginal land rights] legislation as I am in hearing what the Rabid Left or the Greenies or Aboriginals or someone sitting on the bus next to me. I'm interested in hearing what a whole range of people view as being what their reality is of the world – experience of reality. I mean I filter that in relation to what I'm experiencing myself. So in terms of risk, I find it very hard to understand risk that I have not had in some way, some experience. And so coming back to what I just said about loneliness, it was very hard for me to assess loneliness because of what it can do to you, what the chances are of it, because it's just something that hasn't very much occurred to me in the past. But because of circumstances I'm now becoming more aware of what loneliness can be and so now I'm actually looking at and able to appreciate what people say about it

Robert goes on to compare himself with his stereotypical 'factory worker in Ashfield', positioning himself as more sophisticated in his use of the mass media as a source of knowledge on risk and his ability to draw upon his own experience of the world. Like most other respondents in our study, Robert privileged personal experience over mediated knowledge in developing an understanding of and response to risk:

I suppose learning about risk to me in general is just about constant monitoring of what's going on in the world through reading, watching the news, radio, newspapers and talking to people. So what's the difference? – because I guess the process worker at Ashfield would probably answer exactly



the same thing. I suppose it's a matter of degree. It's a combination of your life experience and what you might have observed or experienced at first hand, and what you take in through those channels which are available to us in the late 20th century in terms of gathering information about the world. I try to base my sense of risk on my whole personal experience if I can, and the first hand experience of my immediate peers rather than basing my personal assessment of risk on hearsay. I would probably daringly suggest that a great deal of the community's perceptions of risk are based on hearsay and construction – gossip, what people hear on the radio and what they see in newspapers and television. The opinions of third and fourth and fifth hand opinions without really thinking 'well how does that match up with my personal experience?'

So Robert, like Beck, sees the society of risk as, centrally, the society of information and knowledge. But, unlike Beck, this is an information society which does not have the media as its 'spotlight'. Rather, as peddlers of 'hearsay and construction', the media are in Robert's spotlight; and we quickly recognize the mobilization of a number of distinctly 'modernist' knowledges in this formulation (since even his 'social constructionism' turns out to have a familiarly materialist base).

However, Robert – as is symptomatic of many modernist 'mass society' thinkers – believes that it is the 'mass' of people rather than himself who are influenced by the media. He thus denies this 'mass' the very same 'fragmented' and 'plural' perspective which he prioritizes himself. And central to this theory of media and risk are his own memories of his 'embryonic' gay naivety of the early 1980s, and his resulting 1990s loneliness. It is that particular temporal relationship which underpins every one of his stories about risk. It is that 'unusual life experience', together with his ongoing – and associated – professional perceptions which, in his view, separate him from the 'blind citizen'.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return, by way of our risk biographies, to Beck's 'script for media significance'. Beck's eight-point script covers three areas: the risk-making institutions in the economy, science and politics; the mass media; and the public. We need, then, to pose our 'audience' questions in relation to each of these areas.

1. Do various publics separate their perception of risk from the institutions that are responsible for it? Is the institutional 'damage control' that Beck emphasizes effective in separating specific risks from the public's broader concern about a 'risk society'? Does the public's exposure to new risks (for example, of HIV/AIDS) lead to a cognitive containment of risk (for example, in terms of the risk management of one's sexual preferences)? Do the public react to



the 'politics of denial' with their own denial? Or to what extent can we trace an interweaving of individualized and socially oriented responses, of epistemologies of both hope and fragmentation?

2. Is the public's memory of specific risks as short term as the media's? Or are new risks woven into an ongoing biographical project in relation to risk? And are the media as centrally significant (among various other circuits of communication) in defining and representing risk as Beck supposes? How important are the media in exposing and constructing risk within varied individuals' biographies of risk?
3. In relation to the public, what are the categories we can now use to define the victims ('the weak') of risk? Has the public whittled away its perception of differences between classes, nations, humans for an uneasy identification with nature against a 'common danger', as Beck suggests? Have global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, pollution or food scares led to a 'people [who] have the experience that they breathe like the plants, and live *from* water as the fish live *in* water'?

Our first conclusion has to be a methodological one. This research project has focused on the qualitative analysis of risk biographies – not on quantitative surveys. Consequently, it is strong on the ways in which people narrativize risk, and how they situate personal and social risks (in continuity or contradiction) in the time/space parameters of their everyday lives. The method is weak in making 'more of this, less of that' judgements. So we are not emphasizing here the *frequency* with which environmental risks were mentioned (in fact, surprisingly seldom), but rather the coherences and the absences that construct the time/space coordinates of personal risk biographies.

Our biographies of risk have indicated that among our respondents there are, indeed, very significant uncertainties as well as a sense of loss of control in the current Australian context. But rather than Beck's 'crucial point' about risk modernity (namely, that it depends on a gap between 'expert' knowledge and decision), respondents assert their lived experiences as epistemologies of control. Far from Robert's exposure to the new risk of HIV/AIDS leading to a cognitive containment of risk (e.g. limited to the risk management of his sexual preferences), we have found instead a reflexively critical commitment to a wide range of risks and to a 'solution' in the dialogic play of voices from 'a whole range of people'. Respondents like Robert listen to all those 'channels which are available to us in the late 20th century in terms of gathering information about the world' – and only some of those channels are the mass media. He clearly believes that his particular professional location allows him to access the fragmented channels of discourse of the 'postmodern' more readily than the process worker from Ashfield.



Beck's individualized 'reflexive biographies' (1992: 100) – where social inequalities are perceived as 'psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts, and neuroses' within a crisis of traditional and modern frames – are often hard to find in our data. Rather, the continuing quest for knowledge – epistemologies as experiential 'adaptations' that will help understand and control risk – was a key theme of our case studies on sexual preference, ageing and risk. But (a) *very specific* historical references (1983 = AIDS knowledge; 'the current Liberal government'; and 'racism going backwards with Pauline Hanson') and (b) the *long duree* of biographical recognitions meant that often this quest was interwoven dialogically as individualized *and* socially driven narratives, as epistemologies of both hope and fragmentation, isolation and loneliness.

How important the media are in exposing and constructing risk within varied individuals' biographies of risk can depend (unsurprisingly) on the symbolic resources associated with socioeconomic background and educational level. It is obviously not surprising that the talk about 'methodologies' for media scrutiny within the world of 'post-modernism' come, in our interviews, from a university-educated minister of religion and from a university-educated health worker who has close professional contact with government health policy. In all cases, though, the public's memory of risk is not short term. It is woven into an ongoing biographical project in relation to risk perception and management.

Beck's 'weak' public in his BSE example is farmers. Similarly in Wynne's work, despite his critique of Beck for concentrating too exclusively on 'expert' rather than 'lay' knowledge, the victims are also farmers. Indeed, the tendency of risk theory to emphasize environmental and technological risk has sometimes led to a new romanticism whereby it is country people (as victims of technological rationalism) who are possessors of 'alternative' knowledge. By concentrating on a wider range of risk perceptions, our research has tended to do two things as regards the public as 'victim'. First, it indicates how agentive the 'audiences' of media (and other) representations of risk are in weaving new perceptions and experiences of risk through the short and long *durees* of risk biographies. Second, the sheer accumulation of risk in some cases reminds us not to get too romantic about 'people . . . that . . . breathe like the plants, and live *from* water as the fish live *in* water'. The accounts of our interviewees, including those who are significantly socially and economically disadvantaged, remind us not to head too quickly into unhistorical and over-simplistic identification with Beck's 'democratic' version of the immiserations of risk society.

Modernity's victims are still with us. The risk society is by no means systemically 'catastrophic and democratic'. Rather, it is to be found more closely – and unequally – intertwined with the temporalities of age, class, gender and sexual preference. In his recent analysis of 'Risk,



“Race” and Global Environmental Regulation’, Ian Welsh argues that

. . . the idea that there are global risks which are ‘somehow universal and unspecific’, recognizing none of the social categories which have stratified societies (Beck, 1992, pp. 22 and 53), is only true at the level of rational abstraction used in global risk assessments . . . The idea of common problems facing a world population . . . has . . . permeated environmental discourse. (1999: 66, 51)

Welsh’s methodological focus – on the regulatory rhetorics contained in ‘world’ and ‘united nations’ environmental reports – is different from ours; but his overall finding is similar. If there are, indeed, ‘blind citizens’, then these tend to reside in the ‘expert’ communities of such agencies, and not among the situated logics and temporally articulated biographies of everyday life.

Of course, Beck does not deny that modernity’s victims still exist. His theory of ‘risk modernity’ (as of the earlier ‘class’ or ‘industrial modernity’) focuses on victims of immiseration. In Beck’s view the risk society is a growing tendency *within* industrial modernity. Consequently, two different kinds of immiseration (of ‘industrial’ or ‘class’ or ‘scarcity’ society, and of the ‘risk distributing society’) are operating at the same time. ‘That means that two types of topics and conflicts overlap. We do not *yet* live in a risk society, but we also no longer live *only* within the distribution conflicts of scarcity society’ (Beck, 1992: 19, 20).

Moreover, Beck’s ‘risk modernity’ theory of the media is not quite as pessimistic as analysts sometimes suggest, but, rather, relates crucially to his understanding of the growth of new centres of subpolitics. His occasional comments on the PR-style manipulation of ‘gaping’ audiences relates, in part, to his understanding of the media within *class* modernity. The big corporations’ power over the media to structure knowledge and disseminate it *still exists* in risk modernity, even though there are counter-usages (by special interest and advocacy groups) to challenge it.

Crucially, then, the new subpolitical challenges within risk society include the media and the law. In the risk society, the media *might* – via their possibilities for imagistic condensing and concretizing – perform as ‘cultural eyes through which the “blind citizens” can perhaps win back the autonomy of their own judgement’ (Beck, 1992: 20). There is something here in Beck of a Habermasian ‘if only’ return of the public sphere, in the sense of a democratic citizenship armed with more cognitive knowledge, first *imaged* and *globally perceived* via the visual media, and then articulated and advocated by the courts of law. It is clear that Beck ascribes particular weight to the media and the law as agents aiding the public’s extra-parliamentary direct action against the risk society.

This very activation of the citizens on all sorts of topics receives a special meaning because the other central forums of sub-politics – the judiciary and



media publicity – are *also* open to them. As the developments have shown, these can at least sometimes be used very effectively for protecting citizen interests (in environmental protection, in the anti-nuclear movement, or in the confidentiality of data). (1992: 195)

Nevertheless, in his very emphatic profiling of the relationship between public sphere, environment and a new subpolitics, Beck's theory potently assaults the notion of everyday agency. According to Beck, in our daily activities we

... no longer pick the experts, but instead the latter choose the victims . . . For hazards can be projected onto all the objects of daily life. And that is where they are now lodged – invisible and yet all too present – and they now call for experts as sources of answers to the questions they loudly raise. Risk positions, in this sense, are *springs from which questions rise to the surface, to which the victims have no answer*. (Beck, 1992: 54)

On the one hand, hazards are everywhere in our everyday – the tea we drink, the cake we eat, the very air we breathe. On the other hand, the power that our experiential knowledge of the everyday gives us is denied – because the hazards are invisible, and determinable only by others – by 'experts' who in any case argue among themselves. Thus uncertainty is everywhere; and our ontological grounding is deeply disturbed.

Our case studies have suggested that many people's ontological grounding is indeed disturbed; but that this is negotiated by way of familiar (and *visible*) categories of – and inequalities in symbolic resources due to – class, gender, race, ethnicity, age and sexual preference. In these areas, our respondents were in most cases far from being 'blind citizens', even though very few were actively engaged in Beck's new subpolitics.

If, as Beck argues, 'industrial modernity' is still with us, then so too are its fundamental solidarities. Robert, for example, is perfectly aware of his class and educational privilege in assessing his minimal risk of unemployment, even while using his considerable symbolic resources to negotiate with the fragmentation of a 'postmodern' everyday. In many ways, these non-blind citizens are more flexible than Beck in weaving through their everyday experience the many different risks which Beck himself analyses. And the media – in their different forms – are also woven through these everyday subjectivities. In most of the areas of risk which primarily concern them, these Australians are not victims of the 'invisible', for whom experts 'pick' the answers. And where they are victims, they can be reflexively aware at the end of their lives of very traditional and experienced forms of immiseration.

Curiously, our methodological use of Beck's own emphasis on 'reflexive biographies' – which he sees as symptomatic of risk (but not industrial) modernity's 'individualization' – has drawn attention to the



very same 'embedded' (family, class) traditions which risk individualization supposedly replaces. Beck argues that:

What is demanded is a *vigorous model of everyday life*, which puts the ego at its centre, allots and opens up opportunities for action, and permits it in this manner to work through the emerging possibilities of decision and arrangement with respect to one's own biography in a meaningful way. (1992: 136)

But by over-emphasizing both invisible risks and the emergence of a new public sphere, Beck in fact ignores an alternative politics of the everyday. His 'model of everyday life' in the risk society is one where history is denied:

... forms of perception become private, and at the same time ... they become *ahistorical* ... That is to say, the temporal horizons of perception narrow more and more, until finally on the limiting case *history shrinks to the (eternal) present*, and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life. (Beck, 1992: 135)

Our experience interviewing Australians from a variety of different generations suggests a much greater reflexivity about (both short- and long-term) histories, and their interweaving with biographies of risk which are both individual and social. The 'ahistorical' and the 'invisible' may well be tendencies towards a risk-society future, motivating Beck's alternative 'public sphere' media accountability. But 'class' ('scarcity', 'industrial') modernity is still with us in our reflexive biographies to a much greater degree than Beck is prepared to acknowledge.

#### Note

1. The research on which this article is based is funded by an Australian Research Council Large Grant to the authors. Of the participants in the study, 32 were living in the Sydney and Blue Mountains area, 28 in Wollongong and 14 in Bathurst; 42 of the participants were female and 32 male. More than half (44) had at least some university education and a further seven participants held a trade or technical qualification. Of the remainder, two had only completed the final year of high school, 16 did not complete high school and two were still school students. Fifty-six participants were of British ancestry. Of the remainder, 15 were of continental European ethnicity, two were of Lebanese ethnicity and one was Aboriginal. In terms of age, the group was concentrated around early and middle adulthood: 8 were aged 20 or less, 20 were aged between 21 and 30, 19 aged between 31 and 40, 13 aged between 41 and 50, 7 aged between 51 and 60 and 6 aged 61 or over (one unknown).

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