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Crucial Sites and Research Orientations: Exploring the Communication of Risk
Christopher N. Candlin, Jonathan Crichton, and Arthur S. Firkins

Issues of risk are foundational to people’s lives in contemporary societies, a fact sharply highlighted by the recent history of practices associated with the financial markets, science and technology, workplace health and safety, environmental policy and biosecurity, law enforcement and criminal justice. Exploring such issues is central to our understanding of how professional practice impacts on human relationships in contemporary social life.

Drawing on invited and original contributions from key practitioners and researchers, this book explores how people routinely and across professional domains and sites are discursively engaged in the assessment, management, and communication of risk in ways that materially affect human lives. The book thus recognises that risk, as a major theme in contemporary social and professional life, is both an overarching theoretical construct and one which is constructed in communication among people across diverse sites of practice according their particular expertise and circumstances. It is the argument of the book that if we are to understand the significance of risk in contemporary life, both constructions of risk – the macro and the micro – need to be brought into play, explored, and engaged with each other through a research process that involves interdisciplinary dialogue between professionals, participants, and researchers.

The need for this agenda is pressing. We live in a world described by Beck (1992, 1998, 1999) and by Giddens (1991, 1998) as a ‘risk society’ in which risk is a ‘systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself’ (Beck, 1992, p. 21) and ‘the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the ways that lay actors and technical specialists organize the social world’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 3). The public and private spheres increasingly turn on the management of
a portfolio of disparate risks, while the assessment of risk has become a focal activity of government, organisations, and the professions, where the communication of risk occurs as a crucial component of daily work. In essence, as Beck argued, risk is the defining macro construct of the modern age. At the same time, it is increasingly imperative to understand how different ‘societal members’ define, analyse and communicate risk to a range of increasingly diverse audiences, and for what purposes (Horlick-Jones, 2005). That is to say that risk communication has increasingly become a rhetorical activity and the accomplishment of such activity across a wide range of professional fields is fundamentally embedded in discourse and interaction. These include the fields of health (Alaszewski, 2005a, 2005b; Alaszewski & Horlick-Jones, 2003; Hoffman, Linell, Lindh-Astrand, & Kjellgren; Linell, Adelswärd, Sachs, Bredmore, & Lindstedt, 2002; Moore, Candlin, & Plum, 2003), with specific foci such as genetic counselling (Sarangi, Bennert, Howell, & Clarke, 2003; Sarangi & Clarke, 2002; Wood, Prior, & Gray, 2003) and health policy (Bancroft & Wilson, 2007); as well as social work (Firkins & Candlin, 2006, 2011; Hall, Slembrouck, & Sarangi, 2006; Hall & Slembrouck, 2009); international security (Jore & Kain, 2010); and science and technology (Grundmann & Krishnamurthy, 2010; Petersen, 2005).

Despite the emphasis placed by many theorists on the rational and relational nature of risk, what appears to be absent in studies that have sought to define, categorise, and appraise risk, especially within organisations, is a significant focus on how such risk is communicatively and jointly accomplished through interpersonal interaction employing various modalities and across diverse contexts of use. Those studies which have done so have focused on few and single domains and sites, and not explicitly sought the inter-domain and inter-site perspective provided in this collection. Exceptions include journal Special Issues devoted to risk discourse (for example, Candlin & Candlin, 2002; Sarangi & Candlin, 2003b; Zinn, 2010) and a sustained focus in the journal *Health, Risk & Society* (see, for example, Alaszewski, 2005c; Horlick-Jones, 2003; Sarangi & Candlin, 2003a).

Taking this orientation to risk research, this book brings together macro and micro perspectives on the communication of risk within and across professional domains and, most consequentially for participants, ‘crucial sites’ (Candlin, 2002b) within which:

occur what I have called critical moments, where the communicative competence of the participants is at a premium and at its
greatest moment of challenge. This may be due to the heightened significance of the subject matter, for personal, professional, or ideological reasons. These moments may be defined generically across topics and conditions, such as the breaking of bad news, or individually sited within particular conditions in particular contexts, such as the issue of disclosure of sexual and HIV+ status … What then becomes interesting is to map the critical moments on to the crucial sites and to calibrate these against the participant perspectives of those involved. (p. 10)

This focus immediately raises the question of who a site is crucial for and how such critical moments could be identified, described, interpreted and explained within a programme of research that is accountable to participants. For the researcher this raises the question of how to conceptualise the ‘site’ of such research, and – more specifically – what social/theoretical understanding we can bring in doing so, and how we can warrant our answers to this question.

No single methodology will be able to match the demands of such a programme. Rather, it requires the engagement of researcher, practitioner, and participant expertise, brought to bear on the integration of multiple methodologies in seeking to make visible and connect the different perspectives that may be relevant (Candlin, 1997, 2006). Such a ‘multi-perspectival’ approach (Candlin & Crichton, 2011; Crichton, 2010) is not limited to particular theoretical positions or methodologies but open to and able to bring into play multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives on the communication of risk depending on relevant and emergent understandings of the research site under scrutiny. These understandings will depend on collaborative interpretation among researchers and participants, raising what Sarangi has identified as ‘the analyst’s paradox’ (Sarangi, 2007): the problem of how the researcher can align her analysis with the perceptions of participants without either having to become a faux participant or, if not, being irrelevant to their world. Achieving this ‘mutuality of perspective’ (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001) among researchers and participants is a particular challenge because:

For the participants, then, workplace discourse is a process; for the analyst it is inevitably a product, and, so achieving a reciprocity of perspectives is not only a matter of mutualising view and stance, it is also a matter of (re)vitalising what is necessarily an ecology. (Candlin, 2002a, p. 5)
Key to meeting this challenge is an orientation to research that ‘starts with the site’; in other words, that acknowledges from the outset Cicourel’s (1992, 2007) call for ‘ecological validity’:

Validity in the non-experimental social sciences refers to the extent to which complex organisational activities represented by aggregated data from public and private sources and demographic and sample surveys can be linked to the collection, integration and assessment of temporal samples of observable (and when possible recordable) activities in daily life settings. Fragments of discourse materials always are shaped and constrained by the larger organizational settings in which they emerge and simultaneously influenced by cognitive/emotional processes despite the convenience of only focusing on extracted fragments independently of the organizational and cognitive/emotional complexity of daily life settings ... the challenge remains how daily life activities simultaneously constrain and shape more complex organizational structures. (1992, p. 736)

Cicourel here underscored the need for sensitivity to the different participant perceptions and ‘interpenetrating contexts’ that localise and situate any particular instance of communication: that is, as he (1992, p. 294) explained:

Verbal interaction is related to the task in hand. Language and other social practices are interdependent. Knowing something about the ethnographic setting, the perception of, and characteristics attributed to, others, and broader and local organisational conditions becomes imperative for an understanding of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of communicative events.

Acknowledging the institutionally situated, locally accomplished nature of risk communication makes visible as a focus of research sites involving professional communication that is institutionally located. Particularly relevant here is Sarangi and Roberts’ (1999) account of how such sites are characterised by the intersection of both professional and institutional discourses that may be more or less commensurate, serving different or competing purposes, and creating the potential for shifting or realigned constructions of professional, institutional, and personal experience (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999). For example, drawing on ethnographic data Yates (Chapter 7) examines
the institutional context of the contemporary policy trajectory in youth justice and the risk research paradigm which underpins it, arguing that the voices of young people provide insight into the complexity of risk in their worlds – a complexity which is easily obfuscated by this risk factor paradigm. In the context of health, O’Grady et al. (Chapter 17) use a combination of discourse analysis and ethnography to highlight the disparate interpretations that patients and doctors might bring to risk calculations by examining the use of software designed to assist general practitioners to engage patients in considering their cardiovascular disease risk. And drawing on critical discourse analysis McKell and De Barro (Chapter 14) reveal how risk activities described in public messages about biosecurity negotiate, and make trade-offs between, institutional, professional and personal knowledge and responsibility.

Together the chapters in the book elaborate, and the book as whole models, this inter-domain and inter-site ‘mapping’ of crucial sites explored through the thematic focus on risk. The communication of risk is revealed, not as restricted to particular disciplinary formulations or theoretical orientations, but as inherently and multiply interpretable, depending on the particular locations, participants, professional, institutional and research orientations and modes of collaboration between and among participants, and between them and researchers. From this inter-domain and inter-site perspective it becomes clear that risk is not simply concerned with the identification of ‘hazards’, in its negative projection and ‘opportunities’ in its positive projection. Risk is also and crucially implicated in communicative issues of power (essentially, who defines risk and who challenges them); categorisation (how risk are categorised and given priorities); distribution (how risks are distributed through a community and how such distribution is controlled); and the cross-cutting issues of regulation (how systems of governance are applied to regulate risks); negotiation (how social and cultural interests and values affect the framing, interpretation, and presentation of risks); and mediation (how the communication of risks is mediated through, for example, regulatory frameworks, methods of assessment and modelling, new technologies, media organisations, public relations, marketing and social networks).

By taking this orientation, the book as a whole seeks to enrich and explore the potential of risk as an overarching and motivating theme (Candlin & Crichton, 2011) informing applied linguistic, sociological, professional and communication research. The volume thus centrally positions risk as part of a broader research orientation premised on
communication in interaction, highlighting the following key ways of positioning the construct of risk:

- Risk as based on intention and choice, and socially and contextually located
- Risk as not an event or state but a process
- Risk as relational, interpersonal and intersubjective
- Risk as a foundational socio-cultural category
- Risk as a strategic accomplishment involving risk makers, risk takers, risk perceivers and risk receivers in relation to the objects, processes and outcomes of risk
- Risk as diverse in its accomplishment, in terms of people, domains, sites and foci of risk concern

This orientation to risk underscores the need for such research to be practically relevant (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999) to specific sites and participants, and foregrounds the question of how this relevance is to be accomplished within particular projects. The orientation includes, but is not restricted to, risk as associated with particular interpretive repertoires, in particular social, organisational, and professional settings. It naturally implicates, as Luhmann (1979) emphasised, associated and personally, professionally, and organisationally relevant themes such as trust, accountability, blame, stigma, or confidence, as well as research oriented constructs such as identity, capacity, and agency, depending on the particular site of engagement (Candlin & Crichton, 2013). For example, Coffey (Chapter 3) draws on discourse analysis of talk from people leaving forensic settings and returning to live in the community to argue that the successful handling of concerns about mental illness and risk clears space for participants to deploy emergent identities. And in the context of clinical incident disclosure, Iedema et al. (Chapter 2) draw on more than 300 in-depth interviews conducted with clinicians and healthcare consumers to examine how errors in healthcare are disclosed to the harmed patient and/or their family, arguing that disclosure conversations harbour the risk of reducing complex circumstances to simplistic causation and reductive attributions of guilt and blame.

The orientation taken here seeks to distinguish risk from semantically allied terms such as danger or hazard and encompasses both external and manufactured risk (Giddens, 1998), risk perception (Slovic, 1987), risk as understood from particular cultural perspectives (Rayner, 1992) and risk as understood from particular institutional memberships (Wynne, 1992, 1996, 2002). This orientation is brought out in sharp
relief by Scamell and Alaszewski (Chapter 5) who draw on ethnographic discourse analysis to explore the ways in which midwives’ discourse on risk and place of birth take place at the intersection of two discrete imperatives: to provide pregnant women with choice over where and how they give birth; and to protect mothers and babies from harm.

More broadly, this orientation acknowledges that the majority of fields of social inquiry have been redefined in terms of the identifying and communicative managing of risk. Quite generally, the circumstances, responsibilities and entailments of risk have been shifted to individuals, leaving decision-making process to fall onto the client, the patient or the customer. For example, in the context of food health risks, Jones (Chapter 20) argues that decisions regarding risk take place at a complex nexus where different people, texts, objects, and practices, each with their own histories, come together. In such contexts, professional workers, be they a lawyer, nurse, engineer, economist, or social worker, must engage in the activities of risk assessment and risk communication; it falls to them to define how risk is to be constructed in relation to their field. This point is taken up, in the context of social work, by Stanley (Chapter 9) who explores how risk assessment has taken a discursive hold in the work of child protection, affecting and shaping practice and decision making; similarly, but now in the context of residential aged care, Crichton and O’Neill (Chapter 4) report on a collaborative study that drew on a narrative intervention to reframe and enhance the communication of risk and safety among staff and residents in aged care. This expansion of risk assessment into an onus on all professionals brings its own risks, for as Candlin and Candlin (2002, p. 130) have explained:

Risk talk can mean both talking about risks and generating risks within talk, and can be initiated by both parties to the interaction. Risk poses a dilemma for professionals (Adelswärd & Sachs, 1998); to talk about risks may exacerbate tensions concerning risk, yet to avoid talk about risk may also lead to anxiety. Risk talk is, accordingly, a risky business for all participants.

This in turn presents the challenge, explored throughout the chapters in this book, of how assessments of risk are to be communicated in ways that make sense for and to those who may be affected by what is at stake but do not share the expertise to interpret the assessment. The challenge is compounded when the bases and calculation of risk are institutionally and discursively distanced from those who need to work with
Christopher N. Candlin, Jonathan Crichton, and Arthur S. Firkins

them and are affected by them. Here, for example, O’Malley (Chapter 6) examines how the development of crime prevention, risk-based policing, the redefinition of offences in risk terms, and the use of risk factors in sentencing and parole have transformed much of the field of law enforcement and criminal justice. In the context of liquefied natural gas projects, Mello (Chapter 12) combines in-depth stakeholder interviews with analysis of secondary sources to explore the results of divergent risk-communication strategies. Also in the area of corporate-community relations, but now in relation to cross-cultural communication, Hanna et al. (Chapter 11) consider the consequences of the corporate culture of risk assessment on Indigenous communities. These chapters exemplify how the constructions of risk that are in play in contemporary risk communication may be both anonymous and authoritative, a feature of risk summarised by Beck:

We no longer choose to take risks, we have them thrust upon us. We are living on a ledge – in a random risk society, from which nobody can escape. Our society has become riddled with random risks. Calculating and managing risks which nobody really knows has become one of our main preoccupations ... The basic question here is: how can we make decisions about a risk we know nothing about? (1998, p. 12)

 Allied to risk as an unknowable imposition, the institutionalisation of risk creates powerful – because taken for granted and therefore unnoticed – ways in which potentially unaccountable constructions of risk underlie the categories by which issues are framed and people are grouped for institutional purposes (Sarangi & Candlin, 2003a). This point is exemplified in the context of financial regulation by Bourne (Chapter 18) who examines the construction of risk during a 2008 Congressional hearing into the global financial crisis and the role of US regulators. Similarly, but in the context of youth justice, Case (Chapter 8) explores how risk is constructed within risk assessment and risk-focused intervention practices. In the context of climate change, Shaw, Hellsten, and Nerlich (Chapter 13) trace the framing of risk and uncertainty through the recent history of scholarly articles in that domain; and, in the context of popular media, Clarke and Mosleh (Chapter 16) analyse the construction of risks associated with children’s mental health issues in articles in high-circulating English language news magazines. The focus on institutional and cultural variability in the construction of risk is taken up by Huan (Chapter 15), who draws on concordance
analysis to examine how the risk of food safety is negotiated in Chinese and Australian print media. And in the context of international security and safety, Firkins and Candlin (Chapter 19) examine how a ‘definition of risk situation’ as framed by a governmental travel authority is projected to a specific audience, ‘the traveller’.

By foregrounding the inter-domain and inter-site complexity of communicative challenges around risk, the book recognises that all professionals are in fact risk communicators and that risk communication is not the domain of a narrow field of expert risk communicators. Hence, in part, why the book in recognising this generality seeks to explain risk communication across a diverse number of professional sites, while at the same time arguing how across such sites the essential characteristics of risk communication can be defined. The point is illustrated by the chapters as a whole, and exemplified within the context of research on environmental risk and socio-technical change by Henwood and Pidgeon (Chapter 10) who draw on case studies of living with nuclear risk and gender and risk to argue for the value of interpretive risk research across such domains.

Accordingly, the book models an agenda for risk research that brings together professionals with expertise in diverse sites of practice with those researchers and practitioners from a commensurate range of theoretical and analytical orientations who are engaged in the communication of risk. The individual chapters and the book as a whole, show how this engagement of expertise in communication and risk within and across diverse sites can offer fresh insights into the overarching concept of risk, and how this is realised communicatively across different sites and professional domains, and as a consequence can provide mutually and practically relevant insights for both professional and analytical practice.

The overall objective is for the book to clarify the twin themes of communication and risk by engaging each with the other, within, and across the sites. Consequently, it is the overarching argument of the book that:

1) Risk is informed by tacit models of professional understandings, discursively realised, which invoke positive and negative relationships in terms of which risk comes to be presumed as a theme against which actions and their proponents are judged, their identities co-constructed, and the institutions which they represent measured, at particular sites.

2) A research agenda is necessary which focuses on the interdisciplinary identification and analysis of risk as a situated accomplishment – involving ‘joint problematisation’ (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999) – among
participants and researchers, offering ways of elucidating underlying issues, and holding out the promise of explaining how risk has come to be a criterial theme in terms of which relationships, individuals, and groups are identified and appraised, and the effectiveness of actions, pro and contra, evaluated.

3) It is by reference to the particular modes of inter-professional engagement among researchers and their interactions with participants at these sites that the meanings of communication and risk may be constructed, extended, and interpreted in such research.

These sites may involve inter- or intra-professional encounters in particular professions and organisations, whether or not engaging laypersons, exemplified by those domains and sites represented among the chapters in the book. Each selected domain is represented by one or more chapters in which authors report on how they have explored the central theme of communicating risk. Each chapter illustrates, and the chapters taken as a whole, present and explore, distinctive perspectives arising from these different inter-relationships. These include:

- Approaches to defining communication in professional practice: including interaction, communication, construction, discursive strategy, reflexivity, interdiscursivity, and the need to adopt both historical and contemporary perspectives
- Approaches to defining risk: including locating the origins, appraisal, management, and mitigation of risk in relation to particular professions sites, events, participants: issues of positioning and subjectivisation; and differential understandings and social-theoretical orientations
- Approaches to researching the communication of risk: ways of interconnecting different methodological perspectives in research in relation to specific sites; how such perspectives are grounded in different motivational relevancies (Sarangi & Candlin, 2001); inter-professional relationships of researchers and joint problematisation with participants, and challenges of achieving practical relevance (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999)
- Approaches to locating sites of the communication of risk: domains, sites, participants, data and foci within particular sites
- Approaches to deriving practical action consequent upon research into the communication of risk: including systemic interventions within organisations, education initiatives, mentoring and professional development
In developing this argument, the book addresses the methodological question in general, and at each site of engagement, of how one might go about such a research agenda, and takes up the interrelated question of how we are to understand the ways in which methodology can be ‘commensurate’ with such a focus. In so doing, it provides not only a response to the question of what constitutes ‘communicating risk’ but also how manifestations and interpretations of risk may be defined and researched. For that reason, the chapters in the book construct the theme of risk in distinctive ways, displaying how risk can be illuminated by exploring diverse and crucial sites of communicative engagement. At the same time, such engagements parallel themselves across domains, revealing quite general cross-cutting critical moments of risk-accountability, perception and mitigation including moments of risk-anticipation, management, exacerbation, and reduction. In doing so, the book elaborates ‘communicating risk’ as an overarching ‘focal theme’ (Roberts & Sarangi, 2005) that can inform research and practice across diverse sites of professional, institutional, and disciplinary engagement and practice. Elucidated here are underlying issues linked to the unlocking and making available of expertise relevant to risk discovery, risk perception, risk analysis and risk communication among persons and organisations. At the same time, and now of more general relevance, the chapters of the book argue that it is by reference to the particular modes of inter- and intra-professional engagement among researchers, and their interactions with participants at these sites, that the meanings of communication and risk can be constructed, interpreted, and explained.

In developing the argument of the book, the chapters are organised from the perspectives of domains, sites, and the overarching processes that shape risk and communication across them. Accordingly, the chapters are organised into six sections. The first four sections foreground particular domains and illustrative sites that may be associated within and across them, bringing together studies of diverse sites within the broad domains of Healthcare, Legal Processes, Social Care, and Environmental Management and Biosecurity. The final two sections move from the perspectives of particular domains to processes of Mediating and Regulating Risk that overarch such domains and sites: this allows the book to introduce further domains and sites, namely: Mass Media Representations, Technology Mediated Health Care, Financial Regulation, International Risk Assessments, and Product Safety and Regulation. Organised in this way, the book elaborates and guides readers through the multiple and dynamic, macro and micro, inter-domain and inter-site interrelations that shape processes of communicating risk.
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EXCLUSIVE: Cyberthreats are a business risk. Communicating the message to senior management in healthcare.

The first instalment of a two-part OpenGov Breakfast Leadership Dialogue series on "Expanding Cybersecurity Threats in the Healthcare Sector" was held in Sydney on the 17th of August. Select officials from the public and private health care areas in New South Wales participated in this invitation-only, closed-door session. The healthcare industry is on the cusp of a technology-driven metamorphosis. Following questions on challenges with security architecture and important security measures, the dialogue circled back to the issue of communicating the urgency of acting on escalating risks to senior management.