

The Influence of Cultural Aspects on Risk Communication in the Context of Indonesia

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Abstract

The study in this paper seeks to examine the influence of culture of a society on communicating risk knowledge. Indonesian culture is taken as an example of investigation as this country comprises various customs and traditions which have the potential to influence ways of reporting risk knowledge to the public as well as ways of meaning-making of the knowledge. The way the risk knowledge is delivered whether by journalists, experts, or ordinary people forms the culture of reporting the knowledge itself which relates to identity of such a culture. The way a risk is framed in media and public discourses might have much to do with who is doing the framing as those who report such information attempt to persuade others of the validity of their interpretation of a given risk. When the risk knowledge such as about dangerous food additives, complementary and alternative medicines, and natural disasters is delivered to the public, there might be an “agreement” between the communicators and the culture where the message is delivered in which uses of any elements, including verbal, non-verbal, and visual elements, to form a whole medium of communication which is suitable to the audiences with regard to their culture. Since the cultural aspect might play an important role in reporting risk knowledge, it is important to examine this aspect to look at how and why the audience might understand the risk knowledge within their societies. Although this study is in the Indonesian context, this investigation will contribute to the discussions of cultural studies, particularly cultural identities in the context of Asia in terms of risk communication.

Keywords: risk communication, cultural differences, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Communicating risk knowledge to the public, which can be seen in any society, is not a new phenomenon and has a tight relationship with culture of the society. The culture of the society has great potential to influence the way the knowledge is informed to the member of the society (Barker, 2010:110). However, there might be differences in which how and why such cultural aspects influence ways of communication. People's knowledge and experience about what they hear and see previously from any media of communication can influence people's understanding about information they receive (Trisnawati, 2007a:174-194; Trisnawati, 2012b:283-320). For example, when they watch a television program or read an article in a newspaper about genetic modified food, they might relate this topic to their knowledge about kinds of plants or animals which can be cultivated using this method, its benefit, or its risk to human health. In the context of Indonesia, as this country comprises various customs and traditions which have the potential to influence ways of reporting any information as well as people's meaning-making about such information, there might be various interpretation of the information delivered. This way of communication can then imply identity of the culture.

In the context of this paper the term *risk communication*, in general, refers to exchange of information among people, for example, scientists, journalists, ordinary people, and others (Sellnow, Ulmer, Senger, & Littlefield, 2009:5). This interactive process is usually focused on providing information concerned with resolving public conflict and reducing fear (Sellnow, Ulmer, Senger, & Littlefield, 2009:4) with regard to, for example, the impact of technology on human life. Communicating risk knowledge to the public can also be in forms of campaigns, for example, safety campaigns in using liquefied petroleum gas in the home. This kind of communication is important as this has the potential to fulfill the public's need for information about risk which can then help them to anticipate any risk caused by the above cause and to protect their lives from hazard. The practice of risk communication, however, might differ widely due to different audiences and cultures. The different audiences and cultures might be related to different methods for informing the public about the risk knowledge, different ways of communication among people in the culture being studied as well as its contexts of communication. This way of communication might then indicate identity of a culture.

Since ways of communicating risk knowledge indicate identity of culture, it is important to examine how and why the practice of risk communication in a society, especially if such a society comprise various customs and tradition. There is a number of research on risk communication which focuses on, for example, ways of communicating risk knowledge, uses of media to communicate the knowledge, and considering societal aspects where the knowledge is delivered. However, those have not discussed Indonesian context. Some examples of previous research and discussion focus on pandemic influenza risk communication (Castelfranchi, 2009), communicating cyclone warnings by considering people's access to media, type of dwelling, and level of literacy (Raj, Ullah, & Akhter, 2010), the use of websites to deliver information about climate change which is getting more popular where people can express their views in a public forum (Carvalho, 2010), communicating regenerative medicine by doing workshops

(Nakagawa, Yagi, & Kato, 2011), the use of online media to deliver risk knowledge (Mazzoli, 2011), models of communication to deliver information about science which consider local aspects (Chambliss & Lewenstein, 2012), the use of YouTube for providing information about H1N1 flu epidemic (Walton, Seitz, and Ragsdale (2012), and climate risk communication (Padgham, Devisscher, Togtokh, Mtilatila, Kaimila, Mansingh, Agyemang-Yeboah, & Obeng, 2013). There is still small number of research concerning risk communication practice in the context of Indonesia. Research and discussions about risk communication knowledge in the context of Indonesia, however, is important because the country consists of various customs and traditions which might cause various interpretations on risk knowledge being delivered. In addition, as the country has a risk of natural disasters, for example, earth quake, tsunami, flood, providing information about coping with the disasters and the risk and hazard caused by the disasters are important. Since this paper is in Indonesian context, this will contribute to discussions of risk communication in the context of Indonesia, and in general in Asian settings.

2. Communicating risk knowledge: an Indonesian context

Risk communication is an integral and ongoing part of the risk analysis practice. Practically and ideally stakeholder groups should involve the risk communication program from the start. In this practice scientists or experts try to persuade and to convince the public about the validity of their scientific knowledge and any technical risk assessment of some hazard (Sellnow, Ulmer, Senger, & Littlefield, 2009:4). However, the same risk knowledge may produce very different perceptions on audiences, depending upon the context in which the risk is understood and interpreted.

In Indonesia the risk knowledge can be delivered through printed (e.g. brochures, newspapers, and magazines) and online media (e.g. online newspapers and magazines). The emergence of social media also supports the practice of risk communication as people can share their knowledge about risk and hazard through, for example, Facebook, YouTube, and et cetera. Moreover, they can participate actively in providing additional information with regard to the topic being discussed. Television, however, is also important as a means of communication to deliver the information to its audiences as this medium can construct a world in which knowledge and experience portrayed on the television programs are ever present (Trisnawati, 2012a; Trisnawati, 2012c:72-73; Trisnawati, 2012d:109-111), which in this case is about risk knowledge. Some examples of the media providing information related to risk and hazard in Indonesia can be seen in example (1) to (3). Those examples are about Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinders, which are currently still an important issue in this country. The first example is taken from an online newspaper providing information about a common LPG cylinder leak problem. The second example is about the use of LPG cylinder, taken from a blog. The third example, a television public service advertisement, is also about the use of LPG cylinder. This advertisement can also be accessed on YouTube.



Example (1). A common LPG cylinder leak problem. 1 Jun 2013.
<<http://m.poskotanews.com/2012/04/04/disosialisasikan-cara-gunakan-tabung-gas-elpiji/>>

Example (2). The use of LPG cylinder. 1 Jun 2013.
<<http://iblogblog.blogspot.com/2010/07/cara-menggunakan-tabung-elpiji-3-kg.html>>

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Example (3). The use of LPG cylinder. 1 Jun 2013.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCmceZR9l_k>

Another example of information about risk or hazard broadcast on television can also in forms of news programs, as can be seen in example (4). This way of communicating knowledge to the public is similar to science communication via television programs (Trisnawati, 2012d).



Example (4). Health effects of floods. 1 Jun 2013.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_48X5k7JNZk, 1 Jun 2013>

In addition to all media of communication mentioned above, cinema and theatrical performance can also be chosen to deliver information about risk or hazard. This is also similar to ways of communicating science to the public (Trisnawati, 2012d). In films or theatrical performance we can get message about the risk of living on the riverside including flood risk.

Although all media of communication mentioned in the previous paragraph are intended to inform and to educate their audiences, the audience's perception might differ due to their different ways of meaning-making about information they receive. This different meaning-making can be due to their different social backgrounds including different gender, age, and education (Trisnawati, 2007a:174; Trisnawati, 2007b; Trisnawati, 2012c:72-73). Their previous knowledge and experience about the object being informed, which are LPG cylinder and flood, have the potential to influence their ways of meaning-making. People who do not use LPG cylinder might not understand about the importance of information about the safety in using the LPG cylinder. This group of people might have less attention to the risk of the use of the LPG cylinder (Tauseef, Abbasi, & Abbasi, 2010). The same way of meaning-making might be applied to the information about the impact of floods to human community. Those who do not live in the area portrayed in the news might not pay attention to the risk (Ohl & Tapsell, 2000). In addition, as Indonesia comprises various customs and tradition across the Indonesian archipelago from the Western part to the Eastern part, not all society use LPG cylinders as the source of energy. Some societies located in rural might use firewood and they do not need LPG cylinders.

In addition to the way of meaning-making, cultural aspects of the society is indicated in the texts which bring the risk knowledge, whether in the form of printed brochure or newspaper, articles on social media, public service advertisement, or television news program. Choosing any elements in the chosen media of communication, which is aimed at persuading people through verbal, non-verbal, and visual elements employed in the text, can represent characteristics of the cultures, indicated in the meaning-making process. This will be explained in the following section.

3. Cultural aspects on risk communication: construction of identity

Communicating risk knowledge to the public also means generating meanings where the meanings are also integrated through the ways the risk knowledge is communicated. In this context cultural meanings are formed and communicated via the chosen media of communication (Trisnawati, 2012d:109-110). Information about the flood risk in example (4), for instance, which is delivered through television news program, might construct meaning about such knowledge with the assistance of all elements employed in the text together with its multimodality including verbal, non-verbal, and visual elements. Since in the risk communication all parties including stakeholders, experts, scientists, journalists, and other interested parties take part in the risk communication practice, the process of constructing meanings is also formed in dialogue among them.

In the risk communication practice, the chosen media of communication is also important. People's familiarity with media of communication might give an impact on their interaction with other media. For example, those who are familiar with audio-visual media will use their knowledge and experience in interacting with such media when they interact with other audio-visual media (Trisnawati, 2012c:72). This indicates that people's previous knowledge and experience about any audio-visual elements will influence the way they interact with the media containing information about risk knowledge. Those who do not have any experience using LPG cylinders (see example [1] – [3]) might have difficulties in understanding the usage of the product as well as possible risks from the usage of the product. Also, people who have no experience about living in riverside, or in any area where flood occurs, might not be aware of the flood risk.

With regard to the way the information is delivered, in the context of Indonesia, telling story is an important aspect in delivering information to others (Rodgers, 1995:6; Venkateswaran, 2011:121). Telling stories are part of Indonesian culture that has been socially conditioned and integrated in the society (Rodgers, 1995, p. 6). It might be easier for Indonesian audiences to understand risk knowledge if it is delivered through that way as it might be easier for Indonesian audiences to understand messages through describing an event, experience, or sequence of events in the form of a story (Trisnawati, 2012d:115).

4. Conclusion

The practice of risk communication in the context of Indonesia is influenced by various customs and traditions which comprise the country which can then form different interpretation on what is informed. The meaning of the message is constructed not only by the dialogue among participants in the communication practice or only by all elements within the text. Although the text is a set of sign systems which convey meanings, the meaning does not simply exist in the text. The meaning, however, is formed by all participants in the practice of such a communication, including all elements in the text whether verbal, non-verbal, and visual. Telling story might be an important way to deliver risk knowledge as in general Indonesian people use this way to deliver message among them. This can relate to discussions of risk communication models. However, different areas of living and different traditions might cause different interpretations about the risk knowledge being informed. In addition, different social backgrounds of the audiences, which include age, gender, and education, might also cause the different interpretation.

Although the discussion in this article needs further investigation, this discussion might provide additional information about communicating risk knowledge in the context of Indonesia which can then contribute to the discussion of construction of identity of the society. The development of Indonesian society, however, might change the current characteristic of the practice of risk communication knowledge. For example, the more people get better education and the more people know and use the product of technology will change the characteristic of the practice of risk communication knowledge. There might be a possibility that online information is preferred in the future if the majority people are familiar with various means of electronic communication.

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