

Media Coverage of Risk Controversies: Why Do Journalists Focus on Outrage?

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1. Journalists are unprepared. Many are even technophobic.
2. Time is tight. The average reporter covers more than two stories a day.
3. Space is tight. Even if there's time to get the technical story, there may not be enough space in the paper or time in the newscast to explain it.
4. No one is interested. Editors like technical information less than reporters; readers and viewers like it less than editors.
5. Technical information is ponderous – difficult to make lively, almost impossible to make visual.
6. Enough is enough. Journalists doubt that technical details are really all that crucial to the public's understanding of the issues.
7. The issues are complex. Risk assessment isn't an easy field to explain in four or five paragraphs or a 15-second "sound bite."
8. Technical sources aren't cooperative. Experts often avoid the exposure that news coverage brings. They fear being misrepresented, but even if they are accurately reported they lose (not gain) stature with their colleagues.
9. Technical sources and journalists work under different values.
 - Impersonal versus personal
 - Abstract versus concrete
 - Neutral versus lively
 - Nuanced versus dichotomized
 - Tentative versus definitive

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