

Soilikki Vettenranta:

Making Sense of Chernobyl Nine Years After: TV News Reception Study of the Environment Disaster

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Mediated risk communication is a highly relevant and rapidly developing field of mass communication research. The role of the mass media is crucial when catastrophes happen, as such incidences show how dependent we are on receiving information from the media. But they also show how complicated the situation is for the authorities, the media and for all of us as common citizens with limited knowledge. Vettenranta's thesis focuses on risk communication as a two-way interactive process of exchange of information, in this case, among members of an audience who have watched an excerpt of TV-news from 1986. The excerpt was about the Chernobyl catastrophe, and partly based on information messages from the authorities. Chernobyl will remain in our memories forever; it has become a symbol for environmental damage to humankind and will remain one. Certainly there is a "before" and an "after" in our history. That is what this study, *Making Sense of Chernobyl Nine Years After*, so obviously reveals, but it also raises important questions for the future about how we handle situations like this one.

The Outline of the Thesis

This thesis belongs to the broad area of media reception study. The research design involves screening a 40-minute compilation of Chernobyl news to 15 respondents some nine years after the event. It is original in design, as most of the previous studies after the Chernobyl accident have concentrated on a sender's perspective. The thesis is ambitious in scope and generally convincing in execution. In this reception study, the aim is to study how 15 viewers construct meanings from TV-news about Chernobyl nine years after the catastrophe. Other research questions are the ability of the TV medium to cope with the communicative demands that arise during a crisis like Chernobyl. The resulting data from respondent commentary are analysed both with respect to 'better' management of risk communication in the future and with respect to a number of more subjective themes related to the cultural meanings generated by disasters of this kind. Vettenranta identifies four main research objectives:

1. Inquiry into interpretation of TV news
2. Inquiry into improved use of TV through broadcasters' management and by journalists in the event of a crisis
3. Identification of the limitations of TV news as a medium for crisis reporting
4. Development of concepts in risk communication

As the research objectives indicate, this is an ambitious thesis. It is eclectic in its informing ideas and methodology, as Vettenranta is working with not one, but two or three, agenda of inquiry, trying to reveal the meaning of Chernobyl. In any case, the list of objectives is not a perfect guide to what the thesis finally contains. There is, for instance, considerable overlap between the second and the third objective. A whole major strand of the thesis is concerned with different kinds of cultural memory and its symbolisation is not represented on it, while goal number three is relatively underdeveloped.

The question of television's distinctive capacities as a medium for crisis reportage and the specific short-term interpretative issues raised by these capacities are matters that are suggested but only superficially developed in the thesis. Its account strongly indicates that this is an area for more intensive scrutiny. The question is if a closer study of the specific imagery of Chernobyl reporting would have given more potential for analytically addressing the specifics of news discourse as it was registered by the respondents? Such a strand of inquiry might have occurred as a prelude to the more general observations. This question, which is not easy to answer but highly relevant, of what television can do and how it can do it, remains as an implicit strand in the study.

Vettenranta states that the main focus of this study is conceptual constructions (p.118). That means that Vettenranta considers the individual as active, holistic and involved in continually recreating the social world. She studies this in the individual's consciousness through interaction and, therefore, the epistemology is subjective. Through her method, the aim is to recognise the dominant constructions and her task is to create unity between them. That is quite a challenge. The analysis proceeds through three steps; a diagonal and horizontal step, a holistic depth – especially in one interview; an elaboration of the analysis model where the results are aimed at a higher-level synthesis of themes and patterns. This social constructivist research framework derives from the connections between the ontological, epistemological and methodolo-

gical levels. The study has a hermeneutical-phenomenological basis, as the interest is in the respondents' meanings and their lifeworlds. The respondents experience the world, and through experiences they create new constructions that are individual. When reading chapter seven, I am impressed by the way Vettenranta manages to spin so many threads simultaneously.

Theoretical Approach

The research paradigm of the thesis is considered from epistemological and ontological perspectives. The resulting data from respondent commentary is analysed both with respect to "better" management of risk communication in the future, a concern framed largely in terms of the writings of the social theorist Habermas, and with respect to more subjective themes having to do with the cultural meanings generated by disasters of this kind, a concern framed in terms of the writings of Heidegger and by recent writers on risk. Habermas' work has been and is also now cited regularly in discussions of the problems of public communication affecting European democracies. The thesis deals with his ideas competently, including a good attempt to develop the work of other scholars who have applied his concepts to specific national case-studies. Perhaps more discussion of the Norwegian communication system, its levels and the people's confidence in it, its continuities in terms of public philosophy and its historical relationship with government, might have helped mediate between the normative principles of a social philosophy, on the one hand, and the details of a particular informational "breakdown", on the other.

When examining data from an ontological perspective, Vettenranta uses constructivism as her research framework. The ontological analysis is based on the application of Heidegger's "existentials" as a scientific instrument. The material is discussed particularly in the light of the existentials: time and temporality, state of mind, care and authenticity and construction of space. Epistemology is considered in the thesis as an important aspect of our daily TV viewing, because understanding television as a news medium is an epistemological act. In one chapter, the writer provides us with an analytical bridge between the ontological and epistemological approaches where one respondent, a female South Sami reindeer herder, is examined in detail in the light of the existentials. This chapter is very illuminating, as Vettenranta makes a concerted effort to counteract the tendency to simplify the data by presenting the reader a more coherent description of

one of the respondents' experiences. The portrait of Mari is wonderful. This is described as an interview where the data best fit into the theoretical frame.

According to the author, Mari appeared to best represent the idea of a genuine, authentic "Dasein" in the light of Heidegger's existentials. In her narrative, the private sphere merged into the public sphere, according to Habermas' distinctive terms.

The application of Heidegger is very engaging and provocative. This is an area with far less precedent, and Vettenranta works hard to make it bear fruit in her thesis, on the whole with considerable success. Some of the strongest and more original parts of the work are developed from this base in ontological issues – for instance on the symbolic dimension of the Chernobyl incident as a feature both of a national and a personal memory – no less impressive for their tentativeness and exploratory nature than other strands. In both her use of Habermas and Heidegger, the writer is perceptive about the difficulties that follow from direct, non-adapted application of general theory to specific instances and also about the difficulties that follow from the partial, selective use of theory in order to 'fit' an instance. The well-attested problem of broad classificatory systems, that of deciding which category an instance should fit into when it possesses the characteristics of two or more, is also sensitively and constructively handled at several stages.

Methods

The choice of a qualitative reception study, focusing on a small group of respondents, is well described in the context of existing work in the field. The study is highly ambitious in that it is put into an interesting frame of interpretation based on the division between the concepts of ontology and epistemology. Given these distinctive twin theoretical concerns, it is quite possible that a more concise critical review of the literature would have sufficed, but the comprehensive review with which we are provided is competent and alert to problems.

The instrument used in carrying out this investigation is based on the standardised open-ended interview, employed in order to capture as holistic a picture as possible of the respondents' situations, emotions and reactions. Every respondent was shown a 40 minute long extract of 'old news' from the time shortly after the Chernobyl accident. Vettenranta motivates this by her interest in how different viewers make sense of a newscast excerpt in retrospect. This seems to me somewhat ambiguous and unclear, as the motivation for showing the excerpt must also have been to remind the respondents

of the event that happened nine years ago. More might, therefore, have been said about the principles behind the selection of the particular material screened, since this material was clearly instrumental in provoking the particular configuration of responses analysed. Through the choice of the TV news excerpts connected to the statements in texts and pictures shown in the newscast, certain memories were recalled by the respondents. The selection of these news excerpts shown in the videotape is not properly discussed here, even though the manifest content on the surface, as well as the between-the-lines messages, must have strongly affected the respondents' answers in the interviews.

My own research from that time, April 1986 – a content analysis of radio- and TV-news during the first 40 days after the accident – showed a huge variety of news discourses, e.g., more dramatic news that really worried the audience, containing words like "cancer, high radiation levels, the risk for pregnant women and children" (Findahl & Lindblad, 1987). There is especially one news broadcast I remember from the TV-news in Sweden in 1986, a text telling about the danger for pregnant women and their unborn babies, accompanied by illustrated graphics of a huge stomach with red twinkling arrows pointing at it. News features like this one worried not only pregnant women but a whole nation. My point here is that the selection of news must have had a strong impact on the answers during the interviews, and it would have been of value if Vettenranta had made the selection process clear. In the first objective of the thesis, the word "in retrospect" is used. But the complexity the respondents are asked to deal with when they are told to remember immediate emotional reactions from 1986 during an interview situation in 1995, is not properly discussed here. More might have been said, too, about the principles behind the selection of the particular material screened, some of it transcribed in the appendix, since this material was clearly instrumental in provoking the particular configuration of responses analysed.

The study sample of 15 respondents is weighted towards educated professionals. Even though Vettenranta states that respondents of varying social demographic dimensions were included in this study, most of the respondents have been chosen because of their special status during the disaster, either as a representative of the authorities or experts, the media or as a lay person with a special connection to the accident. The lay people have rather high educational levels with a few exceptions, a housewife and a vegetable grower. The study does not investigate 'lay' readings of the news accounts

so much as it tries to tap into various kinds of ‘key informants’, many of whom had duties in relation to the communication of the incident in April 1986. When selecting the respondents for the group of media people, one woman and one man, former journalists, were included in the media group, though they were representatives of the authorities. During the time of the Chernobyl accident, they were responsible for transmitting governmental information. Vettenranta motivates this categorisation by the fact that they both had a background as journalists. I am not convinced by that, and find it of minor relevance as their loyalty had to be with the authorities. As public information officers, they were not as free as they would have been in the role of journalists to question messages and information coming from the authorities. Especially not when a huge catastrophe has occurred. They were probably even more caught up in their roles of transmitting only the official information and not allowed to engage in critical journalism.

Moreover, unlike many reception studies, where the form and themes of the news account are pursued in detail in the respondent’s fieldwork, here the accounts perform a primary function of ‘triggering’ broader ideas about the incidents as well as reflecting generally on the role performed by those charged with information management and by journalists. As Vettenranta herself has experience from this time working as a person transmitting the operative information, she has gained wisdom that makes the study more trustworthy. In April 1986, she had to formulate her own plan for crisis information in order to be able to answer the questions from the public about nuclear contamination. In the thesis, there is not much written about Vettenranta’s role as an interviewer, being a journalist as well as a woman. She does make one comment, however, about her dual role as journalist and researcher (p. 76), and that was that it might have speeded up the interviews. The interview guide in the appendix is ambitious in form and includes many interesting questions; most of them are open-ended, but there are also a few questions that might be answered by a simple yes or no. Vettenranta uses Patton’s question typology when probing is used in order to penetrate more deeply into the themes, but also in order to clarify that she has understood the respondents’ statements, thus eliminating misunderstandings. By using probes, she enriches her data and obtains a more complete picture by listening carefully to what is said and being sensitive to the feedback needs of the respondent.

Vettenranta’s background knowledge about Chernobyl is valuable for her research, and it has

also influenced the design of her study in a way that I think could have been discussed more in the thesis. I find this of importance as she states that both the researcher and the respondent are active and involved in meaning-making in the qualitative interview. Respondents are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with researchers (p. 69). In qualitative studies, it is of great value that the researcher makes clear her own point of view and preunderstanding of the event that is being studied. Having been right in the middle of the information mess – as Vettenranta was back in 1986 – there might be a problem that too much is taken for granted in the text. When reading, however, I feel convinced that Vettenranta’s journalistic background has contributed a great deal to her lucid and engaging commentary on the respondents’ accounts. She examines many themes and shows that she fully understands the complexities in the respondents’ reception of the disastrous event. All this indicates good levels of research competence.

The concept “theme” is chosen to present the interview data. This is motivated by the fact that the themes allow Vettenranta to grasp both theoretical and methodological alternatives in the data analysis and the fact that she is aware of the shortcomings of other studies. Inspired by Heidegger’s basic question: What it is to be? she uses some of his existentials plus some others in order to form her scientific tools, the themes: time and temporality, state of mind, mood, care and authenticity and finally space and spatiality. The procedure used in identifying the themes is well described. The themes form her scientific tools and help her to find out how the respondents perceived the world, in 1995 and 1986. Giddens’ term “ontological security” is also used, which I find very relevant to this study.

Conclusions in Relation to Data

By proceeding from Heidegger to Habermas’ theory of the communicative act, Vettenranta highlights the tension between the private and public sphere by introducing many well chosen transcript examples. The different aspects of mass media discourse and understanding are also discussed in terms of the Swedish mass media researcher Norstedt’s analysis model on the objective-factual, social-normative and subjective-expressive worlds of the communicative action (p. 173). Vettenranta uses his design of a framework based on a distinction between the validity claims and the criteria for the fulfilment of three world views; the objective, the social and the subjective. These world views are related to three different respondent categories in this study, au-

thorities and experts to the objective world, media representatives to the social and lay people to the subjective. The model is constructed using a distinction between the validity claims, truth, right in norms and authenticity in relation to the condition of openness together with the criteria for fulfilment, evidence, morality and consistency. Vettenranta discovers that this model is only partly correct for her purposes and that the respondents could not be placed rigidly into these three world-view categories. The ideas of Habermas, based on an ideal speech situation, might also have a minor relevance when judging an information crisis like the one after the Chernobyl catastrophe.

The strategy of outlining the main overarching themes against a theoretical background of Heidegger's ontological and epistemological levels as well as Habermas' sociological theories, can be regarded both as a strength and weakness of the study. The strength is methodological – the author to some extent fulfils the aim of recognising the dominant constructions and also makes a concerted effort to create unity between them. This process of creating unity can also to some extent hide the weakness, by causing loss of contact with the differences, nuances and contradictions in remarks of particular interest in the individual respondents' meanings and subjective lifeworlds.

The data presentation was quite accurate, Vettenranta being very particular about illuminating extracts from the interview accounts. As the data are transparent to some extent, the interpretations of them can sometimes be questioned by the reader. Even if the author is well aware that every single respondent participates differently in the construction of meaning, she draws conclusions from the results by strongly focusing on common traits in the interview data. One of these is the assertion that gender differences were less significant than Vettenranta had anticipated prior to data collection (p. 175). Because the sample is limited to 15 respondents, we can not expect to find any significant gender differences. The author seems a bit surprised that the female and male respondents often said almost the same thing. Due to the seriousness of the event commented on here, a nuclear catastrophe, it seems somehow obvious to me that both female and male respondents would often reply similarly.

There were eight men and seven women in the study, and the results did not show any direct connection between the different rationality types and gender. She states that some men represent the rationality of caring and some women are characterised by instrumental, purposive rationality, which is not a surprising fact. But women as a group are

closer to valuing rationality than to instrumental rationality, and caring rationality has its roots in the private sphere. This finding seems to me to be suppressed in the results and interpretative sections of the thesis. Some extracts from the interview data reveal the respondents' view of gender differences:

Women were interested in what kinds of consequences the accident might have. Women were more worried and wanted to find out precautions to take, while men were busy explaining it away.

(female executive officer)

Women feel more responsibility than men for the children and family around us, while men do not see the long-term consequences.

(housewife)

The picture was totally dominated by men in the leading positions. Women were sun bathing and shopping and carrying out their housewife duties.

(male researcher)

How striking the lack of women as experts was.

(male teacher, journalist)

It's more about men than women you know, so there is a male domination.

(male forest technician)

News probably has more to say to male viewers.

(male vegetable grower)

Journalists just grab the first guy who's standing there and make him say something.

(female reindeer herder)

It's so easy to settle on the first man who comes along. Now I have to improve. I keep thinking that I have to be better at that again.

(female journalist)

Men and power brokers are hugely over-represented on the regular news. It's they who first and foremost are permitted to say what they think.

(male information officer and journalist)

These extracts, though they are taken out of their context, represent most of the respondents who seem well aware of gender differences in the media material after Chernobyl. Vettenranta writes that she had planned an experiment to let judges read through the interview transcripts in order to find out if they could identify the female and male respondents. It is a pity that these plans were not carried out, because the results would have been of interest, as she states that there is no direct connection between the different rationality types and gender in her data. The question is whether this is due to gender or to the rationality types, as women as well as

men express both value and instrumental rationality. We all represent split rationality, especially in relation to an environmental catastrophe. Maybe it is a question of choice of methodology. If the researcher had looked for other gender differences, that were not dualistic e.g., language usage, word expressions, use of symbols and conversational style, she might have found them, as is the case in other similar studies. The differences are hidden, they consist of small nuances, ways of expressing like we are shown in chapter eight where Mari, the Sami reindeer herder, talks to us readers. That is why the judges' verdict would have been of interest. In the conclusions of the thesis, Vettenranta states that she would have needed a more refined research design to elaborate this question of gender differences.

There is a question about media content and language in the interviews to which most of the respondents answer that they had not reflected on the language use. This surprises Vettenranta, but I think that the question is posed in a way that is too specific and difficult to answer. It might have been better if the question had been opened up and the respondents had been asked about the whole presentation form. In the answers there is one exception, the housewife, the respondent with the least formal education, which might indicate that class has something to do with the missing gender differences. Later on in the interviews when probing questions were posed, most of the respondents elucidated their views on language use, oddly enough, as Vettenranta writes, as it was the journalists themselves. I do not find it odd, because journalists are professionals using language as their tool. This has to do with the sampling of respondents from a dominant group of experts. My impression from our content analysis from the first 40 days in Swedish TV and radio news is that it was the content, the whole complexity of the situation, that was difficult to understand, not particularly the language used in the news.

In the conclusions when Vettenranta writes about the breakdown in communicative action and the collapse in the public sphere, I can recognise everything from our study in Sweden. The information crisis was total. The more the authorities tried to calm us media consumers with reassuring utterances the more worried we became. Most of us felt that crucial information was being held back. One of Vettenranta's respondents expresses it very well when she says that there was an incredible underestimation of people: we were given "patriarchal com-

forters who patted our heads". As in all media dramas, we are supposed to need roles for scapegoats and heroes, in Norway two scapegoats were found and one heroine. She was a female biologist who already on the third day foresaw the grave consequences of the accident. Vettenranta writes that she was killed by silence as she was not seen on the TV-news later on.

In the concluding chapter, Vettenranta returns to her theoretical basis where the media are seen as an integral part of a cultural process through which meanings are produced. And the messages are considered to be complex discourses with meanings encoded through cultural communicative codes. She states that it's more important to treat the news as a form of cultural discourse than information. This standpoint has been the basis of this study. Chernobyl news on TV was mainly based on technical rationality while viewers construct the meanings of the news on the basis of symbolic, cultural rationality. When reading the final chapter, I find that the conclusions 'narrow down' quite sharply from the reflective, speculative range of the study itself and also risk making, to specific recommendations about future risk communications which seem rather under-supported by the nature of the documentation. In what it does and what it does not do, the thesis provides a good incentive for further research. By opening up the issue of the relationship between news and social memory, and considering both of these in their connection with risk and anxiety, several opportunities are presented for the future. The thesis is rich in possibilities for the development of further research.

References

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