

Risk Communication

This section discusses issues related to risk communication across a range of publicly perceived high-risk industries (such as pharmaceuticals, nuclear, oil, etc.). It reports critically and provides analysis on risk communication as an outcome of risk research within these industries. Contributions are intended to include methods working towards the advancement of risk perception research and describe any lessons learned for successfully communicating to the public about risk.

2010 Meltdown – Airport Closure Risk Communications in London and NYC

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Saturday, 18 December 2010 was the first of a two day complete closure of all London area airports due to freezing temperatures and approximately five inches of snow. A week later on December 26th, New York City area airports closed in a similar manner from the sixth largest snowstorm in NYC history, blanketing the city approximately twenty inches of snow.¹ Both storms grounded flights for days, and resulted in severe delays long after the snow stopped falling. Both London and NYC area airports produced risk communications to explain the necessity for the closures and delays. This short flash news report examines, in turn, the risk communications presented during the airport closures. A background is provided to understand how the risk perceptions differ between London and NYC publics. Finally, it compares and contrasts the perceptions of the decision making process and outcomes of the closures, which continue to accumulate economic and social impacts.

The majority of London area airports are owned by the private company BAA Ltd². BAA was first established via the Airports Act of 1986, as part of a measure taken during the Thatcher era to privatize government owned assets as a vehicle by which stock market funds could be raised. Prior to this Act, the public British Airport Authority was responsible for overseeing the operation of the three main state owned airports: London Heathrow (LHR), London Gatwick (LGW), and London Stansted (STN). Once privatized, BAA Ltd. was responsible for the operations of all three major London area airports. However, in 2009, BAA sold LGW to Global Infrastructure Partners (GIP) in light of scrutiny directed at its

alleged monopolizing of London airports. The UK Competition Commission is additionally insisting on BAA to sell STN in order to prevent “adverse effects for both passengers and airlines.”³

Unlike London, New York City’s three primary airports: John F. Kennedy International (JFK), LaGuardia (LGA), and Newark International (EWR) are operated by a single public authority: the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ). PANYNJ⁴ was established in 1921 as an interstate contract between the American states of New York and New Jersey as a sovereign institution responsible for governing the majority of the region’s transportation. It was in 1942, that PANYNJ’s jurisdiction expanded to include New York and New Jersey state-owned airports. The city of New York required a specialized public authority to rehabilitate, develop, and operate the area airports.

Following the snowstorms that consecutively hit London and New York City in December of 2010, the respective private and public operating bodies decided on total closure of their area airports. Specifically in London, BAA operated Heathrow Airport did not manage to get on top of the situation for a further five

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- 1 H. Kennedy, “Christmas Blizzard of 2010: Mayor Bloomberg defends NYC’s response to winter storm, mass transit”, *NY Daily News* (27 December 2010), available on the Internet at <http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/2010/12/27/2010-12-27_christmas_blizzard_of_2010_mayor_bloomberg_defends_nyrcs_response_to_snowstorm_ma.html> (last accessed on 8 January 2011).
- 2 Further information about BAA is available on the Internet at <<http://www.baa.com/portal/page/About/BAA+Airports%5EAbout+BAA%5EWho+we+are/c44e357c07eee110VgnVCM10000036821c0a/448c6a4c7f1b0010VgnVCM200000357e120a/%20BAA>> (last accessed on 9 January 2011).
- 3 Competition Commission, “BAA airports market investigation: A report on the supply of airport services by BAA in the UK” (19 March 2009), available on the Internet at <http://www.competition-commission.org.uk/rep_pub/reports/2009/fulltext/545.pdf> (last accessed on 8 January 2011).
- 4 The Port Authority is headed by the reigning Governors of New York and New Jersey. Each governor, with the approval of his or her state senate, appoints six members to the Board of Commissioners, who serve overlapping six-year terms without pay. Meetings of the Board of Commissioners are public, and the governor has the authority to veto actions by the commissioners from the same state. An Executive Director is appointed by the Board of Commissioners to deal with day-to-day operations and to execute the Port Authority’s policies. Since May 2008, Christopher O. Ward has been the Executive Director of the Port Authority, after being nominated by then New York Governor David Paterson. More information about The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey board of commissioners is available on the Internet at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20080630000920/http://www.panynj.gov/AboutthePortAuthority/Governance/BoardofCommissioners/>> (last accessed on 7 January 2011).

days after the initial closure due to heavy snowfall. BAA was accused of under-investing in snow and ice-fighting technology at Heathrow, resulting in an inquiry into “what went wrong” that grounded flights for days. BAA chief executive Colin Matthews stated: *“The inquiry will forensically examine what went wrong at Heathrow, and look fundamentally at our ability to prepare and respond more effectively to periods of bad weather at an airport operating at its maximum capacity. The inquiry will have complete freedom to examine the sequence of events, and to deliver recommendations for BAA to implement.”*⁵

By comparison, Gatwick Airport, run by GIP, is half the size of Heathrow, but spent £1m on snow and ice this year and plans to spend another £7m next year. Gatwick’s “snow fleet” is reported to be made up of 150 vehicles to Heathrow’s relatively mere 69.⁶ These figures have prompted calls for new regulations that allow the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to fine airports and even take their licenses if they don’t prepare adequately for bad weather.⁷

In the wake of the London airports closures due to the blizzard, BAA has been strongly criticized, not

just for its investment in necessary equipment to deal with such scale natural emergencies, but also the lack of information communicated. BAA communicated at the beginning of the storm that airport closures were due to passenger “safety first.” However, while passengers were willing to wait in the interest of safety, the dearth of information from then on describes a case of poor risk communication. It is well established in academic circles that risk communications are crucial for building mutually productive relationships between private institutions and the lay public.⁸ Long term effects of poor risk communications can result in a tarred reputation and diminishing public trust.⁹

While BAA did not appear to execute appropriately developed risk communications throughout the lifecycle of the airport closure crisis as dictated by the emergency risk communication paradigm¹⁰, long term reputational damage may be still be minimized “Provided they [BAA] can be seen to come out of this with a clear focus on learning lessons.”¹¹ Further steps taken towards quelling public disdain have included the forfeiture of a 2010 bonus by BAA’S CEO, Colin Matthews.

In regards to the New York City Airport closures, criticism mounted when it became known that several international flights were left stranded on the tarmac at Kennedy International Airport. Operating authority PANYNJ publicly accused the specific airlines for being at fault for the unfortunate circumstances. Spokesperson Steve Coleman stated, *“It is an airline’s responsibility to make sure before they leave their point of origin that they have a gate assignment. These airlines did not. So they got to the airport and had no place to dock.”*¹²

Compared to London, New York airport operating authorities did not receive the same level of criticism for their handling and communicating of airport closures. Rather in New York City, it appeared as though scrutiny befell individual airlines and their inefficiency at communicating information to their passengers.

The difference in public perceptions of how airport closures were handled by the relevant operating bodies may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, PANYNJ is a public body that speaks on behalf of the region’s airports. This allows the messages to be consistent and originate from a single source. Communications coming from multiple sources can result in conflicting information and inconsistent instruc-

5 “BAA launches inquiry into Heathrow Airport snow chaos”, *BBC News Online* (23 December 2010), available on the Internet at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-12071442>> (last accessed on 8 January 2011).

6 S. Musafer, “BAA boss refuses bonus over snow; has Heathrow’s reputation been damaged?”, *BBC News Online* (21 December 2010), available on the Internet at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12049482>> (last accessed on 9 January 2011).

7 Civil Aviation Authority, “CAA Warns Over Instances of Unacceptable Treatment of Passengers during Recent Snow Disruption” (23 December 2010), available on the Internet at <<http://www.caa.co.uk/application.aspx?catid=14&pagetype=65&appid=7&mode=detail&nid=1956>> (last accessed on 9 January 2011). Additionally, CAA found that several airlines did not meet with EU-enforced obligations to customers during the disruptions. EU regulations protect people in such situations and requires airlines to let people know what their rights are.

8 B. Fischhoff, “Risk Perception and Communication Unplugged: Twenty Years of Process”, *Risk Analysis* (1995), p. 15.

9 R. Lofstedt, *Risk Management in Post Trust Societies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005).

10 V. Covello and Peter Sandman, “Risk Communication: Evolution and Revolution”, in Anthony Wolbarst (ed.), *Solutions to an Environment in Peril* (John Hopkins University Press 2001), pp. 164–178.

11 John Strickland of JLS consulting in “BAA boss refuses bonus over snow”, *BBC News Online* (21 December 2010), available on the Internet at <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12049482>> (last accessed on 7 January 2011).

12 M. Schlangenhein and Nancy Moran, “Passenger Outrage Rises as Storm Snarls U.S. Travel”, *Bloomberg News* (29 December 2010), available on the Internet at <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-12-29/storm-response-outrage-grows-as-u-s-flyers-are-stuck-in-planes-airports.html>> (last accessed on 9 January 2011).

tions perpetuating public confusion and distrust.¹³ In London, private ownership of the area's airports resulted in various sources for information. Further, perceived competence of Gatwick operations as compared to BAA run Heathrow allowed for acute criticism towards how risk communications were handled. Mainly, it was the dearth of information communicated by BAA that was most widely acknowledged.

Secondly, PANYNJ is experienced in communicating snow related disruptions due to the history of snowfall in the region. In New York, airport closures are both anticipated and expected. This is not the case in the United Kingdom where snowfall has increased in recent years, perpetuating views of private company airport operators as either unprepared, or unwilling to invest in the equipment necessary to prevent undesirable circumstances, such as airport closures and delays. Thus, while London operators were criticized for their shortcomings in the handling of their airport closures, in New York blame was attributed to the incompetency of the individual airlines.

Public perceptions of snowfall also differ between New York and London. Consistent and heavy snowfall in New York has resulted in a tolerance for anticipated annual disruptions in travel plans. Natural disruptions, such as snowfall, are also far more acceptable than man made disruptions to travel. In these cases, the public is less likely to attribute blame and rather sees it as "the will of god."¹⁴ In London, occurrence of snow related travel disruptions is historically far less than in New York, and while it is perceived as a natural disturbance, there is still less tolerance due to its rarity. Further, salience of prolonged airport closures exists in UK public perceptions attributed to the 2010 volcanic ash crisis. Similarly to the response to the ash cloud in the UK and

other airspaces, the response to the snow was mainly reactive and therefore not as effective as it could have been.¹⁵ The situation escalated due to poorly planned communications, likely still cognitively available¹⁶ in public recollections of the crisis.

Finally, differences in London and New York perceptions may be related to the nature of public versus private operating bodies. In New York, governing of the airports is a transparent process. Meetings are held publicly, and the reigning governor of both New York and New Jersey may ultimately be held accountable for any decisions made. To this extent, communications to the public in regards to any disruptions related may be understood as politically sensitive and therefore given utmost priority. In London, private company handling of a less frequently occurring natural event can result in the potential defamation of the company figurehead.¹⁷ In the case of BAA, CEO Colin Matthews was required to forfeit his bonus in order to regain public trust and take steps towards restoring the public reputation of his company. It is these unique differences between the handlings of the major snowfalls in December 2010 in London and New York respectively that have made for an interesting examination of the resulting differing public perceptions.

13 JX. Kasperson *et al.*, *The Social Contours of Risk* (Earthscan 2005).

14 P. Slovic, "Perception of Risk", 236 *Science* (1987), pp. 280–285.

15 BAA has a snow plan with a "communication during snow clearance operations flow-chart", BAA Aerodrome snow plan Heathrow Airport Winter 2010–11, available on the Internet at <http://www.baa.com/assets/Internet/Heathrow_Airside_and_Baggage/Downloads/PDFs/Aerodrome_Snow_Plan_2010_2011.pdf> (last accessed on 7 January 2011).

16 A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, "Availability, A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability", 4 *Cognitive Psychology* (1973), pp. 207–232.

17 Judy Larkin, *Strategic Reputation Risk Management* (Palgrave Macmillan 2003).