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Book Review

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Book Review

Erratum

The citation for this review is 3 *RISK* 173 (1992) in most commercial databases.

STEPHEN KLAIDMAN, HEALTH IN THE HEADLINES: THE STORIES BEHIND THE STORIES. (Oxford University Press 1991) [249 pp.] Bibliographical references, index. LC: 90-19297; ISBN 0-19-505298-6. [Cloth \$24.95. 200 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10016.]

This is an examination, by a well-known journalist and current fellow at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, of the impact of various media upon public perceptions of the risks posed by EDB, radon, AIDS, cholesterol, the greenhouse effect, nuclear power and cigarettes. With these examples, Klaidman describes and analyzes how media “events” are born, expand into the public’s conscience and ultimately affect private and public attempts to cope.

Throughout, Klaidman describes how health risks, of often uncertain severity and frequency, eventually catch the attention of the average citizen. In doing so, he shows how many important technical details are filtered out by the media because journalists find scientific studies difficult to understand — particularly when they offer conflicting views of the level or existence of risk. He also shows, for example, how distortion can arise from journalists’ searches for stories with high drama and human interest.

In some cases, he believes that risk has been overstated. For example, in the chapter on nuclear power, he contrasts the lack of coverage of an allegedly “inherently safe reactor,” available since 1967, with the extensive coverage of Three Mile Island. At 99, he speculates that “it could easily be that if the press had given more coverage to the ‘inherently safe reactor’ twenty years ago, this country’s energy grid would look different from the way it looks today.”

Yet, he believes that the risk posed by radon has been understated, and his discussion is not without drama. It begins with an account of a Pennsylvania nuclear engineer who inexplicably triggered alarms at the power plant where he worked and later was found to have become “hot” from the radon gas in his home!

In addition to biases introduced by journalists' lack of technical background and their search for drama, Klaidman describes how product manufacturers, political candidates and citizen activists attempt to manipulate the media for their own purposes. The result may be unwise regulation when officials react to snowballing public pressure caused by fears generated by press speculation. In other cases, the responses of individuals may have, in the aggregate, equally or more serious consequences. Consider the following, at 172:

The Associated Press, for example, put a story out that noted: "Adding a bran muffin or a bowl of oat-bran cereal to a daily diet can cost about \$250 a year, compared with some cholesterol-lowering drugs, which can cost as much as \$1450 a year." What the story didn't say was that the drugs will lower your cholesterol; a muffin or a bowl of cereal will not. [Endnote omitted.]

Klaidman's account is anecdotal and aimed at the general public. In some instances, it is apt to spark disagreement. Yet, it is lucid and well documented. Insofar as his book allows readers to consult original sources, many readers of RISK should find it personally interesting and professionally useful.

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