Sensemaking in the Shadow of a Superfund Site: Defining ATSDR Roles and Goals in an Agency-Saturated Community

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Defining ATSDR Roles and Goals in an Agency-Saturated Community

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Where We Are Going

• Sensemaking in Risk Communication
• The Superfund Tapestry
  • Locals
  • Outsiders
• The PGDP Case Study
• Implications
Sensemaking

Individuals working together to create shared meaning

Seeks:

► Plausibility
► Coherence
► Reasonableness
► Social Acceptability
► Credibility

--Weick, 1995
Cosmological Episodes

“When people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system”

--Weick, 2001
Roles

“Thrust people into unfamiliar roles, leave some key roles unfilled, make the task more ambiguous, discredit the role system, and make all of these changes in a context in which small events can combine into something monstrous”

--Weick, 2001
So What?

Role Deterioration

Cosmological Episode

Crisis

Loss of Meaning
The Superfund Tapestry

• Historically Situated
• Environmental and Health Concerns
• Stakeholder Heterogeneity
• Complex Statutory Environment
Locals

- Homeowners/Landowners Near the Site
- PRP Employees
- Environmental/Health Advocates
- Healthcare Providers
- Educators
- Local Media
- Religious Community
- Hunters/Fishermen
- Tourism Industry
- Local Government
- SSABs/CABs
Outsiders

• Federal Agencies
  • US EPA
  • ATSDR
  • NIEHS (SRP)
  • DOE
  • DOD

• State Agencies
  • Environmental Protection
    • Divisions of Water
    • Divisions of Air Quality
    • Divisions of Waste Management
      • Superfund Branches
  • Health Departments

• University Researchers
Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant

- Only operating US uranium GDP (1952-present)
- 1,200 workers/$121M payroll
- TCE and Tc-99 in nearby private drinking wells (1988)
- EPA Superfund National Priority List (1993-94)
- One of the largest TCE plumes in the world
- Plant to close in 5-10 years
Methods

• 4-Year Study
• Interviews (n=63)
• Focus Groups (n=8)
• Content Analysis: *Paducah Sun* (Jan. – Dec. 2005, n=85 articles)
• Internet Inquiry (Activist Blog)
Findings: Interviews

• “...[I]t’s all on the ATSDR/CDC site, and we even had a sick worker get up at one of the meetings and talk about some of this stuff... They never told anybody anything. And they’re still not doing it.”

• “So why didn’t ASTDR [sic] do an epi study? They [i.e., ‘the government’] never do any honest stuff...”

• “What you’re seeing in their ASTDR [sic] reports is a lot of good information, and they do capture a lot of things in the buildings. But then it’s almost like I’ve got the real facts of the workers, and it’s not matching what you’re assessing here...”

• “[T]here’s been recent testimony that the ASTDR [sic] report was biased. These people were intimidated by the past administration.”
Findings: Focus Groups

• “...[P]eople know that it’s a plant out here for the government...”

• “...The federal government is notorious about [using acronyms], if you’ve ever tried to read a federal government document...”

• “[J]ust get the government the ___ out... They came in and disrupted everything...”

• “I would not want [information from] anybody affiliated with the government in any way...”
Findings: Media

Dominant Themes

- Contamination/pollution
- Toxins/toxic/poison
- Government
- Distrust
- Radiation
- Costs
- Regulations & Procedures

- Compensation
- Exposure
- Cancer
- Backlogs
- Protest
- Safety and Security
- Cleanup
- Workers/Sick Workers
- Jobs
- Contracts
- Delays/Postponements
- Timelines and Schedules
- Technology
- Family
- Economic Development
- Health
Findings: Blogs

• “There were, on the other hand, 7 or 8 government people in attendance. ...”

• “At one point during this process, one of the university/government women, Anna Hoover, took the floor...”
Implications

• Communicate ATSDR’s role early, clearly, and often

• Coordinate with other “outside” stakeholders

• Listen
References


* For a more detailed analysis of focus group data, see Chapter Seven of *Community Visions for the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant* at [www.paducahvision.com](http://www.paducahvision.com).
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