The Story of Risk
How Narratives Shape Risk Communication, Perception and Policy

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The organizing question of this volume is when and how events in the world lead to a recalibration of risk and a change of policy. A naïve model might assume a simple Bayesian process: the polity has regulations based on a prior assessment of risk, new information about the true risks becomes available, people update their assessments appropriately, and regulators adopt policies that minimize risks (at the lowest cost). Under some circumstances, to be fair, such a model might not be too far off the mark: in the cases of lead additives in gasoline, or drinking and driving, or smoking, viewed over a sufficiently long time period, regulatory change might be viewed as rational choice. But in myriad other cases, the path from risk to policy strays far from the policy analytic ideal.

There are many puzzles: Why do we seem so much more afraid of nuclear accidents than of coal pollution? Why do our policies seem so much more concerned with international terrorism than with domestic gun violence? Why do we respond so quickly to relatively minor threats to our food supply and so slowly to the annual slaughter on the highways? The puzzles are even more curious if we consider how we respond to major risk events. Sometimes, an event triggers rapid and significant
policy response, often greater than would be warranted by a cool analysis: US policy after the 9/11 attacks might be one such example. In other cases, even an event that should lead to considerable change barely makes a ripple: the US regulatory response to the financial crisis of 2008 for example.

Clearly, how society responds to new information about risk is a good deal more complicated than the analytic model would suggest. We may hold prior beliefs, but our priors may or may not conform closely to reality. Events happen in the world that might suggest that our prior beliefs need revision, but whether and in what form information about those events is transmitted is far from given. We may revise our perceptions of risk in response to that information, but our judgments can be far from accurate. And, not least, even if we recalibrate our risk perceptions, the politics of translating beliefs into policy change is far from straightforward.

Many literatures have shed light on these processes. Economic, sociological and cultural analyses of news production and consumption; psychological research on the ways in which we process information; political research on agenda setting, policy learning, communication, and mobilization: all provide insights for how information about risk is transmitted, perceived, and acted upon. Clearly, many factors are at work, far too many to include in the scope of this paper. But missing from most of the literature, with a few notable exceptions I will discuss below, has been an appreciation of the role of narrative.
This paper, therefore, explores the role of stories in the transmission of risk information, the processing of information into risk perception, and the impact of perceptions on policy. It argues that at each stage of the process, stories play a significant role. For an event to have impact it must first become news, and the currency of news is the story. For news to shape risk perceptions it has to alter how we imagine risk and how we feel about it, and stories are the natural vehicle for imagination and feeling. For risk perceptions to inform regulatory policy, it must pass through the filter of politics, and stories are the lifeblood of politics.

**Why stories and risk?**

Why should stories play a significant role in risk perception and policy making? One answer is that narratives are central to almost every realm of human perception and behavior. Whatever else we are, we are storytelling animals. As Barbara Hardy (1977) has put it, we “dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative.”

The narratives we hold in mind serve important psychological functions. We remember in story, make sense through story, and assign meaning to events through story. Our sense of identity is deeply bound up in our autobiographical narrative. In McAdams’ ( )words, we live storied lives. And to a very great extent we
act in ways that are only intelligible (MacIntyre) or meaningful (Bruner) if interpreted as the actions of a character in a narrative.

Narratives are meant to be shared. They are told by someone to someone else. Often stories are widely held. The narratives we share play important sociological roles. To be a member of a community is to share a canon of narratives—religious, ideological, and historical—that together serve to define what we remember, what we believe, and who we are. Narrative culture is not determinative, but it does prepare a community to be more receptive to stories that reinforce or resonate with the stories it already holds in common.

And politics is permeated by narrative. To a much greater extent than the mainstream of political science will admit, politics is a contest of narratives instrumentally used by those who would frame the news, shape perceptions, and mobilize (or demobilize) political action. Of particular importance is the role played by narrative in enabling shared collective action, as I explore in a forthcoming book (Mayer 2014).

What is important for human behavior generally is essential for perceptions of and responses to risk. Risk assessment requires anticipating what might happen. It is, therefore, by definition, an act of imagination. And almost all the research on how people actually process risk (as opposed to the ideal analytic model) suggests that risk is more a feeling than a calculation of expected utility, as much an affective as a
cognitive state, as Weber points out in this volume. Rare and extreme risks require greater leaps of imagination, and typically invoke stronger feelings. Our judgments about such risks cannot depend on past personal experience, since most of us never experience them (fortunately!). Rather we experience them viscerally, through the virtual experience of story. Such risks make great stories; they are dramatic, with the potential for both the tragic ending and the heroic rescue.

From events to news: The social construction of risk communication

Some event happens in the world: an accident at a nuclear plant, a tornado levels a Midwest town, Lehman Brothers collapses, terrorists fly a plane into the World Trade Towers. Before there can be a change in risk perception, and long before any regulatory response, information about what happened has to be transformed into a meaningful form and transmitted to us, has to be turned into news. News is a story. Aside from those few who experience these events directly, we learn about what happened through the stories we hear about them (and even those in the path of the storm may not know what hit them without a story). For most of us, therefore, the event is the story.

The connection between the raw event and the stories that are told about it is far from simple. Always there is considerable latitude for interpretation; there are many possible stories that could be told. Was the nuclear incident an unavoidable accident or a negligent act? What should it mean for the safety of other nuclear
plants? Was the attack on the Trade Towers the doing of a small group of ideological fanatics or the work of a vast international network of terrorists? What should it tell us about the dangers we face? Which framing reaches us makes a difference, both in our perception of risk and for the logic of policy response.

A considerable political communication literature has explored the question of how symbolic communication shapes political beliefs and attitudes, establishes the agenda, and frames choices for action (Edelman, Stone, Gamson, Lakoff, Bennet, Entman, Baumgartner). All of these authors note that stories are a particularly important form of such communication. Similarly, the literature on “focusing events,” discussed by Birkland in this volume, draws on the more general literature to describe how dramatic events can shape public discourse and drive policy responses. As Birkland notes, however, the concept of a focusing event as commonly used comes close to being a circular argument—a focusing event is one that focuses—that does not really help us understand why some events grab our collective attention and others do not.

What, then, can we say about what makes news?

First, it is useful to consider the supply of news. Aside from whatever other biases they may have, the news media have bias for a good story. Many commentators have offered their take on the question of what makes news, generally concluding with some version of “if it bleeds, it leads” or “man bites dog” (Edelman, Stone,
Jamieson). The local news is a series of mini-tragedies: shootings, robberies, fires and car wrecks. The national news is about the prospects of war, epic battles between the Republican House and President Obama, and human tragedies from around the world. Campaigns are covered as horseraces, not policy debates (xx). Occasional heartwarming stories about heroic rescues or other selfless acts get their play too. But always it is a story.

Risk is a good story. Inherent in risk is the essential ingredient of drama: things may turn out well or they may turn out badly, the story may have a happy ending or a sad. But not all risks are equally dramatic. Rare and extreme risks make for a better story than common and less extreme risk. The possibility of a nuclear meltdown, however remote, is more dramatic than the fact that mining and burning coal involves risks for miners and all of us who breathe the soot of power plants. A shooting at an elementary school is more dramatic than the relationship between easy access to guns and America’s high suicide rate. The consequence of the bias for news, therefore, is an overrepresentation of dramatic risks and an underrepresentation of less dramatic.

The supply of news, obviously, is also a function of demand: the media tell stories that sell. And also, obviously, what sells are dramatic stories. But there is a further point about what stories are demanded, which is that as humans we are much more receptive to stories that fit familiar forms, that confirm our beliefs, that resonate with the stories we already hold in mind. Every society has a canon of such stories.
Indeed, to be a member of a community is to share a canon of such stories. And many such stories are cautionary tales about risks in the world, often in the form of stories we tell to children to warn them of the hazards they face. Stories of wolves and bears and sharks abound. News about a shark attack, therefore, will ring true because it has the form of a story already believe to be true.

Recently, the American extreme distance swimmer Diana Nyad swam from Cuba to Key West, and extraordinary physical feat. The framing that the media chose to give the swim was that she had swum “without a shark cage.” Objectively, however, Nyad faced minimal risk of a shark attack. The real danger was with the much more mundane problem of jellyfish, whose stings could cumulatively disable her. Indeed, Nyad’s previous attempts had been thwarted by jellyfish stings. But account after account highlighted sharks. Why? Almost certainly because we all have shark stories available in mind (and not jellyfish stories). The movie is *Jaws*, not *Tentacles*. To say that Nyad swam through “sharked infested waters” (the usual formulation) is to evoke those stories, and the dread that comes with them.

At the extreme, the demand for a story that “fits” the story we want to hear is so great that almost requires no event at all to produce it. Urban legends have this characteristic, whether the classic “razor in the apple” Halloween legend or the widespread “vaccines cause autism” story, facts have little to do with the eagerness with which the story is consumed. With social media, what “goes viral” seems to have less to do with the real import of events but with the eagerness of the culture
to consume a certain tale. Stories in the mainstream press generally have some basis in fact, but the extent of interest in a story will still be powerfully affected by fit with our prior narratives. This phenomenon might be called the *China Syndrome* syndrome: we demand “true” stories that fit our fictions. Arguably, Three Mile Island was a huge story not just because of the real risks involved, but also, in part, because it so perfectly fit our fears.

The role of prior narratives in shaping the form of the news is particularly clear when different communities tell different stories about the same phenomena. News coverage of climate change provides a clear example. In the fall of 2009, email exchanges among climate scientists were hacked from computers at East Anglia University. The story quickly spread in the right-wing blogosphere, then jumped to Fox News and other conservative media outlets. For climate denialists, here was the smoking gun, the “aha” moment that confirmed the story they already “knew.” The same “event” received virtually no coverage in the mainstream press (Mayer 2011).

Although cultural fit is important in determining what stories circulate in the public arena, fit alone is not determinative. To argue otherwise is to preclude the possibility of learning or the efficacy of agency. That the attacks of 9/11 were news did not simply depend on cultural tropes. Raw footage of the planes striking the towers required no mediation to be dramatic. But from the beginning, the form the story took, and therefore the meaning of what was happening, certainly drew on the stock of available and familiar stories.
What story reaches the public also depends on who is privileged position to shape the news. As Entman () has argued in the case of news about 9/11, information tends to cascade from elites who have greater access to the media megaphone. In this case, the president had unique ability to shape the form of the story. More generally, what story gets told by the media will depend on who gets to tell the story.

**From news to perception: the apprehension of risk**

Just as the relationship between a raw event and the social construction of news about it is far from straightforward, the relationship between a story about risk and our apprehension of that risk is far from simple. Beginning with the seminal work of Tversky and Kahneman, there has been an explosion of experimental work in exploring how humans perceive risks. That literature is well-summarized in this volume by Weber, one of the major contributors to it. As she notes, one way of characterizing what we have learned is that far from the ideal analytic processing advocated by decision analysts, for most of us risk is a feeling, the outcome of associative and affective processes in the mind that are far from analytic.

The insights of this literature are numerous and have far advanced our understanding of how humans actually process risk information. But largely missing from the risk perception literature is an account of the role of stories.
Narrative is a fundamental (and fundamentally) human psychological tool, with both cognitive and affective functions (the two are, of course, deeply intertwined). Like much of the rest of our experience, we apprehend risk through the stories we tell about it.

Risk lends itself to story. By definition thinking about risk entails anticipating possible future outcomes. Usually there is some choice to be made, often between a cautious path and a risky one with the possibility of a better or a worse outcome. Already we have the makings of a dramatic story. As with any good tale, we have some initial circumstance, new information arrives to complicate the status quo, we face a choice with dramatic tension, the possibility that things will end well or end badly, sometimes in life in death. We make sense of risk, therefore, as we do much else, through the stories we construct and hold in mind.

Weber, drawing on Erev and Baron (2005) notes that we are much more attentive to personal experience than to statistical summaries. But most of us have no personal experience with the sorts of risk dealt with in this volume. What we have is stories about them. What we have, therefore, is not personal experience but the virtual experience that stories enable.

It seems that narrative serves many important psychological functions. First, our memory is deeply narrativized. Not only do remember stories better, we make stories of our memory. Contrary to what most of us imagine, memory is far from a
complete record of our experience. It is, rather, highly limited and selective. As Bartlett (1930) first demonstrated, when we remember, we do not so much recall events as reconstruct them, taking those fragments of literal memory and putting them back into a story that makes sense of them. What we seem to remember better is the emotional impact of those past events, the point of the story, as it were, but we are also quite capable of remaking the past to tell the story we want to tell now (Kotre).

Memory is essential to our perception and understanding. Much of what we apprehend about the world depends on recognition, on seeing some object as a member of a class of objects. As Vygotsky noted, “I do not see an object with two hands, I see a clock.” What is true of simple object recognition is also true of more complex categories. We have schema for lumberjacks and librarians, for football games and ballets, for liberals and conservatives, and for risky things like nuclear power and terrorist groups. A great many of these schemas are constructed by narrative, by the stories that are told or might be told about them. The stereotype of a lumberjack or a liberal is established by tales of hearty beer drinking or soft-hearted gullibility, that of the dangers of nuclear power by tales and meltdown (and perhaps a vague association with Hiroshima).

Stories are how we connect the dots. When we are confronted with new observations, the human impulse is to place them in some order that makes them explicable. Bruner gives the following example of a simple dialogue.
“Where’s Jack?”

“Well, I saw a yellow VW outside of Susan’s.”

Immediately the mind leaps to various narrative possibilities. Jack must be visiting Susan. Why doesn’t the narrator say it outright? Is there something illicit in the visit? And so on (Bruner 1986, 27). To understand something comes very close to saying that we can tell a story in which it makes sense, in which what happened is the plausible consequence of circumstance and character.

Beyond its purely cognitive functions, narrative is deeply connected to emotions. Obviously, narrative has the power to evoke emotion; who has not cried in a movie theater? More than that, our emotional states depend on the story. The same objective outcome—the death of child in a car accident, for example—evokes completely different emotions depending on the back story. If the driver who caused the accident had been drinking and driving recklessly we feel anger. If, on the other hand, she had been distracted by her two children fighting in the back seat when she swerved across the center line, we feel a great pity.

Narrative is how we imbue our experience with meaning. We are, as humans, driven not just to understand the particular, but to see the larger picture, to understand how things work, to see what the point of life is. “By using narrative form we assign meaning to events and invest them with coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure” (Gudmundsdottir 1995). It is no accident that our religions are about storytelling or that on grand national occasions we retell the American story,
generally told as a march toward freedom narrative (Wertsch). The meaning-making function of narrative is in some sense the mirror image of its sense-making function. When we use narrative to make sense, we are constructing a particular story on the basis of our general worldview. When we use narrative to make meaning, on the other hand, we are reinforcing our general worldview through the particular. Sense making depends on the plausibility of the plot, meaning making on the more universal moral of the story.

Finally, much of our behavior might best be classified not as rational choice but as acting, in the dramatic sense of acting on a stage. The metaphor of life as theater has a long pedigree, extending at least to Shakespeare. For Bruner, “[w]hen we enter human life, it is as if we walked on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress—a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and towards what denouements we may be heading” (Bruner 1990, 34). The suggestion is that when we act, we are engaging in what he calls “acts of meaning,” in actions that can be explained as making sense given the story in which we find ourselves, that we act in ways that are intelligible (MacIntyre) to ourselves and others because as story can be told about them.

With this preamble about the psychological roles of stories, it is possible to suggest how a narrative theory of risk perception might complement the cognitive and behavioral literature. Below I sketch out how a narrative theory might shed further light on some of the more prominent empirical findings from that literature.
Availability

Kahneman and Tversky first identified the phenomenon of availability as an explanation for distortions in risk assessment. As they put it “There are circumstances in which people assess the frequency of a class or the probability of an event by the ease with instances or occurrences can be brought to mind.” And although the actual frequency or probability will likely affect the ease of recall, “factors other than frequency and availability” also matter, among them the “retrievability of instances” and the “imaginability” of scenarios. (K&T, 1127) Of course, Kahneman and Tversky do not so much explain as report the importance of these factors, but both might be accounted for by what we know about the power of narrative in mind.

First, the retrievability of an instance is, by definition a function of memory. And what we know of memory is not simply that it is highly fallible, but that it is, in many respects, highly narrativized. We remember stories better, and the better the story—i.e. the more dramatic, the more emotionally arresting, the more meaningful—the better we remember it. Moreover, the act of remembering, as Bartlett observed many years ago is not so much a matter of recall as it is of reconstruction. What appears to happen is that when we remember, we are not so much recalling events but their significance, and then constructing out of those fragments of facts a story that fits.
Given this perspective on memory, we would expect that dramatic stories of risk would be relatively more represented in our memory than mundane stories and that we would be more prone to recreate such stories. If it is true that we assess risk by their salience in memory, the consequence is that we would overestimate storied risks and underestimate dull ones.

Similarly, the ease with which we can imagine risks will be bound up in the ease with which we can construct story. “The risk involved in an adventurous expedition, for example, is evaluated by imagining the contingencies with which the expedition is not prepared to cope. If many such difficulties are vividly portrayed, the expedition can be made to appear exceedingly dangerous, although the ease with which disasters are imagined need not reflect the actual likelihood.” Although they do not think about stories, note how close the example comes to saying that the perception of risk depends on the ease with which we can imagine a story in which some disaster occurs.

What we know about story construction is that those that draw on familiar tropes are easier to imagine than those that don’t. The Diana Nyad story recounted above to illustrate the proclivity of the media to tell stories that conform with commonly held prior narratives, also demonstrates why it is that we fear sharks when we go into the water more than riptides: it’s easier to tell as stories in our minds about a
Representativeness

In Tversky and Kahneman’s taxonomy, a second class of heuristics leading to distortions in risk perception is representativeness. The idea is that when asked to evaluate the likelihood that B is part of a class A, say for example, that a welfare recipient would be black, we focus on the frequency with which blacks are welfare recipients compared to the frequency with which whites are, and ignore the fact that there are many more whites than blacks in America. (More formally, we are bad Bayesians: we ignore priors and focus on the wrong conditional probability.)

Why might this be? Tversky and Kahneman offer a number of explanations. But many of them come close to the idea that we make judgments based on stereotypes rather than on Bayesian thinking. And what we know about stereotypes is that they are a form of schema, which are often constructed by narrative. Stereotypes of black welfare recipients as black, librarians as shy, lumberjacks as hearty men with beards, teachers as female, are embedded in our minds. When we are casting their roles in the stories we construct, we naturally turn to the familiar tropes.

For risk, the tendency is to slot certain stories into familiar narratives. If we hear about a nuclear accident, our minds rush to the dramatically available narratives of
nuclear meltdown and widespread radiation poisoning. Lurking somewhere in the background, no doubt, are the emotive stories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**Framing (Prospect Theory)**

Perhaps the most influential of Kahneman and Tversky’s empirical findings was that logically identical risks, if framed in different ways, could elicit different choices, a violation on a key tenet of rational choice theory. Normally, we expect individuals to exhibit risk aversion in their preferences. But they found that if choice is framed as accepting a certain loss or a lottery with the possibility of avoiding that loss, individuals often chose the lottery even when its expected value was less than the certain payoff, i.e., they exhibited risk-seeking behavior.

This finding of prospect theory might seem far from narrative, but one way to interpret what is happening here is through narrative. In narrative terms, a choice between a certain positive payoff of some amount and a lottery which might yield something better or something worse, is the equivalent of saying that we have a choice between a story with a happy outcome and a lottery with two possible stories, one a happy ending in which we did even better, a modest triumph, the other in which we will have traded victory for defeat, a more bitter tragedy. In narrative currency, there’s not as much to gain as there is to lose.
Conversely, if we view ourselves as in the hole already, we already face a story with an unhappy ending, which we can either accept or trade for a risk of a more outcome or the possibility of a triumphant recovery. In narrative terms, there is not so much to lose by gambling, as there is to gain. This interpretation suggests that when face a choice of this kind, we don’t so much calculate the expected value of the two outcomes as imagine how we will feel if the story ends one way or another.

*Illusion of control*

Our feelings about risk also appear to depend in some fundamental way on whether or not we believe that we have some measure of control. Slovic identified two types of risk for which it seems we have disproportionate fear. The first, *dread risk*, involves risks in which we have little control and that have catastrophic consequences. Nuclear reactor accidents and nerve gas score particularly high on that measure. The second, is *unknown risk*, characterized by being unobservable, unknown, new, and delayed in the manifestation of harm.” 283. Drug, chemical, and genetic engineering risks score high on this dimension. On the other end of both spectrums, bicycles scored particularly low. The implication is that we systematically over estimate the dread and unknown risks, and underrate that of such familiar and (we believe) controllable risks as riding a bicycle (which is, in fact, a surprisingly risky activity).
To some extent, this pattern can be explained by the availability heuristic already discussed. Certainly, stories about catastrophic dread risks are likely to be more salient in memory than those of bicycle accidents. But the pattern Slovic describes adds another element, that of whether or not we perceive an ability to act in ways that would reduce or avoid the risk. Almost certainly, we are overconfident in our abilities. Statistically, we are just not that good at avoiding enough auto accidents to make driving safer than flying, yet fear of flying remains.

A narrative interpretation of the anomaly might be that as we imagine facing the risk, we also imagine ourselves in the story and see ourselves taking actions that avoid the risk. We are riding a bike, a car swerves and is about to hit us, but we react quickly enough to avoid the accident. We know that chainsaws can be dangerous, but we only see ourselves handling the tool with care. In a sense we are casting ourselves in these stories as competent and prudent, and imagining a world in which our agency determines our fate. That is why inexplicable accidents beyond our control are so shocking; they are allegories that threaten our preferred narrative. As Slovic notes, such accidents are signals that things may not be what they seem, and that our control may be illusionary.

Stability and change in risk perception

Beliefs are hard to change. As humans we are cognitive misers who prefer to stick with the schemas we have rather than adopt new ones. Weber in this volume cites
the example of the failure of settlers from Europe to recognize that winters in Newfoundland were harsher than those of Northern Europe from whence they came, since the two places were at roughly the same latitude, the determinant of climate in their existing schema. We know, too, that we have an extraordinary ability to perceive only those things that confirm our worldviews. Stereotypes, for example, die hard.

Yet, sometimes we do change our perceptions, often quite suddenly, when the story we once believed rings hollow and we see the situation from an entirely different angle. Baumgartner et al describe how opponents of the death penalty have been able to change public attitudes about the death penalty (at least to some extent), by introducing a new frame into the discourse. Before, proponents of the death penalty held either a vengeance or a deterrence narrative in mind. Efforts to counter this frame with traditional arguments against the death penalty, particularly the inefficacy of capital punishment as a deterrent, had little impact. But DNA testing made possible a new frame. By demonstrating that the innocent were sometimes wrongly convicted, it raised the specter of executing an innocent. A narrative interpretation of that finding would be that DNA evidence introduced a new narrative line in which the tragedy of wrongful conviction and execution supplanted the deterrence and vengeance narratives, at least for some.

From perception to policy: the politics of risk
If anything, the road from a change in risk perception to a change in policy is even more circuitous than that from event to news or from news to perception. The politics of policy-making is enormously complex, involving interests, institutions and ideas in multiple arenas. Clearly, anything approaching a full account of the political processes through which recalibrations of risk result in policy change is well beyond the scope of this paper. My focus, therefore, is on the more general problem of political mobilization, on how changes in belief, here about risk, result in changes in behavior, or to be more specific, in action.

To be sure, in some circumstances, a change in belief may be sufficient to induce a change in action. If regulators are sufficiently empowered to act and sufficiently insulated from political pressures, new understandings of risk may well translate rather directly into changes in policy. Certain routine regulations of the EPA or the FDA come close to this largely apolitical ideal. Indeed, the path from event to policy is straighter at every step of process. (I will leave aside the evidence that even experts are prone to many of the errors of judgment discussed above.) But just as often, regulators operate in a political environment in which they cannot ignore the external political environment.

Political mobilization, on any scale, is, at its heart, a matter of collective action. To understand it, and to see what role narrative might play in it, it is useful to begin with reminding ourselves of the core obstacles to collective action. As I argue in my forthcoming book Narrative Politics, a shared perception of a problem is necessary
but far from sufficient. A shared belief that banks too big to fail or easy access to semi-automatic weapons are unacceptably risky, does not guarantee collective action to pressure for change, for example. Before we can see collective action, I argue, three other problems must be addressed. The first is the familiar problem of free riding. A regulatory change desired by a group is a collective good for its members. But if there are costs to taking action and if the benefits of successful action cannot be restricted to only those who act, each member has an incentive to shirk, or free ride on the action of others. The second barrier, seemingly more mundane but often quite difficult, is the problem of coordinating action. Always there are many forms that action might take: protests, marches, letters to Congress, giving to advocacy groups, supporting candidates in campaigns, and the like. Often, too, there are many forms that political action might take, including particularly differing demands for policy responses. And finally, a problem often missed in the literature, even if individuals would prefer to join than to free ride, and even if they know the script for what form action should take, they may need to be assured that others will join too: we do not want to protest alone.

Narratives are, I argue, our “go to” tool for solving these problems. When we participate in collective action we are participating in a shared narrative, a collective drama in which joining, marching, giving, voting, and other private actions became meaningful and satisfying acts in our autobiographical narrative. Such actions become expressions of our identity, not choices based on a calculus of interest. And because participation in collective action is its own reward, there is no temptation
to free ride. Indeed, to shirk is shameful. Similarly, a shared narrative can facilitate coordination. By providing a common script to choreograph our actions, we know what form collective action should take. And, finally, because we believe that others, like ourselves are caught up in the shared narrative we are assured that they, too, will act.

From this perspective, much of politics is a contest of public narratives, instrumentally used by those who would frame an issue to spur political action (or to defuse it). So, too, the politics of risk. Those who would spur action, either because they perceive a grave threat or because they would benefit from that action, or both, spin a narrative of common peril, in which acting can avert disaster. Conversely, those who would deter action, for either idealistic or egoistic reasons, counter with narratives in which the risk is overstated, the real danger is to act, or even, as we have seen in the case of climate change, that the advocates of action are the real villains.

Usually, general forms of these stories are already in circulation when some event happens. News of the accident at Three Mile Island arrived in the context of an already mature political battle over the future of nuclear power, in which opponents of nuclear energy were animated by a risk narrative that made opposition a heroic act. For them, the story of TMI then became an instantiation of the meta-narrative (in literary terms an example of synecdoche) they already held. It was a story waiting to happen. And for opponents of nuclear power, the story of TMI was a
powerful tool for pushing the danger frame out to a wider audience. In this case, the ability of those who favored continued expansion of nuclear industry in the United States to tell a story in which that made sense were at a severe disadvantage, although there was certainly a valid case to be made that the alternative to nuclear posed the greater risk.

After the financial meltdown, in contrast, an event that might have been expected to result in a significant regulatory response, an initially powerful narrative about the risks of unregulated banks was countered by a narrative in which government regulation was he greater danger. So, too, in the cases of Columbine, Aurora, and New Town, all horrific events that might have been expected to lead to significant gun regulation. After an initial period reaction in which stories of those events mobilized those who prior narrative was that easy access to powerful weapons creates great risk, opponents of gun control have been very successful in spinning a counter-narrative of government overreach and loss of personal freedom.

Conclusion

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References

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