



Public and Institutional Responses to Bird Flu Epidemic in Turkey

Subject

Bird Flu in Turkey firmly occupied the Turkish Society's agenda from the beginning of October 2005 to February 2006 with four human death cases.

The research aimed to examine the construction of different risk knowledge claims raised by

- The government
- Medical experts
- National and local media
- Lay people

Rationale & objectives

We believe that understanding:

- 1) the construction and communication of knowledge which is essential to the public perception
- 2) the perceived performance and trustworthiness of institutions and agents

is essential while organizing the public deliberation in S&T

Understanding the processes of how public responses are constructed and communicated in this particular case may further inform and could be exploited by whom concerned with the question of *How to organize the public deliberation in science and technology in similar cases and contexts.*

Results

Institutional Responses

The government: 30

- framed the risk with backyard poultry practices in the east
- defined the risk not only with the virus but also with poverty, illiteracy and ignorance of people who experienced poultry and human deaths, i.e. The Minister of Agriculture claimed that "deaths were caused by socio-economic and socio-cultural reasons" (Milliyet, 2006, January, 07)
- tended to support industrial poultry farming within their risk definition

Medical experts (Turkish Medical Association)

- constructed the risk knowledge based on the available scientific information by considering the special conditions of the country
- critically assessed the government's way of managing the risk, and their critical opposition was, in fact, a response to non-autonomous characteristics of science and / or scientists in Turkey

The national media

- in line with the government's stance, limited its coverage mostly with the concerns of the public living in urbanized areas.
- questioned on the developmental objectives of the country in terms of especially the EU membership

The local media

- highlighted the word-of-mouth arguments claiming that the virus had come from the west
- covered some scientific arguments claiming that Turkey was losing its special gene pool due to mass culling
- voiced local concerns of lay people, i.e. socio-economic, cultural implications of mass culling of backyard poultry

Lay People's Responses

After the human death cases interviewees, even though they were well informed about the scientific claims, they declared that they had suddenly stopped consuming poultry meat, eggs and egg based products. This finding was also supported by a research made by Eurobarometer for European Commission.

However in later stages, most of them had started to reconsume these products relying upon a set of parameters including

- the perceived trustworthiness of accessible information
- their relation to expert knowledge,
- their personal experiences,
- their social identity and culture,
- everyday needs and practices

Conclusions

The construction of risk knowledge and lay response relies upon the integral processes of where people situate themselves within the coordinates of ominous sensations ("I am afraid") and their everyday needs and practices ("I am hungry") as inspired by Beck (1992, p.49)

We claim that neither the position of the interviewees' within these coordinates nor the risk knowledge constructed and response given are static but rather dynamic during the whole process of the risk case.

Interviewees' response to risk is not a response to scientific expert knowledge; according to them, experts may define and assess the risk and their definition may be true however the government and experts working in the field tend to hide the risk or at least they do not share all the information with the public.

Our interviewees' particular reference was the Chernobyl case, among many others, which, according to them, was a reflection on the past and present governments' (the state's) stance towards public concerns.

Therefore, we believe that they construct their own risk knowledge, and they define and judge the risk, the risk information and the scientific knowledge related to this risk as part and parcel of the social package they are experiencing (Wynne, 1992, p: 281-2).

Interviewees' responses was multilayered as a form of private reflexivity (Lash and Wynne 1992; p:7)

Thus, organizing public deliberation in science and technology, especially when the involvement of trans-national governance mechanisms considered, the construction and communication of scientific knowledge should consider the particular and contextual settings in which public deliberation in science and technology will be organized.

References

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