

Jens Zinn, Melbourne

## **Contested Knowledge - Contested Meaning: The Mutual Constitution of Data and Risk (Abstract)**

In public debate and interdisciplinary research 'risk' is a slippery concept. There is some agreement that 'risk' refers to the possibility of undesired events in the future, but the ontological and epistemological status remains contested. The reason is that it is not only the same 'risk' which is described differently by different experts and the public. They also refer to different 'risks' or different aspects of the world when allegedly referring to the same entity.

The question of what counts as data and which phenomena are addressed by language are therefore a key issue in risk studies. Risk analysis and disaster studies overwhelmingly deal with risk as an ontological reality while social scientists tend to see risk as a social construction. For example, Niklas Luhmann (1993) suggested that the risk semantic occurs and becomes increasingly used as a result of systematic socio-structural changes in early modernization characterizing a new social experience. Peter Bernstein (1996) identified the development of statistics and probability theory as a major driver of risk thinking. In contrast Ulrich Beck asserted that the proliferation of risk results from a change in the societal reproduction mode (1992, 2009), which was characterized by social concerns and conflicts about risk. A development, which mainly took place in the years from the 1970s onwards.

As a result, the analysis of changing discourses and discourse semantics of risk comes with specific challenges. The presentation discusses key issues by the example of a research project, which examines the forces which have shaped the proliferation and meaning of risk words in *The Times* (London). Researching the connections between text and the social and material world raises questions about the different layers of analysis, from risk events, to institutional practices, the production of news as well as long term linguistic dynamics.