

Book Review

Standards, Risk and the Scientist

Scientists and the Regulation of Risk: Standardising Control by David Demortain

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Central to risk regulation is the setting of standards. Standards generally:

... define technical or quality requirements with which current or future products, production processes, services or methods may comply. (European Commission 2011: 1)

From wall sockets, paper sizes, insulation to light bulbs, standards are playing important roles all around us.

Scientists play significant roles in standard setting and increasingly in risk regulation and related policy. According to Demortain, scientists shape risk regulation and standards more than they would care to admit (p. 1). There is also increasing dependence on scientists to inform us if, for example, something is safe to eat, use or dispose of. Many times, public confidence and acceptance of various products rests on the belief that scientists have been consulted to evaluate the safety of those products. Scientists as holders of an expertise, provide international standard setting bodies with the required legitimacy to set rules even in the absence of power of enforcement or sanction (p. 10).

Questions that this book attempts to answer are how invisible colleges of scientists produce concepts such as pharmacovigilance planning (PVP), hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) and post-market monitoring (PMM) in the domains of medicines safety, food hygiene and novel foods, respectively. What are the sociological and political implications of actions by scientists on such regulatory concepts? What new regulatory concepts emerge from these colleges, and how do they shape consensus and pave the way for international standards. Why scientists should be singled out as standardising actors? In attempting to answer these questions, the author also explores the relationship between science and regulation from theoretic and historic perspectives, and illustrates how scientific experts integrate regulatory actors in commonly agreed modes of control and structures of regulatory responsibilities.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 introduces risk regulation, the various controversies associated

and lays the foundation for answering the question, what role do scientists play in the emergence of concepts on risk and what implications does this have on standardising control? In this chapter Demortain reiterates that the focus is not only on the importance and setting of standards but on the processes that often precede these (p. 10). Scientists play an important role in international standard setting bodies, have the legitimacy to set rules and benefit from science-driven rule setting acceptance. Chapter 2 explores the concept of 'invisible colleges'. According to Demortain, this concept revolves around three main benefits. The first benefit is the ability of certain scientists to circulate and act transversally in their capacities for example as researchers, scientific advisers or industry consultants (p. 11). These scientists also have the ability to circulate through various sites of action such as laboratories, food or pharmaceutical manufacturers, scientific advisory committees, regulatory agencies and policy making bodies (p. 11). The second benefit is that these scientists can be considered as special or 'elite' (p. 11). The third benefit of invisible colleges is confidentiality, lack of publicity and in certain cases in less normative terms a state of 'in-betweenness' (p. 11). Hence, Demortain uses the notion of invisible colleges in underlying the 'elitism of science and scientific expertise in regulation, and hence the importance in studying experts and the role they play empirically' (p. 4).

Chapter 3 analyses the food and pharmaceutical regulation in the European Union and the affinities that exist between these regimes and evaluative sciences such as clinical pharmacology and toxicology. These sciences basically dealt with the evaluation of risks. However, according to the author there is now a visible shift in regulation regimes, through the emergence of systems for the monitoring of risks such as pharmacovigilance and food surveillance plans and scientists play an increasingly important role in these. The chapter outlines the shift in sciences that standardise as a result of interest in the evaluation of product-related health risks and how the standards that are developed then become 'part of the practice of regulation' (p. 71).

Chapters 4–6 advance this hypothesis through three case studies: the regulation of medicines —PVP; the regulation of food hygiene using HACCP; and the novel food regulation—standard of PMM. According to the author all three concepts advocate the monitoring of risks and involve complex protocols by which this monitoring is carried out.

Chapter 7 seeks to appreciate who the scientists are and how they can be differentiated from the broader mass of scientific research and risk evaluation. These scientists are seen effectively to be specialists who have moved away from their original role as a researcher or physician and work with a variety of regulatory actors (p. 15). Finally, the concluding chapter (Chapter 8) focuses on the dissimilarities between the three case studies and threads the arguments on invisible colleges as ‘emergents’ from the dynamics of a domain with transnationalisation and complexity (p. 208).

In the words of Beck (1992: 29), ‘There is no expert on risk’. Standardisation is, of course, just one dimension in risk management, and is also complex with different standardisation bodies, actors and often political dimensions for example in the case of standardisation in new technologies.

Scientists are also only one of the actors involved in this process. In times of increasing use of new technologies, public distrust and questions about scientific knowledge and data, trust in scientists may not necessarily be on a high note. Nevertheless, this book is an interesting read which will be useful in a range of fields encompassing science and technology studies, public policy, risk and environmental regulation, and transnational governance.

References

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- European Commission. (2011) ‘A strategic vision for European standards: Moving forward to enhance and accelerate the sustainable growth of the European economy by 2020’, COM (2011) 311 final. Brussels: European Commission.

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