



2nd AGORAS Conference

December 13th-14th 2018, Paris

« Lessons learned »? Studying learning devices and processes in relation to technological accidents

Call for Papers

How do organizations and sociotechnical systems “learn lessons” from accidents? After the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011, the immediate and most significant direct response by industry, governments and regulatory agencies was that they would learn from the accident. Such framing of accidents, disasters or crises as opportunities to improve the operation and regulation of sociotechnical systems has become an increasingly prominent feature of discourses following adverse events. This learning idiom is also taken up by social scientists who study accidents, be these nuclear, chemical, air traffic, railway, oil spills, or ‘natural’ disasters (Blandford & Sagan 2016; Fujigaki 2015; Jasanoff 1994; Downer 2011; Lofstedt and Renn 1997; Dowty *et al.* 2011). Such studies claim to provide a more complex account of accident causes and consequences (Birkland 2009), compared to the narratives produced by institutional actors.

In certain industries (e.g. nuclear power), the relatively low number of large-scale accidents suggests the need for other ways to identify possible weaknesses in sociotechnical systems. Complex modeling, scenario planning, or simulation exercises provide opportunities to test these systems and to draw lessons from observed limitations or failures. The Cold War played an important role in this trend: the tools forged to prepare for a nuclear attack later served to address risks in a wide range of domains (Collier and Lakoff 2008). A growing number of social scientists have studied the invention and development of these tools, in institutions such as the Rand Corporation (Andersson 2012).

Yet these scholarly works rarely address the phenomenon of lesson learning itself, nor its concrete role in transforming or maintaining social practices such as knowledge production, norms and regulations or the operation of sociotechnical systems. The aim of this conference is therefore twofold.

First, we aim to better understand and qualify these lesson-learning processes by drawing on insights from sociology, science and technology studies, history, management, and political science. What actors participate in lesson learning discourses? Which processes and devices are set up in order to make learning possible? On what kinds of social practices is learning supposed to act? How and under which conditions do learning attempts actually transform social practices? How are they assessed and evaluated? What are the temporal dynamics of learning processes that often aim to analyze the past in order to better anticipate the future?

The second aim of this workshop is to foster a debate around the different methods and approaches through which scholars are able to understand learning processes, as well as the social and material conditions that render these studies possible. Papers may address methodological issues including access to fieldwork and data, as well as the prospects, opportunities and limits of transforming social science research into operational lessons for government and industry actors.

While we welcome all proposals that speak to the conference themes, we especially encourage proposals that focus on one or more of the three following dimensions:

1) Mechanisms of knowledge production after accidents:

Industry and regulatory agencies are increasingly engaged in R&D activities. These activities not only produce data on the way technological systems used in regulation and prevention activities work, but also provide blueprints for narratives and storytelling activities following adverse events. One way of addressing learning activities is to understand how already known mechanisms of knowledge production and ignorance (Jouzel & Dedieu 2015; Frickel *et al.* 2009) are reshaped in the specific context of adverse events. Papers may also be attentive to the sources of financing of research in the aftermath of accidents and disasters, including social science projects (Frickel & Moore 2006). Finally, they can also describe how complex modeling, operational experience feedback, scenario planning or exercises are used to produce knowledge on rare phenomena, such as large-scale nuclear accidents, global pandemics or terrorist attacks.

2) Organizational procedures and learning:

Lesson learning often aims to create reflexivity over the actors' own working practices in organizations and to develop a "culture of safety" (Santana 2016; Silbey 2009). Trying to respond to phenomena such as the "normalization of deviance" (Vaughan 1996), organizational procedures and devices like operational experience feedback, peer reviews or incident reporting systems aim to create vigilance, render signals of deviance visible and analyze incidents continuously. In other words, lesson learning seems to become an increasingly formalized and routine procedure in many organizations (Hutter & Lloyd-Bostock 2017) that may transform regular organizational practices and temporalities (Hussenot & Missonier 2016). To what extent and how do they allow to put back into question everyday practices? How are they used, adjusted or transformed in the case of an actual large-scale accident?

3) The politics of lesson-learning:

Announcements of lesson learning after accidents and crises (investigation commissions, evaluation and testing) often lead to proposals for institutional and political reforms that serve to signal change and legitimate socio-technical systems, regulatory agencies and policy makers after adverse events, which might otherwise be framed as failures or opportunities for challenging actors on their industrial policies (Boin *et al.* 2016; Balleisen *et al.* 2017). How does the state and political actors participate in the orientation and framing of learning processes? To what extent are these processes influenced by political and economic contexts of technologies and markets? We particularly encourage papers that historicize the attempts of lesson learning and their change over time as political phenomena (Lakoff 2006; Anderson & Adey 2012).

Submissions and selection

The submission deadline for abstracts (up to 400 words) is **June 1st 2018**.

Paper acceptance will be notified by the end of **July 2018**.

Full papers are expected by the end of **October 2018**.

Proposals should be sent to: colloque2agoras@imt-atlantique.fr

Organizing committee

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Conference venue and organization

Beffroi de Montrouge

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The research project AGORAS (*Amélioration de la Gouvernance des organisations et des Réseaux d'Acteurs pour la Sécurité nucléaire*: Improving the governance of organisations and networks of actors in charge of nuclear safety) studies contemporary modes of governance of nuclear risks in the post-Fukushima context. It is one of the 14 research projects financed by the French National Research Agency (Agence nationale de recherche - ANR) in the framework of the French public funding scheme *Investissements d'Avenir* relative to radioprotection and nuclear safety. It is the only project that conducts research exclusively in the field of human and social sciences. AGORAS brings together researchers in sociology and management working in academia, as well as in public and private institutions specialized on nuclear safety. Launched in 2014, Agoras explores the relations between organisations in charge of nuclear safety, both in terms of prevention and crisis preparedness.

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