APPARENTLY SAFE: HOW AVIATION REGULATION CHARACTERIZES RISK


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The role of regulatory agencies is understudied in the sociology of risk. This dissertation lays the foundation for a model of the expansion of formal responsibility within a system of risky activities, using the institutionalization of aviation safety in the US as its case. This is different from the goal of many organization-risk theorists, who seek to explain how organizational features can inadvertently contribute to failure. This work attempts instead to explain how and why organizations tasked with controlling risk create, negotiate and institutionalize risk theories in order to manage selected aspects of an activity’s environment, aspects that include perceptions of the activity. My focus on the process of establishing safety standards in complex technical environments is new to the sociological study of risk.

The central thesis of this work is that the structure and processes of the current air safety system are artifacts of the history of major aviation disasters. Accidents are treated as the prime indicators of risk in aviation, and regulatory activity therefore focuses on risks as revealed through accidents. However, the effectiveness of this strategy for improving safety has declined as the system has grown safer and more technologically complex. This strategy was more successful for this purpose in the nascent system, where relatively few risks were managed, and where the risks themselves were straightforward due to the simplicity of the system that engendered them. However, the strategy remains in place today because the other purpose it serves, to signal high-level attention to the existential problem of risk, is meaningful to important constituencies. A disaster may yield information that informs policy, but more importantly, the event necessitates action on the part of those responsible for the system. The tension that exists between the regulator and industry is played out in negotiating changes to the system, and accidents shift the balance of power in this relationship in ways that facilitate these changes.