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Safety Management as communication

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Safety Management Systems as Communication in an Oil and Gas Producing Company (Wold & Laumann, 2015a)

- Executives and workers related to the management system very differently.
- Workers saw their own knowledge and competence as more important for safety.

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Safety

- A state where nothing goes wrong
- Often a focus on accidents and mishaps

- How to study the absence of accidents?

- Includes a focus on social, cultural, technological and communicational factors

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Three phases of safety research

(Hale & Hovden, 1998)

1: Technological focus; safer machines (till mid 1900s)

2: Focus on skilled and motivated workers

3: Focus on organizational conditions for safety and human error.(from ca 1980).

Cultural approach – as an extension of phase 3.

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Communication and safety

- Communication is key to safety performance (Cohen, 1977, Vredenburgh, 2002, Cox & Cheyne, 2000, and Mearns et al., 2003)
- Natural accident theory, High reliability organization, resilience, drift into failure have communicational aspects embedded in them:

- Reports of near misses
- Collection of warning signs
- A learning culture

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Can you no communicate?

- Hundreds of theories
- No theory canon
- Multidisciplinary theories

- Sender – message – receiver
  medium

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Reception theory: Semiotics

- Rooted in semiotics
- John Locke: cannot take it for granted that people understand each other. (Locke, 1690. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*)
- Codes and media of communication are not merely neutral structures (Taylor, 1992. Mutual misunderstanding: Skepticism and the theorizing of language and interpretation)

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Reception theory in organizations

- Usually top-down communication process
- Safety management is decided at an executive level and communicated to the rest of the organization
- Know who the receivers are – still, responses are often unexpected.

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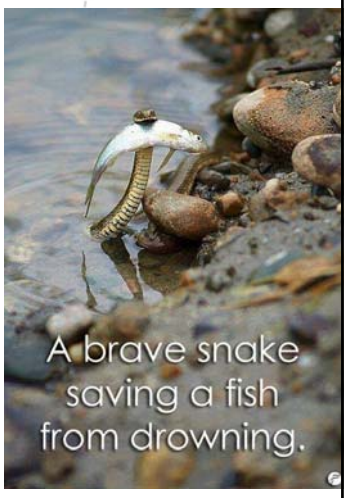
Reception theory: Interpretation

- Different people interpret the same piece of information differently.
- Structures guides the interpretation.

- A potential for meaning in the message
- A potential for interpretation for the individual



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Reception theory: Frames of references

- Mental structures
- An organized version of reality
- Formed by experience
- Can be modified by new experiences

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Drift into failure

- Experience needed to get the job done
- Decisions that makes sense in a situational context
  – but not necessarily in a broader context.
- Unreflective routine – the way we do thing around here

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Implications for safety management

- Pay more attention to social and cultural facets of safety management
- Safety management as a cognitive process, not a mechanical.
- Cannot use a linear transfer model
- Emphasize how operators interact with procedures

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Context

- The organizational context
- The situational context
- Procedures are cultural constructs

- Create a mutual understanding

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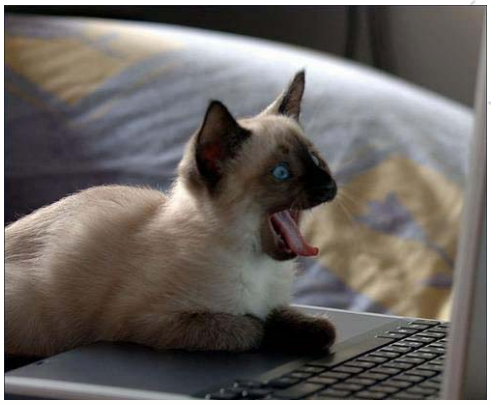
Technology is not neutral

- Something interesting to learn?
- Adds to the work load?
- Dislike computers?



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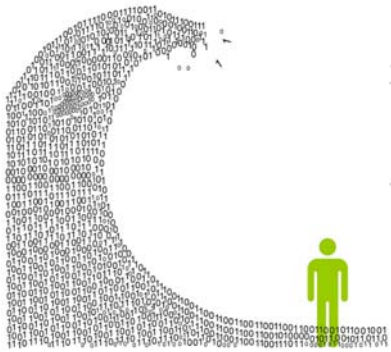
Information overload

- We don't always need more information
- We need existing information put to good use



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Understand the purpose of safety management

- Must establish a fundamental understanding of why safety standards and procedures have originated
- Establish a link between using safety standards and ideals of professionalism
- Create mutual frames of reference

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Two-way communication

- Must be feedback from the lower tiers
- Lessons learned at the operative level can be transferred to the management level

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Common denominators among the informants that had good use of the procedures and the Safety Management System:

- They were able to say something about the purpose of the Safety Management System and the procedures.
- They saw the procedures as helpful in the daily work routine.
- They saw the procedures as a result of industrial experience accumulated over many years.

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Common denominators among the informants who never or rarely used the Safety Management System:

- They saw their own experience and competence as more important than the work procedures for safe practice.
- They could only give vague descriptions of the Safety Management System and the purpose of it.
- They thought the Safety Management System was mainly important for the management, and not so much for the operators.
- They thought it was difficult to use the Safety Management System, and preferred just to go out and do the job.

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Organization must

- Organisations must:
- Establish using Safety Management Systems and the procedures as an integral part of being competent and professional
- Regard safety standards and work procedures as a part of the communication within the organisation
- Establish an understanding that the procedures are rooted in the practical competence and experience of operators.

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and…

- Analyse the different types of users and how the systems and procedures should be designed in order to be a resource for the users
- Allow workers to give feedback about their experience with the different procedures, and give proper and swift reply to this feedback
- Give all workers a combination of theoretical and practical training
- Give practical training by simulations, workshops, or on the job training
- Make sure that training is repeated and followed-up
- Set up a buddy-system to ensure on the job training

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