Title: Investigating the Investigators – On the Role of Investigative Journalisms in the Management of Uncertainty

Why is sociology interested in how different societal groups deal with uncertainty? It is not only the existence of different meanings attached to uncertainty, but rather to observe these contexts colliding. This happens whenever, for instance, there are decisions regarding science and technology at stake, recent cases being nanotechnology, synthetic biology or hydraulic fracturing. Here, for some uncertainty may mean to foster further research because uncertainty regarding opportunities and risks will otherwise never be convertible to certainty. Others would argue that further research is already too risky just because of uncertainty: If risks, of which we might not even now at present, cannot be excluded, it would be careless to go ahead.

Moreover, uncertainty means something entirely different within political, scientific, legal, or economic contexts. Very little attention, though, has been drawn to the role investigative journalism (IJ) plays in societal debates concerning contested issues - although the recent success of the “Offshore-Leaks Team” proved its capabilities. Their strategy was the publication of an enormous amount of data which gave rise to public outrage and thus exerted pressure on decision-makers.

From a sociological point of view this move towards transparency has a “downside”: There is hardly any chance for the (general) public to form an opinion as these data - and their mere quantity - cannot be comprehensible to outsiders. Yet, other parts of IJ already seem to be aware of this problem. ProPublica, an independent IJ agency based in New York, not only gathers and publishes data to interfere with decision-makers, but also tries to awaken public interest in complex issues. To achieve this, it works with formats such as songs, videos, or comic strips. These are thought to facilitate an easy access to difficult issues and the opportunity to build up an opinion in the long run.

This obviously is an interesting and inventive attempt to public education, but it remains a risky endeavor. Not so much because videos and the like may lead to an “underexposed picture”. The risk is rather to treat uncertain things as if they were certain in order to take sides – and be it “in the public interest”, as ProPublica puts it in its motto. Such a “policy of transparency” may lead to adverse effects with regard to the management of uncertainty, because it obscures that uncertainty and the need to deal with it will remain.

For sociology, I want to argue, this means not to take sides, but to observe others taking side and see what might be learned – for example by investigating the investigators.
Further references/further reading:


www.propublica.org/series/fracking