Safe and/or Secure?

Dealing with uncertainties in high-risk industries

Our societies are facing an increasing number of crises. These may be rooted in non-intentional or intentional and malevolent acts or a mix of both. In order to prevent and mitigate the threats confronting them, high-risk industries, including defense industries, chemical facilities, energy corporations or nuclear power plants, among others, have developed over time measures to enhance first and foremost their safety, and subsequently, their security. In consequence, safety and security policies have been developed separately and in non-mutually informed ways. Yet, both safety and security have an impact on employees’ daily work and the discrepancies between their aims and practices may increase high-risk industries’ vulnerability. To face these tensions, employees of such organizations, already working in uncertain environments, have to balance and articulate contradictory measures and handle the resulting uncertainties.

The paper reports from an ongoing project that aims to analyze the constant tradeoffs that employees of a nuclear research center in Belgium (SCK•CEN) make between safety and security measures and cultures. More precisely, it examines how employees deals with the various types of uncertainties arising from safety-security discrepancies in their daily practices. In order to do so, the project mobilizes a qualitative methodological approach based on interviews, focus groups with employees and an ethnographic study undertaken in a nuclear research center.

Keywords: Safety, Security, Uncertainty, High-risk industries, Daily practices, Tradeoffs