



Improving Risk Communication in The Film and TV Industry

April 2024

SAFE ELEPHANT

Executive Summary

The film and TV industry, characterised by creativity and innovation, faces unique challenges in ensuring the health and safety of its crews. Recent incidents highlight the critical consequences of inadequate risk management. Under the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, employers must protect their employees, yet a BECTU survey reveals that 75% of UK film and TV crews feel their safety is compromised. Effective risk communication is essential for informing individuals about benefits, risks, and costs, reducing conflict, and maintaining stakeholder trust.

Drawing lessons from the aviation industry, both industries share high public profiles and face potentially catastrophic consequences from incidents. Key recommendations include Increasing transparency between various studios and production companies by sharing learnings of accident and incident investigations, improving dynamic risk communication practices for quick and effective communication on fast-paced sets, and implementing training programmes and workshops to proactively equip future industry professionals with essential safety skills.

Implementing these recommendations promotes a culture of safety, mitigates risks, safeguards crew members, and enhances productivity. As the industry evolves under heightened public scrutiny and growing production scales, the responsibility to safeguard crew members becomes increasingly imperative. Adopting communication strategies and practices from the aviation industry can help proactively address risks, ensuring compliance with legal, financial, and ethical standards while improving industry standards and reducing reputational risks.

This paper has been written with the assistance of a postgraduate student from the Risk Analysis, Disasters and Resilience MSc at King's College London working as an intern with Safe Elephant.



Contents

Introduction	1
Risk Communication	3
Lessons From The Aviation Industry	4
Recommendations	7
Conclusions	10
References	11



Introduction

Film and TV production creates a dynamic and diverse environment that can affect the health and safety of crews. Each member of production is susceptible to both physical (falls from heights, electrocution) and mental (stress, anxiety, overtiredness) health related risks, that harms not only the individual, but the entire production process. The industry is defined by creativity and innovation, and consequently faces unique and distinct challenges in communicating risk.

Incidents during filming of *The Crow*, *The Twilight Zone Movie*, and, more recently, on the set of *Rust* and *Top Gear*, have highlighted the potentially fatal consequences of inadequate risk management. As the public narrative surrounding film and TV becomes more sensationalised, and the production scales amplify, the responsibility to safeguard both the health and safety of the crew becomes increasingly important.

By examining communication strategies, industry practices and case studies, this document aims to provide comprehensive recommendations for professionals to proactively identify, manage and communicate risks.

Employers are legally required by the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure and protect the health and safety of their employees. This act mandates employers to create and maintain health and safety related policies and systems, such as ensuring sufficient training for staff, maintaining a secure work environment, ensuring safe operations within it, and the appropriate provision of information, guidance, and supervision to employees. These regulations can take the form of proper storing of equipment or machinery, monitoring noise exposure, and the creation of department specific risk assessments.

When these protection measures fail to be put in place, organisations can be fined, sanctioned and their productions suspended. Despite this, almost 75% of UK film and TV crews said they “felt their safety or that of a colleague has been compromised at work”, according to a recent survey by BECTU (Khomami, 2023).

Financially, comprehensive health and safety procedures drive down cost for an organisation by preventing workplace accidents, mitigating reputational damage, and reducing downtime (HSE, 2014).

Workplace accidents incur significant costs, both in financial terms and in time, including direct costs, meeting with insurers and lawyers, and hiring and training temporary staff. HSE estimates show that work-related injuries and illnesses cost UK employers £3.9 billion in the fiscal year 21/22, and resulted in 35.2 million working days lost (HSE, 2023). For each £1 of insured costs, uninsured costs can range from £8 to £36 (Pitt, 2016).



(Pitt, 2016)

Risk Communication

Risk communication is a crucial part of the risk management process, and informs people about the benefits, risks, and other costs of their decisions, allowing them to make educated choices about their health and safety (Fischhoff, Brewer and Downs, 2011). It helps organisations to reduce conflict and predict potential issues before they escalate into costly communication breakdowns. Without robust risk communication practices, production companies lack the components to navigate unexpected challenges, often leading to the derailment of projects and a loss of trust between stakeholders, including cast, crew, investors, and audiences.

Communicating safety risks in the film and TV industry can take different forms, including safety briefings, CSOs, reces, incident reports, workplace inductions, risk assessments and production safety meetings. They can also include signs, infographics, and labels which act as a constant and effective reminder of safety procedures.

This can look like;

1. clear communication and open discussion regarding safety issues between production and departments
2. clearly displayed signs for safe working loads, or departments working with hazardous chemicals, and;
3. implementing a lessons-learned programme for safety through accident investigations and anonymous reporting mechanisms.

In a fast-paced environment like film sets, navigating potential risks and uncertainties requires robust communication strategies to maintain legal, moral and reputational standards. Shooting on location presents its own unique set of risks that require risk assessment processes that are specific to the site's characteristics. Poor communication between production departments can create significant challenges, as it can result in inconsistent messaging about risks that stem from different priorities, responsibilities, and tasks.

On one hand, departments may have different procedures or policies that convey conflicting information about how to manage health and safety risks. On the other hand, a knowledge or awareness gap can occur when incomplete information is shared about possible hazards. This culminates in a lack of coordination, which can shorten timelines, create feelings of stress and frustration in teams, and impede accident response. Similarly, incidents can occur when the focus on safety is not considered throughout the production process, namely during strike and de-rigging. Risk communication must be integrated into every stage of the process, spanning from the initial concept and design phases to construction, rigging, lighting, and shoot and strike.

Lessons From The Aviation Industry

The aviation industry has a remarkably distinct approach to risk management and communication, which, despite obvious differences, our industry can draw learnings from. While aviation comes with inherently higher risks, both those industries have a high profile among the general public, and incidents on set quickly gain widespread media attention. The similarities don't stop there. The role of the pilot can be likened to the role of the director and assistant director team in their industries. These roles share strong leadership, the ability to make decisions under pressure, and the expertise to ensure the safety and success of their crew. In the same way a pilot navigates the plane in high risk conditions, a director leads a production to achieve their creative vision, and the assistant director team coordinates complex projects. They require careful planning, effective communication and the capacity to quickly adapt to new ideas and directions.

In the aviation industry, the pilot acts as the sole authority who is responsible for the navigation, operation, and safety of the flight.

Health and safety risks are constantly evolving in highly complex settings, which requires the freedom for pilots, copilots, and engineers to communicate horizontally (between colleagues) and vertically (up the organisational hierarchy). The same concept must be applied to the film & TV industry, where directors and executives, such as producers, must take into account the suggestions and recommendations of expert Heads of Departments when making creative decisions. As experts in their fields, these are key players in maintaining safe sets. To do so, horizontal & vertical communication must be fostered and encouraged. Crew members must feel safe and able to communicate any concerns to people 'above the line'. One way to encourage this is ensuring there are accessible communication for crews, for example by creating WhatsApp groups for different departments and levels of production staff.

In order for good communication to be possible, crew members must be confident in their own ability to independently assess and manage

risky situations. The concept of 'Cockpit Resource Management' (also known as Crew Resource Management) allows for fast safety assessments by pilots and crew based on instinct and intuition. An example of this is United Airlines Flight 173, where in 1978 the cockpit crew were forced to circle above Oregon because of a technical issue with the landing gear. Despite early warnings from engineers, the pilot failed to recognise fuel shortage as the critical challenge, which ultimately led to an aviation disaster. Widely treated as a watershed moment in the aviation industry, independent investigators were allowed unrestricted access to the wreckage and other evidence. Reports are anonymised and made available to all pilots, flight crew and industry staff so that mistakes can be learned from.

By acknowledging these errors and integrating them into policies and training, the entire industry creates a culture of safety, highlighting the important role of risk communication and proactive risk management.

Similarly, in the film and TV industry, studios and production companies can benefit from adopting a similar level of transparency, facilitating open access to incident reports and anonymised data. This approach can not only enhance safety practices, but prioritise the welfare of current and future crew members.

One way that the aviation industry has enabled employees to identify when there is a lapse in safety culture is through PACE (Probe, Alert, Challenge, Emergency) training (see Syed (2015), McCulloch et al. (2009) & Besco (1995) for more). Developed as a way to train junior crew members to independently and preemptively reduce incidents, this training empowers employees to question assumptions, decisions, or actions that may compromise safety and address hazards before they escalate into emergencies or fatalities. By integrating these practices into the film & TV industry, we can enhance safety standards, mitigate risks, and ensure the well-being of production crews.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Increased Transparency Between Studios and Production Companies

By improving communication channels and incident reporting practices between studios and production companies, the industry will be in a better position to address potential risks and mitigate hazards on film sets in the future. For example, during the filming of 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' in 2009, an incident during filming left stunt actor David Holmes paralysed during the waist down. The incident occurred as Holmes was connected to a pulley system that pulled him backwards using weights, however on the day too much weight was added and the force of the stunt fractured his neck. Following the accident, there was a lack of cross-organisation discussion about the causes, methods, and effect of the accident, meaning that important learnings were lost. This highlights the need for increased transparency, and to share lessons learned from incident investigations across studios and production companies, so that everyone knows what went wrong, and how to prevent it from happening again (Scott, 2023). The implications of the aviation industry's risk communication practices for our industry are significant here.

By admitting mistakes and taking failures seriously, the aviation industry can not only learn from these mistakes but take proactive steps to prevent accidents in the future.

When incidents occur, full investigations take place in order to understand what went wrong and identify opportunities for future learning, rather than stigmatise mistakes. Crucially, findings from aviation investigations by passenger jet companies are anonymised before findings are distributed, and findings can't be used in court to prevent a culture of blame. The film and TV industry is urged to promote transparency in incident reporting and risk communication between studios and production companies.

Recommendations

Recommendation 2: Improving Dynamic Risk Communication Practices

In dynamic and fast-paced film sets, it is important to develop protocols and practices that allow risks to be communicated quickly and effectively. Incidents can occur when hazardous materials such as explosives are quickly moved and scenes altered from the original health and safety plan. When materials and plans need to be changed quickly, risks must be communicated to all individuals involved, and the person responsible for the SFX, along with the health and safety advisor, must be consulted (Santos et al., 2018). Positionality of actors and supporting artists in relation to the risk should also be considered. Steps that can be taken to mitigate risks include briefing crew on the intended action before the scene takes place, routine production safety meetings, certifying proper training and certification for handling hazardous materials, and ensuring that crew members have the knowledge and capacity to identify and alert management about risks through training. For example, creating a WhatsApp group with those above-the-line and head of department is an easy and quick way to ensure everyone is aware of any changes made, and provides a platform for expressing

safety concerns.

When we look at why these problems are occurring, we see that the director and assistant director teams are focused on achieving realism. Many teams do not realise the importance of having a health and safety advisor on set. They might also think that following safety rules could stop them from filming certain scenes, however this is not the case. HSE monitoring of the set and adherence to safety guidelines can occur at any stage throughout the production process. If they find studios to be in breach of these guidelines, corrective actions must be taken immediately to ensure the safety of everyone involved. This might involve suspending production temporarily until the issues are resolved, or incurring financial penalties. By implementing these short recommendations, alongside achieving the basic risk assessments, safety briefings, and CSOs, film & TV sets can successfully ensure health and safety guidelines are maintained and the production process can run smoothly.

Recommendations

Recommendation 3: Training Programmes and Workshops

Introducing safety protocols and practices pre-employment has the potential to introduce best practice to future industry professionals at an important time in their career. A rising number of individuals are entering the industry through universities, colleges and institutes, where health and safety can be taught in a simple, controlled environment. Programmes and investigations should encompass basic hazard identification, risk assessment and communication, and the importance of having incident response procedures. By learning this in a regulated environment, students can be better prepared for entering the industry.

For industry professionals, studios, and production companies should encourage ongoing education and refresher courses to ensure that crew members stay up-to-date on the latest safety regulations, technologies, and techniques. Training methods can involve members from different parts of the production to attend sessions together to foster greater inter-department transparency and collaboration.

This both enhances communication and teamwork, and guarantees that all crew members share a common understanding of the risks and hazards on-site. These courses and programmes allow professionals to adapt to a dynamically evolving industry standards and emerging risks from new technologies, boosting productivity and ensuring that companies are up-to-date with latest industry developments. Platforms like ScreenSkills and the PGGB provide information about available courses that industry professionals can undertake to stay up to date with industry practices.

Conclusion

With advances in technology, machinery and production practices, the face of risk in film and TV is constantly evolving. Recognising this is important not only for individuals on set, but for the success of the entire production process. As the industry continues to evolve under heightened public scrutiny and growing production scales, the responsibility to safeguard crew members becomes increasingly urgent. Incidents that occurred during the filming of *The Crow*, *Harry Potter*, *Rust*, and *Top Gear* highlight the critical need for effective risk management and communication strategies within the field. By examining communication strategies, industry practices, and learning from relevant case studies, comprehensive recommendations can be formulated to proactively address risks.

Drawing lessons from the aviation industry's risk management practices, such as the implementation of PACE training and transparent incident investigations, can offer essential insights for enhancing safety standards in the film and TV sector. As the industry continues to evolve amidst heightened public scrutiny and escalating production scales, the responsibility to safeguard crews.

members becomes increasingly imperative. By examining communication strategies, industry practices, and learning from relevant case studies, comprehensive recommendations can be formulated to proactively address risks. By integrating these recommendations and promoting a culture of safety, the industry can mitigate risks, safeguard crew members, and increase productivity. Additionally, these recommendations help ensure that employer's legal, financial and ethical standards are met, improving industry standards and reducing reputational risks.

References

Besco, R. (1995). 'To Intervene or Not To Intervene? The co-pilots catch 22. P.A.C.E. PROBING. ALERTING, CHALLENGING, and EMERGENCY WARNING; The integration of crew resource management with operational procedures'. Proceeding of the human factors and ergonomics society, 39th Annual Meeting.

Fischhoff, B., Brewer, N. & Downs, J. (2013). 'Communicating Risks and Benefits : An evidence-based user's guide'. Silver Spring, MD: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (2023). 'Health and Safety statistics: 2022 to 2023 annual release'. London: Health and Safety Executive.

Khomami, N. (2023). 'Most TV and film crews feel safety has been compromised, says survey', The Guardian 21st November. Available online at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/nov/21/three-quarters-of-tv-and-film-crews-feel-safety-has-been-compromised-at-work-says-survey>. Last accessed 02/02/2024.

McCulloch, P. Mishra, A. Handa, A. Dale, T. Hirst, G. & Catchpole, K. (2009). 'The effects of aviation-style non-technical skills training on technical performance and outcome in the operating theatre', *Quality and Safety Health Care*, 18(2), pp.109-15.

Pitt, S. (2016). 'The Real Cost of Poor Health and Safety' HBXL 23rd March. Available online at: <https://hbxl.co.uk/the-real-cost-of-poor-health-and-safety-on-site/>. Last accessed 15/03/2024.

Santos, R.B., Rébula de Oliveira, U. & Rocha, H. (2018). 'Failure mapping for occupational safety management in the film and television industry', *International Journal of Production Economics*, 203, pp.1-12.

Scott, A. (2023). 'Negative Reinforcement: Learning from mistakes', *IOSH Magazine*, 1st September. Available online at: <https://www.ioshmagazine.com/2023/09/01/negative-reinforcement-learning-mistakes>. Last accessed 15/03/2024.

Syed, M. (2015). 'Black Box Thinking'. London: John Murray Publishers.

Vecchio-Sadus, A.M. (2007). 'Enhancing safety culture through effective communication', *Safety Science Monitor*, 11(3).

