

Book Review

S. Røed-Larsen, J. Stoop and E. Funnemark *Shaping Public Safety Investigations of Accidents in Europe*

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Shaping public safety investigations of accidents in Europe is a book edited by Sverre Røed Larsen, John Stoop and Espen Funnemark. The book is a report from the European Safety, Reliability and Data Association (ESreDA), published in 2005 by Det norske Veritas (ISBN 82 5150304 3).

The book consists of two parts. The first part of the book, written by the three editors, provides an overview of the current state-of-the-art of public safety investigations of major accidents in Europe. The second part of the book consists of eight papers by different authors, dealing with different topics related to in-depth investigation of accidents.

The book explicitly lists the audience it is intended for – a rare feature in scientific books. The primary target groups for the book include national governmental bodies responsible for safety, accident investigation boards, consultants in the field and researchers.

The objective of the book is not merely to describe the current state-of-the-art of safety investigations of accidents in Europe, but to influence such investigations; hence the title shaping public safety investigations. The book notes that major changes in the approach taken to in-depth investigation of accidents have taken place in recent years in Europe. Traditionally, these investigations were intended merely to identify the immediate causes of an accident. Today, accident investigations increasingly also aim for the prevention of accidents. This means that modern accident investigations adopt a much broader perspective on contributing factors than past investigations did, looking, for example, for elements of organisational culture and safety management that may contribute to accidents. Moreover, the organisation of safety investigations is changing. In the past, ad hoc commissions were created to investigate each accident, and dissolved once the task was accomplished. Today, accident investigation boards are often permanent institutions that cover a broader range of tasks, sometimes including the monitoring of safety by investigating unwanted events that do not end up as major accidents.

The book argues that the changes taking place are likely to make safety investigations a more useful tool for accident prevention than it has been in the past. The eight papers that constitute the second part of the book are of somewhat varying quality. Personally, I found the contributions of Knut Rygh and Barry Strauch most interesting. Rygh explains that the essential point of any accident investigation is to explain why operators believed they were

doing the right thing. Pilots veering off course, supervisors ignoring warnings, drivers proceeding in defective vehicles – all these people were behaving normally, either unaware of being off course or off guard, or regarding the known defects as minor and inconsequential. None of them were prepared for an accident.

Barry Strauch presents an analysis of the concept of normal accidents, introduced by Charles Perrow, and asks if Perrow's predictions that normal accidents will increase has been borne out. His answer is "yes and no". Yes, major accidents do continue to happen regularly, but they do not seem to have increased. Strauch also gives some very fascinating glimpses into in-depth investigations of selected accidents – eminently shedding light on the point made by Rygh that the victims of these accidents did what they believed to be the right thing, but ended up precipitating disasters.

The book should be of interest to its target audience. What I miss in the book is some discussion of the foundations of accident research. What do we mean by the "cause" of an accident? Some researchers would argue that accidents do not have causes – I disagree, I think accidents do have causes – but the ontological status of accident causes may be different from that of causes in general. How, in in-depth investigations, can spurious factors be discriminated from true causes? These are difficult questions. They may not have any definite answers. That, however, does not make them less interesting to discuss for a true intellectual.