HOW TO BUILD PUBLIC INFORMATION AND UNDERSTANDING

Some French Examples

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ABSTRACT

Public perception of nuclear issues and of the environmental impact is largely dependent on the general public's knowledge and understanding of complex scientific and technical matters which characterize the nuclear world, and on information provided by mass media which primarily tends to emphasize dramatic aspects.

Consequently public information must be provided as completely and in as straightforward a manner as possible, and be adapted for people who do not have a clear understanding of nuclear technologies. Information must be objective in all cases, in order to increase credibility over time. This is important because confidence in scientists, and more generally in technical progress, has been eroded.

In addition, when providing information, one has to anticipate events as much as possible in order to avoid mis-understandings when crises occur. Explanations during crises will then be better understood and confidence will be maintained.

Examples of campaigns undertaken by the French Atomic Energy Commission are given in this paper.

SCIENCE, NUCLEAR POWER AND PUBLIC OPINION

Relations between the general public and the scientific community are complex. Technology and science require special means to communicate information because people's ability to understand it is very dependent on their cultural and educational background. This is obviously even more the case for nuclear energy, because of the complexity of the technologies involved. However if this complexity is a major source of misunderstanding, it has not resulted in science and technology being rejected, since at one time they were considered the engine of human progress, and even the stuff of dreams.

So complexity may not appear to be the only cause for a change in public opinion from full acceptance to mistrust. Public debate of new scientific discoveries and new technological projects, such as nuclear plants, have greatly changed during the last two decades, especially in Western countries. The role that the mass media has played in this regard must be emphasized.

Opposition groups have developed, multiplied and been reinforced since the beginning of the seventies, a period when conflicts about environmental issues began to emerge. For about 10 years, these opposition groups have been using the mass media more and more to deliver their messages (we might say better and better).

Since dramatisation is the most efficient way for these groups to influence public opinion, the media mainly presents the risks, thereby allowing journalists to catch people's attention. This is particularly the case for nuclear power, for which the risks are considered to be invisible; a fact which is part of the associated myth.

Opposition groups emphasize the limits of scientific knowledge, especially in major public decisions. They try to demonstrate that political choices are dependent on other considerations; values which are not scientific.

The speed at which information is produced and circulates does not give people enough time to think through the different aspects of complex problems. This phenomenon has been made possible by technological progress, and imposed on the media by competition for readers and viewers.

The result is rising doubt among the public. People feel that decisions, some of which were taken decades ago, were not well-founded. Meanwhile, public debate has changed considerably. Public opinion weighs more and more on political decisions. Democracy has become much more deliberative, and thus it is essential to be aware of important developments and to propose a strategy for communicating information which is adapted to the situation.

We think this is very important for all countries intending to maintain or develop nuclear energy, where such social developments are occurring or are likely to occur.

HOW TO BUILD PUBLIC OPINION

If science is far from being rejected by the public, the role it has to play in the preparation of public decisions in which science is involved seems threatened, particularly by the increased power of the mass media. The problem for the scientific community is how to introduce scientific information into the public debate which arises when a new discovery is made, or a new project is launched.

Scientific information must be accepted as a credible component of the discussion. Credibility becomes the key issue, and credibility may be obtained only if objectivity and straightforwardness are the guidelines for any action which involves giving information. People must be convinced that the information is the whole truth and nothing but the truth (except, of course, for information which must be kept confidential for defence or commercial purposes).

It may be possible to achieve this objective by creating strong links between scientists and journalists, because of the power of the media. In this way, journalists could increase their own credibility and at the same time obtain valuable information to publish. To develop such links, the scientific community must define an appropriate general communication strategy.

The French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) developed such a strategy over the last eight years. Its Corporate Communications Division organizes 15 to 20 media campaigns per year, including visits to different CEA research centres, located throughout the country. Scientists describe and explain their research and results, including what has been developed in nuclear research reactors, so that journalists may fully understand CEA's R & D activities and communicate that understanding to the general public.

These media campaigns give rise to many articles and broadcasts, which increase the quantity of public information and improve their quality. For instance, at the end of 1996, the CEA Corporate Communications Division organized a three-day visit for journalists of local newspapers (representing all regions of France) to six CEA research centres, including one belonging to the military applications division. This produced 60 articles and broadcasts, all of which were positive for the organisation and for the nuclear activities.

CEA now intends to expand such initiatives by opening its research centres to all kinds of opinion relays, including teachers, doctors, VIPs, young people, etc., and increasing their contact with scientists.

The role of opinion leaders is undoubtedly of primary importance, for they are very effective at relaying information to the public. Special visits or meetings must be organized for them. Teachers are also a major target, because of the strong influence they have on younger generations. Not only should teachers

be invited to visit nuclear research centres and nuclear plants, but scientists and engineers should also be going into the schools and universities to present their activities and describe their jobs. In this regard, simple experiments could be staged to provide an easy approach to physics, and particularly to radioactivity.

CEA has acquired significant experience in this field. For example, once a year, each of its research centres opens its doors to young people aged 13-14 years. Such operations are always successful.

Furthermore these initiatives have an immediate positive advantage. In the event of a crisis, it will be easier to manage the situation because of the confidence which already exists between the media and the public on one hand, and the scientific or industrial organization on the other. Scientists and physicists will then be considered credible sources of information for explanations given.

Such examples show that it may be possible to give interesting and objective scientific information to the public at large and to help public opinion better appreciate scientific arguments, including those in favour of nuclear activities.

However, as mentioned above, this may not be sufficient. A further step must be taken, so that the public's position and judgement take into account the information which is being communicated. In other words, one has to incite the public to consider the scientific and technical information. For that, it is important that scientists and physicists participate in public discussions so that people become aware of the different aspects of the issues and may then express their own points of view.

How to attain this objective? We propose to create committees to introduce a new approach to the relations between science and society, and to organize public conferences and forums on complex technical and scientific subjects with major implications to society. The objective is clearly to try to balance the public debate, by ensuring that science and technology have a role in it, and that decisions take into account all aspects, including the scientific ones.

CONCLUSION

By developing many specific information campaigns, such as those carried out by the French Atomic Energy Commission, the scientific community, especially the nuclear sector, may help to build positive public opinion so as to allow it to take into account all the pertinent scientific and technical considerations, and thereby balance the public debate. Credibility and straightforwardness remain the guidelines for this communication policy.

The objective is to ensure that the scientific point of view is included, not only the news highlights as they are presented by most of the mass media, which emphasize dramatic aspects.

Such a communication strategy could be applied, we think, in the interest of all countries in which nuclear energy plays a significant role, or will do so in the future.