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A Journalist's View

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INTRODUCTION

I happen to report about nuclear items because the area I cover for my newspaper in Switzerland includes the five Swiss nuclear plants. I soon realised that it was impossible to write about such a complicated problem (it includes scientific, technical, economic, political, sociological factors) without first knowing and experiencing what those nuclear plants are in reality.

This paper is the result of five years of experience with the nuclear world in Switzerland. I don't pretend to know everything; I'm neither scientific nor a technical journalist. I write for the man in the street. And I work on a daily paper: I have to work very fast and to write the best I can. And as close to the reality as I can be.

Let's understand each other...
Confidence comes soon afterwards

A few months after the November 1986 fire at Schweizerhalle which destroyed a whole chemical storehouse at Sandoz plant near Basle and caused one of the heaviest pollutions of the river Rhine ever, I met one of the topmost managers of another chemical multi, Hoffmann-La Roche. More than ten years ago, this firm also suffered under a heavy crisis after the Seveso drama. For this man, it was absolutely clear that "our worst fault after Seveso was that we denied the journalists any information as long as we ourselves couldn't see clearly in the drama". He went on: "Now, we have at least learnt that, after an industrial catastrophe, one needs to talk. Talk a lot. Not to say just anything. But to explain whatever one knows and talk to comfort the people..."

It seems to me that these words match exactly to the image I have of the nuclear industry professionals. The only difference is that those people, that is to say YOU, have not yet realised the great benefit you could gain by talking to people. You are still traumatized by the Chernobyl drama and totally drowned by its psychological, sociological and sometimes political consequences. YOU have also not realised that going on focusing on safety as expressed before April 86 ("It's impossible that anything happens in our nuclear plants") no longer addresses people's preoccupations. And those preoccupations are the everyday bread for us journalists. At least for the one who takes his job seriously.

I know that you are going to tell me: "You journalists don't listen to us, you only listen to what the antis are saying; you only want to write and talk about the worst that can happen". For you, the question is: "Do we still need to talk with press people?" I expect that everybody in this conference room has a personal story to tell about how nasty it was to meet a journalist. But let me tell you that we journalists hate a too political or too technical language. We hardly listen to it. Let me illustrate this. When the antis say: "The Creys-Malville nuclear plant can explode!", we journalists get the message right away. It speaks to us; we can immediately see the nuclear cloud over the Alps; it makes us think back to what happened 40 years ago in Japan; we understand what the anti-nuclear movement wants to say. At least, the journalist understands it much easier than the message of the nuclear professionals which comes two weeks later and says something about "a power excursion", "super breeder", "very dangerous incident" (which is totally contradictory: can an incident still remain an incident if it is dangerous? and: what is an incident in a nuclear plant for the man in the street?), or also "light water reactor". For the non specialised journalist, who is most of the time the one that will handle the information, or for the local journalist, these words are chinese. And he does not understand chinese. And he has to write his article for the next day; he is in a hurry and does not have time, between an accident and a political event, to do research and to read the dictionary. First time he gets such a complicated message, he pays some attention and is soon fed up with the technical language; second time, he only reads the title; third time, the paper is consigned to the waste paper bin.

You don't have to think the journalist does not want to listen or to read something coming from nuclear professionals. He is ready to do it but he wants to understand. You are dealing with NON-SPECIALISTS! With people who are very curious and who want to understand what happens in this world, but who do not carry two or three technical dictionaries with them everywhere they go. We

journalists have to understand because it is the best way to help others understand too. And you must know that nowadays, the newspaper readers and the TV viewers want to understand in less than a few minutes. We live in the "clip era"; we live at a time where the average French newspaper readers understand only a thousand words. And it certainly is not "super breeder"! If you don't realise that most journalists don't write for an elite which can get your message (even if it rejects it), then don't be surprised if the people and the journalists don't grasp it.

You also must know that the journalist has to work more and more rapidly. One example: on the 29th of April 86, at around two o'clock in the afternoon, my chief editor phoned me. Within the next three hours, I had to write an article about the risks of a Swiss Chernobyl! I could do it because I have files about the nuclear problem and because I could quickly reach a nuclear professional I know. But what would have happened if it wouldn't have been so and if a journalist in a hurry had had to write this article. Most of the time, it's what happens and YOU get nervous afterwards while forgetting that this journalist had not the time to do his job correctly. Just as we rarely see your finished product, you do the same when you judge an article about nuclear industry and don't know the conditions in which it has been done. One suggestion: why don't you come and see us working between 20:00 and 23:00 at night. It does not look like a nuclear plant control room!

If the communication between each other is one of the most important problems, hindering mutual confidence and comprehension between nuclear world and press world, it is first because we DON'T KNOW EACH OTHER. I want then to speak out in favor of you being clearly understandable, being frank, coming down from your scientific tower and coming down to earth, to talk simply and NORMALLY with us journalists but also with the man or woman in the street. I know personally that you people working in the nuclear field have an awful lot to say. Then say it! It is certainly not easy to do that. But, let me ask you: what would you say if your doctor refused to tell you about your ailments? Would you agree? Or would you agree to listen to an obscure and highly medical speech about your health? As a patient, you'd be scandalised not to know exactly how you are going to be treated. As a consumer of your finished product (the electricity) and as someone who pays for it as a public service, I have the right to know exactly what happens in the nuclear plants. As a journalist who has to inform his readers about their everyday lives, I demand also to be informed about what happens in those plants and how they work. Because I want to understand. And because my job is to make people understand.

The journalist is not only someone who writes. He also (I would say he has to) listens to people. And usually, he likes to listen to his informants. He needs his contact persons for his information; and his informant needs him to let the public know what he has to say. Both need each other; I need you and you need me. Think about it! The journalist also has to see and feel what he is going to write about. Then, apart from talking with him, let him come into your offices and plants, let him visit the heart of the nuclear plants, let him experience what you do, let him speak with technicians and plant workers. He will very soon realize that nuclear plants are not devil's places and that people who work there are not monsters who plan an atomic explosion. But, if you don't take the step towards him, don't be surprised if he doesn't make it: everyday is changing and atom items don't hit the headlines every day, he will come to you when they do. Then anticipate his willingness to understand and to have background information. You are first technicians and engineers

who should want dialogue with the journalist and not to influence him. Leave that job to the politicians. You certainly have to know how to talk to journalist. But you also have to be reachable. I can tell you that this quality is not really one of yours! Experts are never there when it is necessary. Or, they are never the good ones. Or they don't feel concerned by the problem the journalist wants to talk about. Or they send him back to the press "officer". The latter is, as every journalist knows, the specialist to speak about everything except the one he is asked about. The press officer also rarely has knowledge of the press world and is very often ordered by his superiors to hide the truth. If the press officer knows about it! Because very often, he has to answer questions about problems about which he has no idea, or is not informed about. Briefly said: press officers should guide the journalists in a new world, let him come into contact with the right man at the right place, organize his visits in the plant and never let the journalist feel that he is unwanted. Otherwise, we really have the feeling to search deeper. And there is always something to find out. Especially nowadays and especially in the nuclear plants.

What I am trying to tell you is this: if you want more confidence and more comprehension from the journalist, you also have to move towards him. You must not believe that everything you say and write is the gospel truth. You must accept contradiction, nasty questions and people trying to check out if what you told them was right. It is our job to find out the truth. Which truth is another debate. But let me tell you that bad news is not only good news for us. When something goes perfectly, we also like to report on it. The only thing is that we know sooner about the bad news. And you don't inform us when it goes OK. Or, you immediately suspect the journalist of wanting to manipulate the data he collects. It is sometimes a true suspicion. More often it is unfounded. But you must also know that the journalist has to collect a lot more information than he is going to write. And to do that, he is obliged to talk to a lot of people. And sometimes the discussion begins as it once did for me when I was trying to gather some information from a Brown Boveri engineer about the Hamm-Uentrop THTR 300 nuclear plant in Germany. He listened to my questions and then turned round to a colleague and asked him in English (he obviously thought I didn't understand): "Do you think he's a leftist one?"

Don't be surprised if, in these conditions, the journalist has a better idea of anti-nuclear organisations. They have long understood how to cope with us. Just take the example of Greenpeace: a little bit of scientific information, always actual events, a lot of impressive and photographic events. The journalists run for the show. And when it concerns the nuclear industry, you barricade yourself behind your supposed dignity. The one who does not say anything always bears the blame... Anti-nuclear organisations are always ready to talk with the journalists, in simple and understandable language. They are always ready to bring him into contact with one of their experts who always knows how to explain a problem clearly. It is true that journalists listen and talk a lot with these people. First, we have to: it is necessary to have their opinion in mind. Second: they are easier to reach than are the pro-nuclear experts. I personally regret this reality. Because, I repeat: you have a lot to say and you know a lot of things which can smooth out other opinions which are often too extreme. But I also see that it is very difficult to reach the nuclear experts within a very short time. And when we succeed, we very often have the impression that you fear the journalists. Are the pro-nuclear people really frightened by the press world? Or, better said, are you afraid of the idea of us going on searching about your activity? About you?...

It is true that we often ask disturbing questions. But most of the times the questions we ask are the ones to which we think everybody else in the street would like to have an answer. Unless the journalist is specialised (which is very RARE on today's newspaper and magazine staff), the question the journalist asks can frighten you because it is not formulated in a language you are used to listen to. It is formulated in everyday language. The one that permits you to understand what your doctor tells you in his office. It is not a SPECIALISED language and I understand that it might frighten you because you don't master it as well as the language you use with your colleagues. I do understand then your fear of being misunderstood by a NON-SPECIALIST. But, instead of refusing to answer, why don't you ask the journalist if you could read the article before it is published? The journalist knows he is not specialised. He will be ready to be corrected if something with a technical or a scientific meaning is not correctly reported: he has everything to gain from that attitude. And you can use those moments to talk with each other. To build confidence and mutual understanding.

If you choose, on the contrary, to be silent and to let the press officer say everything, then be sure that the journalist will find out the expert or the technician that will tell him what he wants to know. And the result certainly puts your nerves on edge. And you will again tell your colleagues about that dreadful writer who doesn't know what he is writing about. Forgetting you were not ready to talk with him. An idea: why not reach for the phone and ring up the journalist when you feel something is interesting. "If the public do not understand the nuclear industry, it is not their fault, it is our fault": Lord Marshall said this in his speech at the ENC congress in Geneva in June 1986, in the wake of Chernobyl. Two years later, I must say that things have not really changed. You people of the nuclear industry still think that you cannot be wrong. Do you really have the monopoly of the truth? Do you really think that people can accept to hear that a nuclear incident (or accident) can only happen one time in a million and simultaneously listen to the radio news that this accident did effectively happen? Do you really expect or believe that everyday folk talk with their neighbours in the language of probability? No! They want to know if they can drink their milk and eat their salad. Now! Not tomorrow! Don't you think it would be much more profitable for you to let the people see what you do to prevent the incidents and the accidents instead of feeding them with statistics and good words?

You want to restore confidence with the media and with the public? Very well! Accept being criticised; accept being questioned; talk about and show where and how you work. Do, at last, open the door!