

"NucNet's Growing Impact on the Media"

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PIME '95

Session 4: Media, Tuesday January 31st

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XA04C1421

In the four years since the birth of NucNet there has been a gradual but radical change in the original concept of the network.

In the beginning, the focus of attention was to make nuclear communicators better-informed and more efficient. What had been desperately needed for some time was an information exchange system which would enable those communicators to do a better job whether working proactively or reactively.

The idea was primarily for positive nuclear news from Europe to be disseminated to people on the network so that they could pass it on to media contacts in their respective countries, as part of their regular dialogue with journalists. That proactive approach is - and should remain - an important way of using NucNet information. Even in reactive mode, nuclear communicators - thanks to NucNet - have the facts at their disposal to answer media enquiries as fully as humanly possible.

However, once NucNet was up-and-running, a strong body of opinion emerged, arguing in favour of NucNet's most urgent, important or off-beat news - the "A" category releases - to be sent direct to national and international news agencies. Quite rightly, it was felt that, in this way, the nuclear community could clearly demonstrate its transparency and its desire to inform the public openly. At the same time, it was clear that sending to just a few national news agencies in Europe would not be enough. It was clear that NucNet would have to expand into a truly worldwide network and that, to reflect this, the main international news agencies would have to be put on-line as well.

In NucNet's first year, only a handful of news agencies were receiving NucNet "A" category news. But by the end of 1991, in addition to some European national news agencies, the international wire services of Reuters and the Associated Press were also starting to see NucNet for the first time. In the next two years, the number of agencies receiving NucNet grew steadily to a total of 13.

However, a major leap forward was made last October. After the autumn '94 NucNet board meeting, a concerted effort was made by the Central Office in Berne to send to more agency journalists, especially the international ones with a worldwide media audience. In some cases, the "A" category news now goes to more than one journalist at the same agency. This is due to the different interests and responsibilities which the journalists have. It could be general news, energy, science, the environment or health matters.

The result is that NucNet is now being received by 26 different agencies or individual agency journalists.

There are three ways in which NucNet reaches the media, and inevitably the public. One is the direct route: a NucNet news item is sent direct to an international or national news agency, the story is picked up and put out by the agency, and then used by newspapers and/or the broadcast news media.

The second is an indirect route: a member of the network sees a NucNet item which he or she thinks could strike a chord with a media contact. It is then fed to the journalist concerned, and coverage could well be the end result.

The third route is not so tangible but just as important. It is the influence which the steady flow of NucNet material has on the way journalists handle a nuclear story. These days, in the vast majority of cases, nuclear stories are dealt with in a more objective manner - thanks to NucNet - and the "half-life" of negative stories is much shorter than in the days before the network existed.

To demonstrate NucNet's growing impact on the media, some evidence is needed. Probably the most crystal-clear example of NucNet "A" news being used by the agencies, comes from Hungary. This involves the "direct route" already mentioned. All NucNet "A" news items are faxed to the Hungarian national news agency, MTI. They are regularly translated and put out on the agency's wire service.

Here is just one example, showing how a NucNet item rapidly became an article in Hungarian newspapers. It is perhaps a nuclear "chain reaction".

We see first the NucNet item (slide 1).

The corresponding agency story (slide 2).

And one of the articles which appeared in the Hungarian press (slide 3).

It appears that in most "NucNet countries", the network's "A" news is routinely relayed to news agencies and major national newspapers.

The Swiss Association for Atomic Energy, for instance, translates selected "A" news into German and French and sends it to the Swiss national news agency and certain major newspapers.

NucNet material is widely distributed in Ukraine, where it is used in contacts with the local media.

India is another country where NucNet is distributed to major national newspapers and news agencies.

NucNet has had a good reception with the national news agency in the Netherlands. When asked to comment on NucNet material, the Dutch agency said it "complemented" the international news agency material. It was also "specific", providing a good overview of new developments and a good explanation of technical matters.

I have two examples of NucNet getting into the print media via the "indirect route". They are both from the UK. The first from Scotland, to be more precise, shows how a NucNet user at AEA Technology distributed a NucNet news story about radiation and leukaemia to contacts at different Scottish newspapers, and got great results.

Here are the articles which appeared in both local and major regional Scottish newspapers - coverage thanks to NucNet.

(slides 4 and 5)

A further example of the "indirect" impact of NucNet has a somewhat religious angle to it. On seeing a NucNet piece on how the Vatican is in favour of expanding the use of nuclear power, the press officer at the British Nuclear Industry Forum passed this on to a journalist contact at the world-renowned British national newspaper, The Times.

We are very grateful for what the newspaper calls the Pope's "Nuclear blessing" (slide 6).

So much for the past and the present. But what of the future?

One of NucNet's targets for this year is to get better results from the expanded distribution to a larger number of agency journalists. The NucNet editors will not just be gathering, evaluating, writing and faxing out the news. They are now embarking on a marketing effort - alerting agency journalists to upcoming news to try to generate interest, and stressing the importance of particular developments, as the NucNet fax "sends" are underway.

With a larger readership at the agencies, and with a "selling job" being done on NucNet material, the present impact being made by NucNet should increase. In particular, the big international news agencies - Reuters, AP and UPI - have become a key target audience. They have the power to flash good news and bad around the world in seconds. Radio has the capacity to get that news on the air in minutes - even if it's negative and inaccurate news about nuclear. This presents a major challenge for NucNet at every level. In the event of an incident, the information suppliers have to be quick. So do the editors at Central Office who handle the input and distribute the output on the network and to the agencies. Speed is always the important thing, provided accuracy is maintained.

There are probably those journalists whose only interest in nuclear - and their only interest in NucNet - would be for what is now the World's Nuclear News Agency to provide the first report of a serious accident.

For NucNet to have a bigger impact on the media, the network's reputation for accurate and balanced reporting on nuclear must obviously be maintained and enhanced. This is clear. But there is more to it than that. If NucNet is to make the agency journalists really "sit up and take notice", it should at least report on incidents - and major positive developments - at the same time as the agencies do. Ideally, as a news agency in its own right, NucNet should be fast enough to beat everyone else with the news.

To sum up, it should be pointed out that NucNet's growing impact on the media is a result of teamwork, and this teamwork takes different forms. It is:

- between the network's information suppliers and Central Office
- among the Central Office staff themselves
- between Central Office and the agencies
- and between network members and their news media contacts.

Through this continuing teamwork process, NucNet will achieve its goal of providing the media and the public with a balanced picture of nuclear energy.

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