

BA and ESRC Science in Society seminars 2006

How do NGOs commission, communicate and contest science?

The last seminar in the ESRC science in society series looked at how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) commission, communicate and contest science. The first half of the seminar was led by Dr Sally Eden from the department of geography at the University of Hull.

Dr Eden began the seminar by outlining a research project funded by the ESRC which looked at the differences between business and environmental NGOs and how they interact with science. NGOs are in the middle of the debate about how science is used. It is generally agreed by academics that NGOs would play a positive role in the debate and that they could change the way that science is portrayed in the media and society. NGOs are very important in a new kind of science where science is becoming a political resource.

The one-year project run by Dr Eden looked at a selection of both business and environmental NGOs. The project looked at the differences between the NGOs but did not assume that differences were present in the first place. The NGOs selected were

On the general topic of waste although the insights generated were of wider interest and significance. Some of the organisations involved in the research included: Greenpeace, WWF, Wastewatch, The Environment Council and the

Women's Environmental Network.

As part of the research project one or two people from each NGO were interviewed. The results of the interviews found that many NGOs identified the importance of science within their organisation, and that producing good information and advice to the general public, media and government based on scientific evidence was a key part of their function as an NGO.

The interviews showed that NGOs are by no means anti-science, as they have often been portrayed as being in the media. Many of the NGO employees hold science degrees, and many also have postgraduate scientific qualifications. Although many of the people working in NGOs are scientists, they do not generally carry out the primary research themselves, although this may depend on the issues. A major part of an NGO's work is to study the latest scientific reports and journals and to assess which parts of the evidence presented are relevant to their organisation.

NGOs also commission other organisations, most frequently academic institutions, to carry out particular research on their behalf. Dr Eden's research programme specifically looked at how NGOs commission this research. The programme posed the question of whether NGOs are, in effect, able to 'buy in' credibility, namely to commission the research which will provide supporting evidence for their particular campaign.

It was found that NGOs go about commissioning research firstly by creating a list of research institutions which they trust and are prepared to use. Most of these institutions are academic research departments. In conclusion, Dr Eden's research programme found that there were fewer differences between the NGOs selected than had been expected. In fact, it was found that many business and

environmental NGOs have a lot more in common with each other than is generally thought.

Business NGOs are often viewed as being 'factual' whereas environmental NGOs are seen as 'emotional'. NGOs want to use science to present their views to the general public, government and industry with as much firm evidence as they can gather. They use a mixture of expertise and approaches to do this.

The Chief Scientist for Greenpeace, Doug Parr, spoke in the second half of the seminar as an NGO practitioner about the way NGOs commission, communicate and contest science. The aim of Greenpeace is to promote environmental action through political change.

Doug Parr commented that he was not surprised that the results of Dr Eden's research project as the aims of many NGOs are similar, to promote change. In order to challenge the beliefs and practices of the courts, media and the government, NGOs need to acquire hard facts on which to base their action. He also discussed the issue of commissioning research in Greenpeace, as they commissioned a number of pieces of research, including Imperial College to carry out research into nanotechnology.

Angela Venters from the Office of Science and Innovation asked Doug Parr how Greenpeace went about deciding which institution to commission to carry out research on nanotechnology and questioned whether the results would be better or different if it had been carried out by another institution.

Doug responded to this by acknowledging that when research is commissioned, they generally have a reasonable idea of what the outcome will be when they decide to commission. Julie Doyle from the University of Brighton raised the question of what the main problems of communicating the science of climate change to the general public. Doug Parr responded by saying that on climate change the nature of the way the subject is communicated is often disempowering to the general public in terms of the actions they can take.

Michael Harrison works for a government department and asked how NGOs are able to create what is known as a cartography of credibility as government departments are not able to restrict their choice in this way. Roland Jackson, director of the BA, asked whether the results of Dr Eden's research would have been similar if government departments had also been looked at.

Doug Parr further explained that NGOs tend to use cartographies of credibility in order to ensure the research they commission is credible, which means that the commissioned organization has to be considered credible amongst numerous audiences. The government already carries a certain amount of credibility and they also need to display an open process so that they are not closed to new ideas.

Michael Harrison also raised the question of whether NGOs and the government could work together on traceability. Doug Parr mentioned that some NGOs are already involved in certification.

Another member of the audience asked how NGOs could work together and whether they have similar agendas. Greenpeace does have an informal flow of information between them and other organisations. A lot of environmental NGOs are in the same position so it makes sense to share the analysis of science around the network of NGOs.

The question was raised of how an NGO decides what it is going to campaign. Doug Parr explained that for Greenpeace, it is partly a matter of history which began with the campaign to sail a boat into the Pacific against nuclear testing. However, generally it is very difficult to define as issues arise in different ways.

A final question of the seminar asked by Roland Jackson, was whether Dr Eden's research project found any evidence of emotionality within the language of NGOs. However, Dr Eden's research did not directly look at this aspect and she added that there is not any research that has looked into emotionality within NGO communication.