

Danger of the maverick view

Joe Perry sees problems with the Spat

Dear Editor,

In the Spat on GM crops in the September issue, Michael Antoniou claims that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) does not claim universal confidence.

Actually, each Panel of EFSA is made up of 21 academic experts in their field. The Chair and Vice-Chairs of the GMO Panel each have over 100 published papers in refereed journals.

Antoniou questions the independence of the GMO Panel. None works for industry; their outside interests are all documented on EFSA's website.

Antoniou claims that the EFSA GMO Panel considers toxicity tests for GM foods in mammals should last at best three months. In fact the Panel says: 'Ninety-day studies with rodents are normally of sufficient duration for the identification of general toxicological effects ... However, [they are] not designed to detect effects on reproduction or development ...

in some cases, testing of the whole food and feed beyond a 90-day ... study may be needed.' This is no different from the view of FAO/WHO and OECD.

Antoniou cites papers by Séralini and describes it as 'incomprehensible' that EFSA does not agree with their findings. EFSA's reason is that Séralini's arguments were based purely on statistical grounds, not on toxicology, and that assumptions underlying the statistical tests performed did not hold, so Séralini detected more significant results than analyses based on more robust techniques.

Let there be no doubt that, aside from the views of those who see biotechnology as some form of crusade (whether they are pro or anti), there is a real consensus amongst independent academics and international agencies concerning safety assessments of GM crops.

The difficulty for the media in engineering debate between opposing factions in controversial areas of science is that the consensus position, which is of crucial importance in settling issues within the scientific community, is often downplayed. There is a danger that the 'maverick' view is publicised to a degree not justified by its importance, and that members of the public without the time to delve deeper believe that such views are taken equally seriously by the scientific community as the more rational 'consensus' view. I am afraid that that was the case with your last Spat.



Professor Joe Perry is a retired biometrician and ecologist who is currently Vice-Chair of the EFSA GMO Panel. This letter expresses entirely his personal views, which are not necessarily shared by the European Food Safety Authority or by any of the other members of its GMO Panel
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Pilots and cabin fumes

Ken Okona-Mensah
on causality and proof

Dear Editor,

Paul Tyler commented on the potential health effects of pilots' exposure to cabin air fumes and lambasted work being done to investigate the reported symptoms (*People & Science*, March 2009, p16). Lord Tyler claimed that relevant authorities are failing to take the matter seriously, and asserted that there was 'mounting evidence that fumes leaking from aircraft engine oil into the cabin air can have serious effects on passengers' and crew members' health'. The article also suggested that causality is not being accepted by ministers until there is 100 per cent proof.

The independent scientific advisory Committee on Toxicity (COT)¹ undertook

a substantive review of all the available literature and published a statement² in 2007 on the cabin air environment, ill-health in aircraft crews and the possible relationship to smoke/fume events in aircraft.

Although it is possible/plausible that the reported acute or short term health effects in pilots could be related, it is not possible to draw such conclusions based on anecdotal evidence alone. The COT, therefore, suggested that further research (which meets the criteria for a properly designed study) should be conducted. Research commissioned by the Department for Transport (DfT) has already started, and additional information is available at the DfT website.³

When providing any scientific advice, the COT uses a weight-of-evidence approach, recognizing that there is always some uncertainty. Therefore, one must emphasise that any further COT review would not require 100 per cent proof to establish causality.

- 1 See <http://cot.food.gov.uk/>
- 2 <http://cot.food.gov.uk/cotstatements/cotstatementsyrs/cotstatements2007/cotstatementbalpa0706>
- 3 See <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/aviation/hci/faq>



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Listening, not talking

Robin Greenwood discovers he's a godfather

When I left full-time education, I went to work in Sales. 'You have two ears and one tongue,' said my mentors. 'Use them in that ratio.' That advice is this book's central theme.

It argues that there is a strong link between good (or bad) communication and good (or bad) development. The right approach to development is the prime mover for good communication; and that approach is structural change and the eradication of poverty.

Context is all

The authors' approach involves listening and inclusion. They are centred on people and their potential, and are oriented around messy processes that the authors characterise as 'searching'.

The alternative approach to development, which the authors are challenging, is unclear (deliberately or accidentally) about purpose; involves telling and direction and is focussed around neat planning and 'products'.

The book warns against a fixation with replicability. The context is never the same, so the response can never be wholly the same. Communication is a two-way process. When working with communities for their development, it is more important to 'get ideas in' than to 'get the message out'. And knowing the context, especially though a champion who knows and sticks with the context, is everything.

Enabling social networks

The authors build a convincing case that links these themes together. It culminates in the exhortation to get out of the 'grey zone' (of top-down, 'telling and planning bureaucracy' and into the 'zone of the possible'. This is where new technologies (essentially mobile phones and the internet) give rise to social media which enable social networks to form and bring 'another development' within reach.

The book is structured in three parts: what we know, what we learned and what we can do differently. But it does take a while to get going and I fear that readers with a lot else on their plates may bale out before they can be fully rewarded for staying the course.

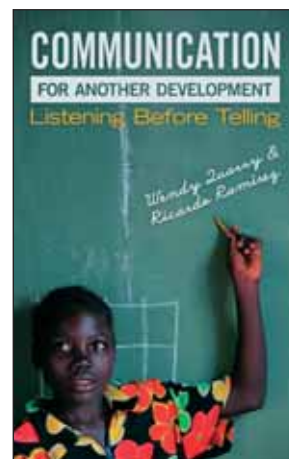
Very useful sub-headings provide signposts for the reader. Seven pages of references take the place of footnotes. Engaging, though not wholly relevant, illustrations leaven the text. The authors' language is light, clear and almost jargon-free. The chapter on how communicators are often so bad at communicating what we do is particularly amusing (although there is a recurrent touchstone metaphor that doesn't really work).

Not surprisingly, the authors have thought hard about how to get their message across through the essentially one-way medium of a book. They compare acquiring the proposed approach to communication to learning a new language: you don't learn a new language from a book, but by interaction.

Holding the space

There are lessons for academics and aid workers, nuanced by very human insights: for instance that individuals' appetites for the risk of stepping out of the grey zone can be governed by factors like the stage in one's career or life.

I don't have 'Communication' in my job title. I have a leadership and policy-making role in an NGO known for its activism. I work closely with some professionals who communicate to supporters, backers and those we wish to influence; with others who communicate with the people with



Wendy Quarry and Ricardo Ramirez (2009). *Communication for another development*: Zed Books 140pp £16.99 ISBN: 9781848130098

whom and for whom we try to bring about change; and with still others who do both.

But even in Christian Aid a fair amount of 'left-brain' activity lurks under the surface. This book promotes the value of 'godparents' in positions like mine; we can clear the path (or at least hold the space) for the champions of active, listening communication and a searching approach to people-centred development. Such affirmation encourages us for the grey days to come.



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