

How do NGOs commission, communicate and contest science?

Dr Sally Eden, Department of Geography, University of Hull

Doug Parr, Chief Scientist, Greenpeace

Chair: Roland Jackson, the BA



Contesting environmental science: business and environmentalist NGOs

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Sally Eden



Why NGOs?

- Not much researched as scientific actors
- Intermediary role in knowledge production suggested
 - to critique, challenge and open up scientific debates and promote greener, more democratic science
 - Mode 2 knowledge production – (a) socially accountable and (b) useful in environmental governance
- Part of boundary-work and a ‘cartography of credibility’
- Complicate academic categories:
 - lay-expert (consumer-producer), science-policy (Mode 2)

Project work 2003

- exploratory
- symmetry of analysis
 - environmentalist and business NGOs
- methodology
 - indepth interviews
 - Q methodology card-sorting exercise

The industry council for packaging and the environment



Environmental
Services
Association



GREENPEACE



The Chartered Institution
of Wastes Management



The Environment Council

Resource Recovery Forum

“green alliance...”



Women's
Environmental
Network

Classical science (Mode 1)

- for building credibility
 - “[we have] a reputation for well-thought-through, scientifically credible advice.” (small ENGO - K)
 - “we get the figures right, we get the analysis right. They may disagree with us over arguments and we can argue over it, but that is very, very important to us that we protect the reputation of our research as being rigorous really and our arguments as being the same” (large ENGO - G)
- acknowledging quality control through peer review
 - “If it’s been peer reviewed in a respectable journal and then open to critique, response, then you have to take it seriously.” (large ENGO – I2)
- not anti-science

Interactional expertise

- scientific training/background
 - all bar four had scientific first degrees and many had second degrees
- secondary research capabilities
 - ‘pure’ science journals + diverse sources
 - “I am what could be derogatorily described as a ‘Xerox Warrior’, I work on on-paper desk studies, using and marshalling information that’s been dug from the actual scientific work generated elsewhere.” (large ENGO – I,1)
 - We don’t do the research ourselves, we try and assess which bits of evidence are relevant to the debate. (small ENGO - H)

Experiential expertise

- from experience of practice or application
 - “It’s not very often that we meet Government officials without at least one or two members. Particularly from the large companies; there’s a certain amount of credibility in being able to say ‘this is our experience and this our insight and these are the problems we’re facing and these are the issues we have, and we need guidance or we need help or we need this changed’.” (waste BNGO - D)
- not ‘lay’

The problem with Mode 1

- science as insufficient to decide issues
- need science to be (a) socially accountable and (b) useful

1. morally or politically useful:

- “if everyone’s a scientist that’s working on an issue, there is a danger of becoming too involved in the technical aspects of it, and losing the moral clarity, if you like... science doesn’t make those decisions, science informs the decisions, but the decision that’s what’s right and wrong is a political and moral one.” (large ENGO - I2)

2. practically or technologically useful:

- “If it will only work in a test tube then it’s not much good on a practical level.” (small community NGO – N,1)

The problem with Mode 1

- Quality control
 - “just because a paper is published and peer-reviewed, I don’t believe it’s always correct, conclusions or the information in it.” (large ENGO - I2)
- Alternatives
 - “to make those judgements about what you think is credible and what isn't, then for each issue you need a kind of institutional map” (large ENGO – I1)
 - “I send out my own work sometimes, to people. Normally other academics who’ve worked in the field... it might be somebody internal and somebody external if they’ll do it for us” (large ENGO - G)

Doing Mode 2

- Commissioning research from consultants
 - “information which is unequivocal, or as unequivocal as possible, or as least unbiased as possible. So what we didn’t want in our work is that a person could pick it up and say ‘well they would say that, wouldn’t they, they’re an NGO’.” (large ENGO – Q1)
 - “there’s always a risk of course that if somebody has a rabid view which opposes what we’re saying, they read a report that we say is independent, that they will say as you said “Well, [you] paid for it”. Well, sure, but how else do we get it done? We could do it ourselves and they’d say the same thing, we could use the company data and they’d say the same thing. At least this [using consultants] gives as much of an element of credibility as you can get.” (trade BNGO - L)

More similarities than differences

- across the business-environmentalist divide:
 - “all these green lobbies claiming that incinerators are bad for health, cause cancer and kill babies and all that sort of thing, so we need to rely on scientific facts and data as much as we can to counteract that. What we counter the claims with have to be factual... they use a lot of emotional arguments; it’s very difficult to try and engage the public in facts.” (waste association D)
 - “I did do a Radio 4 interview where they’d got the Greenpeace guy in... [the interviewer] said ‘if he says anything really outrageous, just jump in there’ [and disagree] and he didn’t... Afterwards she was like ‘how can a professional institution agree with that?’ and I said ‘because on that particular point we do!’ you know? So sometimes you do get it and sometimes you’re set up” (waste organisation B)

Conclusions of project

- NGOs are:
 - not anti-science but pragmatic and flexible about science
 - both lay and expert – heterogeneous
 - less differentiated/contested than expected (in private)
- academic arguments are inevitably too simple:
 - NGOs both play the game and challenge the game (Modes 1 and 2)
 - boundary-work is contingent on time, space and issue (public v private, UK v US, GM v climate change)
 - easier to propose democratisation of science than to achieve it

Current project (2004-6): *Credibility Claims as Scientific Commodities*



- how science and knowledge figure in public consumption through specific claims on products
- overlooked everyday encounters with science and expertise

Assurance schemes



Key questions

1. How do NGOs and companies use science to make claims about products?
2. How do consumers judge the credibility of these claims?
3. How is science managed and transported alongside these products?
4. What does this mean for the authority of science and constructions of credibility in society more generally?

Thank you.



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