

Science & Risk Communication. Communication on GM CROPS. Het Pand, December 8 2011,.
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Interventie Greet Riebbels ILVO:

"In spring FLM announced that they would liberate the field.

That announcement made us change a lot in our communication strategy

We had to invest more in fences than planned and our communication become more defensive than what originally planned

Our message was adducted...instead of reporting about what was really going on the press was reporting about fences, about the police, the security etc. With a lot of media attention. TV, radio, press, magazines, ..

What we realised after more thought is that we made a mistake in the beginning by showing this sign [the poster "hier groeien de aardappelen van de toekomst"] at the plantation

This is a statement instead of a question whereas scientific people we should pose questions. So it would have been better to put "are this the potatoes of the future?"

I must admit we did a mistake here. ..we must have marked more that we are researchers and evaluators of science instead of really promising before testing.

...

you know what happened then. The manifestation. FLM was very succesful in recruiting people internationally. It looked like a very fun manifestation, with a lot of people.

There were some arguments. "this is a bad investment even for capitalists", "safe our science from corporate slavery". "stop biopiracy" ... so our scientists were colled to rob nature.

There was a counter action from the scientific world..not only from the involved scientists but a lot of other institutes, in fact people who sympathise with science.

Signs "no science no future", "biotech can be green", "destroying a field is criminal etc etc."

So what you saw in belgium that there were formed to very opposing camps. In the communication and the press, people were forced to ask themselves who are the bad guys, who are the good guys.

The 'rade' (?) itself I must say it was quite spectacular I must say, and perceived as such also in the media. And pictures taken that day are really icons that are repeated over and over again. When we report afterwards. 250 people taking part in it. Use of some violence. Indeed a very strong footage taken by the press people.

And then the rollercoaster for communication really went off. The minster president peeters for example and the minister of agriculture of our region being present at the field, promising some extra financial support.

What I saw when I evaluate what I have experienced is in fact three things:

- we had to deal with a much wider range of topics than we planned in advance. And I show you a couple of issues that we had to deal with extra. Above what we had planned. There was much more attention, much more public debate and much more dialogue and in fact a war of opinion

which I personally evaluate as a positive thing. In fact most of our scientists are really happy with the fact that we got a forum, a platform to communicate and to enter into the debate and much more channels, media channels, were used than what we originally planned, internationally, the social media entering (facebook, blogs and so on). But on the other side I must say that our scientists and communication services were really forced to be re-active instead of always having the initiative in our hands.

- What issues came to our table instead of what we had planned. There was one researcher from a university not involved in this field trial who was dismissed because she was the spokesman of the FLM movement. This got some opinions pro and contra. A lot of arguments about the security and fences. Freedom of speech. Financial profit. Who is really profiting, getting the benefit from this kind of technology. And so on.

So well we had to prepare for whatever argument coming towards us and not, and not only giving the very technical information as we planned.

I evaluate this communication event saying two things. What we saw is especially with politicians and general public, not so much with the stakeholders directly involved, that there are a lot of holes in their sets of knowledge. We as scientific public are not enough aware of the fact that people really need to be thought about things that we think are widely known and that we start from this platform adding some new information.

For example, do people know, do they know in fact how agriculture is organised in modern times. No they don't. Do people know what conventional breeding techniques are about. No they don't. Do they know how species are pollinated in nature? No they don't. and everytime you see this creates the opportunity to create false convictions, false feelings in the peoples minds. That we really should contradict by giving more facts, more information, more teaching about the broader theme. For example do they know how authorisation procedures are organised? no they don't. what really is about the market introduction, crop protection and so on and so on.

Everytime we saw that there were some false things going on and that we discovered it in fact too late and than we had to contradict it. Whereas this was not really our plan in the beginning.

Another observation that we made afterwards is that in all the debates that we attended and in all the arguments and the contact we had with the public, and also with the politicians again was that this is a debate that is not only lead in a rational way but also very emotionally. There is a lot of fear going on. Fear for unknown consequences. There is the fear for human health, there is the notion of sustainability. In Belgium the organic sector does not want to hear and think about gmOs. So if we as gm-scientists claim the sustainability argument it was as not logic in their mind because there is a strong relation going on in the public between sustainability and organic crops.

And then the other part, the ennemy part, claiming sustainability that was something that felt like wrong. There was something going on about that. Respect for nature is also something quite emotional. And then even the broader things like poor naïve farmers being slaves of economic boops, biodiversity, etc etc. so the emotions...what we experienced is...don't under estimate it. They are there and we have to respond to it. Don't ignore feelings and don't ignore emotions in a debate.

One other observation. There is something going on with the vocabulary used and there is something with this vocabulary. For example in Dutch, Gmo is called genetisch gemanipuleerde of gemodificeerde organismen...both suggests something different. Also the word Risk. In scientific language is something about statistical chance of occurring. Risk in the mind of non-scientific public

means danger...so, there again the use of words was for us a learning process. We have really to choose our pictures and words, vocabulary so that it is understandable. So that the concept that we want to communicate is really the same in the mind of our public and in our mind.

Another word/vocabulary to talk about is ...the activists, and they call themselves peaceful resisting people, legitimate protest, non-violent attention seeking and so on and so on. In the other camp were used some other words. Are they ignorant, are they 'scum', they were distracting. So there were some differences in use of vocabulary.

What are we going to do next year and what could be done better than this year? Because people know already that we are going to repeat the same field trial in wetteren. So I think that we should pay even more attention to our target groups and especially, what contend they need. We should really try to make that better fit. What really is needed in the political world to be known. What questions are posed by the ngos and how can we respond to that and so on and so on.

We also observe that our European society is, well you know, not really asking for gm technology. Suspicion is something fashionable about society. It is fashionable to say 'well I don't know about this gm'..there are some things in society where you have to fight for attention and give our message to say 'this is something okay to go for in agriculture'. I think we plan for next year a restricted number of strong baselines. I am convinced that the potato story is a good story to talk about sustainability. I am convinced that everybody can really understand that robust plants can help to respect the soil. And respecting soil is something very fashionable to talk about in agriculture nowadays. I am convinced that we should really stress more that GM crops are really as near to the common crops as we could reach. They are equal unless one gene, or a set of genes. The visualisation is important there too. We saw for example with the camera crews coming, 'show us the gm-potatoes, are they frankenstein potatoes?' and they were really surprised that there was no visual difference between the conventional types and the gm-types. So there is some work to do and we should not so much stress the differences, that is what we should do next year I think.

The technique itself we should not emphasise too much that it is a difficult thing to do. We should really repeat that is a technique to really enter some characteristics in a more precise way than rough breeding techniques.

And yes we will try to have some new messages as you know press and public also want to hear something new instead of what they heard already the year before. What we are not stressing too much are those arguments because we saw that they not really bother too much (??)

Our strategy: more dialogue, more questions, more visits, more communication, more repeating, more visual attractiveness if possible, more teaching, vulgarizing, choosing the right words, explaining the procedures and if we have time, because that is also something we have to deal with, scientific people are about science in the first place and not communication...do we make more time for communication, do we find more money for communication? Do we for example work in an overall website with frequently asked questions about gm. This doesn't exist in dutch.

Did we achieve our goal? I think yes and THANKS TO FIELD LIBERATION MOVEMENT! it will maybe astonish you, but they were helping us for agenda setting. That was our platform, at least part of it, to communicate intensively.

Thanks to the gm experts, not only our own experts but also the broader institute network. And also social and ethical scientists who really gave away their opinion in all kinds of platforms. Thanks of course to our collaborating colleagues from wageningen, BASF, and thanks to the

government also because there were some very strong statements and that was in Europe, I don't know exceptional, but strong in any way. They were really choosing side, which was a good thing of the field trial. Students. Why students, because at a certain moment facebook, and internet platforms were really exploding and there we couldn't follow. And there were some students entering in the debate. That was a beautiful thing to see.

What are we not planning is really a bargaining (??) campaign. We are not planning not to say the truth anymore. We are not really going into a marketing strategy. That is not our plan. With the good press relations we have I think we come already far. Luckily we have for example Lieven and the other scientists who are excellent spokesmen also on the level of emotions which is very important. We had good collaborations and the visual aspect was really very important.