

## MEDIA ANALYSIS...A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY RELATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The radioactive waste cleanup community has not effectively utilized its most powerful communications tool to inform the general public; the print and broadcast media. Environmental interest groups have known of the value of accessing the media for their message for years and have used it effectively. The radioactive waste cleanup community's efforts to date have not been focused on education of the media so that they in turn can inform the public of our cleanup mission. Their focus must be to learn of the importance of the media, develop training programs that train technical people in how to know and respond to the media's needs for information, and then incorporate that training into a comprehensive program of public information in which access to the media is a key communications tool. While it is not a panacea, media education and access is a cost-effective means of accomplishing community relations goals of public information and public participation in radioactive waste cleanup and has been effectively utilized at the Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project (WSSRAP).

### INTRODUCTION

One of the means of communicating ideas effectively to the public is through this nation's network of print and broadcast media. Environmental interest groups have known this for years and have utilized this relatively low cost communications tool to disseminate their messages to the general public.

Radioactive waste cleanup is a relatively new industry in the eyes of the media and the perception of the public. The public demands knowledge of this highly complex and technical field through the media and the media must respond, and respond quickly, with stories that are informative, easy-to-comprehend, and attract their audience to read/listen/watch their communications message.

The radioactive waste cleanup industry has not made education of the media a key component of their community relations programs. Thus, when the media is responding to the public's immediate demands for news and information, it is the environmental interest groups that get access to the media because they understand the media's needs and how to respond to them. They, not the radioactive waste cleanup community, have filled the information vacuum, and thus gain priority status as the key information source in the eyes of the news media.

It is an easy way out to say that "media is biased" or they "only want to cover the bad news." These reactions offer no answer to the question: "Are we making our best effort to educate the media and the public to our cleanup mission?"

The following sections in this paper will explore what needs to be done to increase the access to the media with public information disseminated proactively from cleanup programs. The communications industry continues to expand, and with it, a voracious appetite for up-to-date accurate information must be satisfied. Environmental interest groups should not be the only ones filling this information vacuum when the radioactive waste cleanup industry already has at its disposal the best technical experts, the best information, to educate the media and allow them to fulfill their mission of informing the public.

### Media's Role as a Catalyst for Public Reaction and Political Involvement

Some would consider a utopian setting as a world in which only the best, and most accurate information, was ever disseminated to the public. For an industry committed to accuracy, quality, and technical excellence, this would indeed be a perfect world. Unfortunately, the real world is one of fragmented information, and the media's mission is to gather all that information, determine all that is newsworthy, and disseminate it quickly in as objective and entertaining a manner as possible.

Environmental interest groups have known this for years. Their core membership is generally small and the news media can reach more people with their message than these interest groups could with any other form of information dissemination.

There are other reasons for their success. Since many members of these environmental interest groups come from the local community, they are not considered by many of the media as special interest groups, but rather as champions of the people. Unwittingly, agencies and their contractors reinforce this perception when they respond in a reactive, and not a proactive manner, to news stories. When the environmental interest groups set the agenda in the media, and their information is the first to be received, it is hard to change the media's or the public's perception that their role is just as important as those performing the cleanup work.

Public and elected officials also use the information provided by the news media to read the "pulse" of the community they serve. Clipping services for print, as well as broadcast news, are flourishing and some of their biggest clients are elected and/or highly visible public officials.

Since the primary mission of the elected or public official is to serve their community, it is important that they understand the issues that are important to the community. When the media does not understand, and therefore, does not communicate the position of the agency or contractor, the official has to base his decisions on limited information. It is not hard to figure out that those views will generally be sensitive to environmental interest groups which have successfully accessed the media with their message.

Furthermore, the media is educated by environmental interest groups as to the critical nature of their mission. Since there is little easily understood or available

information to refute this, the media then acts as a catalyst to generate a perception of urgency in the public view. Public officials, sensitive to public needs, respond quickly to solve the problem and to then access the news media to inform them of the resolution. Whether or not the urgent problem existed in the first place is not the issue. Because of the absence of easily available information to the news media to challenge the expressed concern and urgency, perception, and not reality, becomes the driving force behind the news story.

Summing up, it is clear that the media acts as a catalyst for public perceptions and opinions about radioactive waste cleanup because they are the information source the public turns to for its news. It is also clear that environmental interest groups effectively access the news media with their opinions about radioactive waste cleanup. Elected officials, sensitive to the needs of their constituency, depend on the media to reflect the critical issues in the community they serve, and at times react to the media's portrayal of a problem, rather than directing their attentions to the actual problem.

Unfortunately, those with the best, most accurate information about radioactive waste cleanup, the radioactive waste cleanup industry, are often missing from the picture.

#### **Responsiveness and Openness - Why Agencies and Contractors Come Up Short Against Environmental Interest Groups in Accessing the Media**

The following is a brief comparison and contrast between agencies and their contractors and environmental interest groups and their relative success in accessing the media. While it is clear that agencies and their contractors have the superior information, their methods of dissemination could be improved by taking a lesson or two from the abilities of environmental interest groups to access the media.

To make this comparison and contrast, one should analyze with what the media sets as its three fundamental rules; Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity, the ABCs, as you will, of effective journalism. One more should be added: Deadline, or the big D of the media. All four of these factors shape, in one way or another, the information the media receives, and its ultimate presentation in a news story.

**Accuracy:** Give extremely high marks for the agencies/contractors. All of their regulatory requirements and their technical disciplines demand nothing less than complete information and total accuracy. Environmental interest groups, on the other hand, are accurate within the frame of reference from which they communicate their message. Their information, however, generally identifies, but does not solve the problem at hand. In the limited capacity in which they speak, environmental interest groups are accurate, and sometimes, on a breaking news story, that is all the media needs or asks for.

**Brevity:** Environmental interest groups achieve very high marks for brevity. They know that a short statement that is interesting and quotable is far more likely to reach a media audience in a newsworthy story. Their viability as an organization is dependent on their outreach to the public.

Agencies/contractors are handicapped by the fact that their superior information is generally voluminous and complex, not easily reduced to statements that are short, interesting, and quotable. Thus, agencies/contractors must work twice as hard to make their statements short, focused, and in simple everyday language in order to meet this very basic need of the news media.

**Clarity:** Often times, agencies/contractors put forth the strong effort to disseminate information which is both accurate and brief, but fail to follow up and take the time with the media to ensure that the message is understood. These misunderstood communications wind up either not being reported in the news story or reported inaccurately. Once again, the environmental interest groups take the time to present a clear, simple message to the news media. While it may be based on limited information, it is, in its context, both accurate and brief, and if the media is interested, newsworthy.

**Deadline:** This is probably the greatest source of friction between agencies/contractors and the news media. Even if the information is accurate, brief, and clear in focus, it does no good to a news organization if it is delivered even one minute past their deadline. The deadly consequence of this is that the news media perceives that the agency/contractor that fails to respond cannot be trusted as a reliable and credible source when they are on deadline and will seek their critical information elsewhere, or just leave it out. Environmental interest groups respond quickly to news media because their small organization allows for that flexibility. Furthermore, their proactive approach in identifying environmental issues to the media generally prompts the news story in the first place, so no deadline has to be met.

Unless agencies/contractors can learn to be more responsive to these fundamental needs of the news media, they will continue to be frustrated in their efforts to access the media. Agencies/contractors must educate themselves about the media and understand their needs. Only then will they be able to educate the news media about radioactive waste cleanup.

#### **Educating Technical Staff About Media**

Engineers and scientists, due in part to the heavy emphasis in college of loading degree curricula with core subjects, and not encouraging that courses be taken in communications and journalism, generally have very little understanding of how the news media, or news organizations, do their job.

Thus, when the news media makes an inquiry, the general reaction is at first, defensive (what do they want?), and then considered, at best, an inconvenience to respond. Technical staff sometimes see no benefit in communicating with the news media. Excuses generally range from "they'll just report it in the worst possible light," to "how will it be of any benefit to my project?", to "I'm doing more important things now." The underlying reason may be that most technically skilled individuals believe that there is no way a non-technical person could ever understand the complexity



of their job and explain, in a short news story, what they went to school for years to learn.

Excuses aside, all of the above reasons are fallacious thinking, and must be changed for the following three reasons.

First, if the technical person, with the superior knowledge of the best available information, fails to respond to the news media, they will have denied their project any opportunity to proactively place their quality information in the news story.

Second, any accurate information presented from an organization, which appears in a news story, will result in a greater understanding by the public and the media of the difficulty and complexity of the project mission.

Finally, understanding is the key to overcoming opposition. A radioactive waste cleanup project has no broader audience than that which is accessed by the news media to nurture and develop this understanding.

Those are three positive reasons why technical staff should respond enthusiastically to news media inquiries. The potential negatives, which have been alluded to in previous sections, are too numerous to mention.

One way to educate technical staff about the news media is to take key managers in radioactive waste cleanup through a course or workshop in media training. A media training course should develop some understanding of how the news media works, its needs, and how news stories are put together. It should develop those communications skills necessary to get technical information to the news media in a manner that can be easily understood and presented.

At the Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project, the Department of Energy has proactively encouraged this type of training. Two such programs have been held since coming on the site in 1986. Every manager who has participated has come back with a working knowledge of the information needs of the news media and now see media inquiries not as an obligation to be fulfilled, but rather an opportunity to educate. This has not gone unnoticed by the media, the public, and environmental interest groups which have, on numerous occasions, commended DOE site managers and contractor personnel for their openness and candor in discussing the critical and difficult issues of radioactive and mixed waste cleanup.

### Analyzing the Media

The Community Relations staff at any site has a key role in media analysis. Their ability to analyze and prepare the technical staff for whatever situation they may be placed in, is critical to the project's community relations success in any program of public information and public participation. The following guidelines give an idea of the preparatory work involved in media analysis prior to starting up a community relations program. It is surprising that on even major radioactive waste cleanup projects, these basics of media analysis are not performed, leaving both the community

relations staff and the technical personnel handicapped in their efforts to access the media.

First, develop and maintain an accurate, up-to-date contact list of the local media. This requires more effort than just looking in local telephone directories and writing down a few addresses. It requires telephone calls to media outlets in the local areas. For the print media, names and phone numbers that should be included on the list are editors, reporters assigned to cover the project, and out of town reporters assigned to the project, wire service reporters, and specialty publications and periodicals. For radio, get the names of news directors, talk show hosts, and individual producers of local public service programs. For television, in addition to the name of the news director, it would also be helpful to have the name of the assignments editor, as well as specific reporters who might be assigned to cover the project.

Do not be surprised if this, in itself, prompts media inquiries. At WSSRAP, just getting the names of interested reporters and editors, prompted new inquiries, as well as major positive stories in several local broadcast and print media outlets.

Once this comprehensive list has been developed, it is time to go to the project's news clipping file, or if one has not been developed, to the local public library, to read past stories written about the project. Take special care to note what has been reported, how it has been reported, and where it has appeared in the newspaper. Names of some of the individuals on your media contact list could appear on some of the story bylines and will give an indication of that person's understanding of the project. Also pay careful attention to the public officials and individuals quoted in these articles because many of them will be the active participants in the project's community relations programs of public participation.

One note of caution about this research is to be sure and separate the news articles from the news headlines. In many newspapers, the editorial staff is completely separate from the news staff. This will sometimes cause some confusion as the editorial staff will write an editorial negative to a project while the news report in the same newspaper may be neutral, or even positive toward the project. Furthermore, headlines and story placement are a function of the editor, not the reporter. Relationships with reporters covering a project can be strained if they are criticized for something they have no control or responsibility for.

Once this initial research has been completed, the analysis can begin. Analyze what it is that the media wants and needs in information and respond to that need while fulfilling your project's mission to provide up-to-date accurate information to the public.

The most important need of the news media is to meet a deadline. The demands of deadlines sometimes force stories to be hastily written or severely limited in scope, sometimes missing important or critical information the public needs to know. Whatever a project can do to clarify or provide that critical information in a manner that assists the news media in meeting a deadline is not only

appreciated by the media for that story, but increases the project's chances of being called first when the next news story breaks.

Another way to help the news media is to have information organized in a manner that has a clear beginning, middle and end. The media presents its information in that way because the public responds to that concise style of reporting. Few stories are newsworthy enough in this age of information to be covered in detail on a day-to-day basis. Look at every opportunity to respond to media inquiries as a one-time chance, because in most cases, that is all the news media will report on.

Finally, the goal of the news media is to present a story that is interesting enough to be read, listened to, or watched, and as accurate as possible under the time constraints of deadline. Many times, technical staff on a project bristle at the media's cavalier use of words such as contamination, toxic waste, and radioactivity, when less inflammatory and more accurate vocabulary could be used. If the information is essentially correct, then compliments, and not criticism should go to the news media for use of these words since they are, in effect, encouraging more of their audience to become acquainted with, and gain an understanding of the project. If the information and use of terminology is wrong, then efforts should be made to educate, and not criticize, the news media.

#### Educating the Media

The previous discussions have centered on the value of accessing the news media to aid community relations goals of public information and public participation. Here are three major reasons why it is important to educate the news media that covers a radioactive waste cleanup project.

First, few reporters or their editors have the technical or scientific background to cover the complex issues of radioactive waste cleanup. Mostly, the news media's background is in the liberal arts, and not the sciences, and it is rare to find someone in the news media with a scientific background.

Second, the news media's audience wants news that is both informative and entertaining. The news media knows that issues of conflict and controversy are more attractive to their audience than a dry technical report or tables of complex data. The media's livelihood depends on their ability to respond to how their audience wants to be informed. The project's communications mission is to provide, through the media, information the public needs to know.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, public opinion is shaped by information received from the news media. If the media does not understand the technical issues they are reporting on, it is not hard to figure out why public opinion about radioactive waste cleanup can sometimes be based on misinformation.

How does one educate the media? It is not as difficult a task as one might think. Ask any editor what they look for in a good reporter and they will probably respond that they look for someone with a strong sense of curiosity.

Coincidentally, that is the same attribute necessary for learning. Here are just a few examples of how to educate the media and how they have been put to use for the positive benefit of the Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project (WSSRAP).

**Ready Availability of Site Documents and Information:** Since WSSRAP is an unclassified project, every document on the site is available to the public. A decision was made early on by the DOE, both at the site, and at Oak Ridge Headquarters, that documents available through FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) should, if requested, be copied and made available to news media as quickly as possible, to avoid the confrontational and lengthy process of FOIA. Many news organizations in the area have made use of WSSRAP's past and present site documents in their news stories, which helps to ensure that accurate, factual information from reports and technical documents are cited.

**Summary/Fact Sheet Availability:** Many times reporters are on deadline and do not have the time to read an entire report. This is the best time to prepare summaries and facts sheets which highlight the major points and purposes of the report. At WSSRAP, this occurred when preliminary groundwater studies detected the presence of chemical contamination which was not known before. By providing the major facts of the discovery through a news release and accompanying that with a map of the area where the contamination was identified, both local reporters and WSSRAP personnel achieved their goals. The news media got a breaking news story, from a credible and accurate source, and site personnel saw information from the site disseminated to the public in an easy-to-understand manner through the local news reports.

**Availability of Technical Personnel to Field Questions:** Sometimes the information is just too complex to be summarized in a one-page fact sheet or press release. Or it could be that a member of the news media wants to report on an issue that has not yet come to the forefront as a public concern. When this occurs, it is very important that key technical personnel be made available to the news media to answer questions. Many reporters perceive that the Community Relations/Public Information Officers are there not to provide information, but to control and manage that information, keeping the news media shielded from key individuals that direct the work on a project. The best way to overcome this perception is to make key people requested by the news media available for interviews. At all times, it is recommended that public information personnel brief technical staff on the nature of the news media's inquiries, sit in on the interview, always looking for opportunities within the interview where information can be clarified for a reporter's understanding and education. A large amount of WSSRAP's successful media relations have come from the DOE's directive to its personnel and contractors that responding to media and public inquiries are top priority on the site.

**Special Briefings Prior to Significant Events:** Many times there is forewarning about significant events which, if information is limited, could cause greater public concern



than is warranted by the event. This presents an opportunity to provide a special briefing for the news media. Generally the news media will respond favorably to this kind of briefing because they can take the time to learn about an issue, rather than coming in with a few facts and a pressing deadline. While these kinds of briefings have required a delicate balance and sensitivity to counterparts in federal, state and local agencies, WSSRAP's credibility as an information source with the local media has increased because their statements, their briefing materials, their information, is presented proactively to the media. If a significant event occurs on a project, and is reported by someone outside the project, that project suffers a loss of credibility with the news media, as well as being forced to play catch up by reacting to a breaking news story.

**Media participation in Training Programs/Education Workshops:** To tap into the natural curiosity of the news media, ask one of them to participate in a project training program or a specialized education workshop. Not only will this help develop an understanding by that individual of the complexity of the project tasks, but it will provide them with an opportunity to learn within the same frame of reference that the project trains its own personnel. At WSSRAP, a reporter was asked by a site technical manager to review one of their software programs for radiation education. The reporter not only provided an objective analysis for the manager on the program, but learned about radiation in the process, and reported with greater depth and accuracy on the relative risks of low-level radioactivity.

**Corrections of Misinformation in News Stories:** A general rule to follow is to develop a thick skin and as the old saying goes, "never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrelful." But that is not to say that one should never correct inaccuracies or misinformation in the news media. Rather, one should look at it as a mistake and seek to educate and inform, not criticize. When there is a significant inaccuracy, call the reporter and ask why that appeared in the story. If it was wrong information, provide the correct information. If there was a misinterpretation, educate the reporter on the correct interpretation. If it is a matter of opinion, let it drop. Remember that both technical personnel in radioactive waste cleanup and the news media have the same master, accuracy, and both must be accountable to that standard in their respective professions. WSSRAP's Community Relations staff contacts the news media about

stories to both praise and correct any inaccuracies. Early on, the inaccuracies were more frequent, but as local reporters learned more about the project, there were less calls for corrections and more for commendations. One way to correct a minor inaccuracy was not to run a corrected story the next day, but rather to correct the story before it was sent to the newspaper's reference files. This ensured that future stories would not continue to print inaccurate information.

## CONCLUSION

It is indeed a paradox when one considers how far the radioactive waste cleanup industry has advanced with new technologies and its abilities to clean up and monitor radioactive waste and how far behind it is in utilizing modern communications and the news media in educating the public which they serve.

The future is clear. More and more information will be disseminated by the news media on radioactive waste cleanup programs. To ignore this trend is to deny the radioactive waste cleanup industry an opportunity to present up-to-date information on their activities so that the news media and the public can gain an understanding of the complexity of their mission.

There is only one choice. Given that the news media is involved in covering radioactive waste cleanup, set aside the time for key individuals and managers on a project to guide and educate the news media through the highly complex process. The time invested in education of the news media makes the community relations goals of public information/public participation that much easier to achieve.

The Weldon Spring Site Remedial Action Project is a good example of benefits received in positive and accurate local news stories about a radioactive waste cleanup site when time, effort, and a firm commitment are made by DOE site managers, as well as the contractor, to provide timely and accurate information in an easy-to-understand manner to local, regional, and national media.

The sooner this kind of education process can begin on radioactive waste cleanup projects, the sooner an understanding can be reached of the industry's and the news media's very different, but very important roles in society; the industry's role of cleaning up radioactive waste and the media's role of reporting about it to the public.