Use and misuse of the information in the environmental field & industrial accidents

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Introduction

The Seveso experience marked the professional career of the author.
In the 10 years spent at the Special Office of the Lombardy Regional Administration, as responsible for the scientific aspects for the solution of the several problems posed by the reclamation of the area, FGU had the opportunity to examine the different aspects of information supplied to media and through media to population.
Several later experiences expanded the view of the complex problem, in each case the management of the crisis involved the relationship with the press.

The malformation danger in Seveso

The fear of the birth of malformed children has caused a number of procured abortions mainly flying to the U.K. where this practice was legal. The bitter discussion which followed took to the law on abortion in the Italian legislation. This has been the result of a stressful situation among people, increased by the political speculation.

The press indicated the name of the technical director as the main culprit of the dioxin accident. A Red Brigade commando murdered the techician ignoring that 10 July 1976, when the accident occurred, he was in holiday and had no responsibility in the toxic release.

Other accidents (USA, Germany, Lebanon, Italy)

In Times Beach, one of the several sites contaminated by a PCB oil with a high percentage of dioxin, the expectations of the hazard evaluation obliged the public Authority to respond to he media who where pressing the italian expert to have infomations.

In Hamburg the dumpsite had gathered wastes both from industrial and domestic origin. A little quantity of oily liquid, containing dioxin, was leaking from the big wastes hill. The population was in panic, mainly those who had gardens distributed around the dumpsite area. The factory responsible of the toxic waste was compelled to close immediately after the international experts' intervention as a conseguence of the pressure of the population.

In Lebanon a press campaign was accusing the Italian government of profiting of the civil war to dispose of hazardous wastes in that small country using it as a litter. The Italian Embassy has been threatened to be blown up with dynamite. The Crisis Unit of the Italian Ministry for the Foreign Affairs sent FGU to cope with the problem which heavily affected the image of the country.

The 'ship of the poisons' – according to a journalistic definition – Zanoobia moved around in the Mediterranean Sea seeking for a place where ten thousand drums of hazardous waste originated from Northern Italy industries, could be safely disposed of. When she arrived in the Genoa harbour the drums were reconditioned and transferred to the mainland to be treated. A moment of acute crisis occurred when the Captain of Zanoobia informed that the lower level of the ship might contain radioactive waste. Then this hypothesis resulted false but the media had already diffused it, worrying the population of Genoa.

All these experiences will be illustrated with dias in a comprehensive form.

Milano, 25 February 2002