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I Can't Hear You: Translating Coastal Science for the Public

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Abstract

During the summer of 1997 fears raised by an outbreak of toxic dinoflagellates in the Chesapeake Bay − specifically Pfiesteria piscicida − drove down seafood sales and caused public concern that at times appeared to border on panic. Scientific experts and governmental officials attempted to calm public worries, making reassuring statements that seafood was not tainted, and that the public had nothing to fear. These early statements were often heard with considerable skepticism, and resulted in accusations from fishermen and others that the government was withholding information or not taking the issue seriously.

Both scientists and governmental agencies became frustrated at the public's inability to "hear" them, and at the apparent ability of the popular press and television to capture public attention and arouse widespread concern.

The case of Pfiesteria serves to illuminate several key points about the difficulty of communicating science to a broad public, or to be more precise, a range of publics. Communications theory (cf. Grunig, 1997) holds that one-way, or "asymmetrical," communication often employed by governmental or corporate press agents does not go very far toward establishing trust or even effectively presenting information. A "symmetrical" approach to communicating with key publics, on the other hand, has a much better chance of benefiting from established relationships and leading to a genuine exchange of information.

Using the Chesapeake Bay as a case study, this paper explores the ways in which scientific experts and governmental agencies often fail to consider who is listening to them and how; and suggests ways of establishing more effective communications through the building of trust and confidence by developing more meaningful relationships and by openly sharing information and concern with key publics.