

# Culture of dispute and debate over

## Practical remarks

by Harald Klussmann

### Current situation

In the public, the topic ‘electrosmog’ is controversially discussed in association with mobile radio and electromagnetic fields. ‘Electrosmog’ is a catchword raising very strong emotion, as it touches on subconscious fears. In addition, science itself has come to heterogenous and – for laypersons – contradictory conclusions. The rapid expansion of mobile radio networks continues to prompt new discussion and dispute over the acceptance of mobile radio technology that is now used in Germany by more than 71 million people. Thus, the number of mobile radio users has far exceeded the number of fixed network users.

### Risk assessment – laypersons and experts

In the assessment of technological risks, experts lean on factors such as probability of occurrence and potential extent of damage. From the perspective of laypersons, these factors are virtually uncalculable. The consequence is a subjective assessment that often distinctly deviates from expert evaluation, as comparisons between risk assessments of laypersons and experts illustrate<sup>1</sup>. This is especially true of technologies such as mobile radio, which is “per-

ceived” neither through visible emission nor through other influences perceptible by sense organs. The feeling to be able to exert an influence on an alleged risk is crucial for the willingness of people to accept it. Among other things, this subjective influencing factor decides whether people are ready to take a risk or not. Motor vehicle traffic or smoking are examples of generally accepted risks of very serious consequence for thousands of men and women. The aspect of usefulness is crucial for normal citizens: If a technology brings direct advantage (or thrills resp. pleasure), people are more willing to accept a greater extent of damage.

A characteristic of the perception and the use of mobile radio is the fact that there is no clear association with effects. There is a huge time gap between occurrence of the alleged risk and a potential proven effect. This increases uncertainty and intensifies the call for “decisive action”. Typical is the publicly voiced demand for a “zero risk” that, logically, cannot exist and even less can be effected by intense discussion and dialog.

Consequentially, the “refusal” of industry to orient its action towards the “zero risk” and to opt for voluntary precaution measures until a “zero risk” is scientifically established, is interpreted by concerned laypersons as indirectly confirming the existence of a risk. Quite often, this is the basis of many problems in communication with regard to newly planned or existing mobile radio sites.



# risk discussion in the ‘electromog’

## Communication in an open society

Political officials of all levels, who naturally are also citizens, do not remain unimpressed by these controversies over factual or alleged risks. This is the reason why companies need adequate communication, as is generally required in an open society, to preserve their legitimation and their economic action radius. It does not suffice anymore to provide technological accurate problem solvings. They must also do their share in creating acceptance of solutions thought to be adequate. Against this backdrop, politics demand intensification of the discussion with citizens, based on clarification, transparency and participation.

## Partners of dialog

Five main actors are partners in the dialog with network operators:

1. politics and administration at different levels
2. national and international research institutions
3. the churches and their institutions
4. associations
5. citizens' initiatives.

The local focus of media interest is on citizens' initiatives, since they articulate fears and concerns of part of the population in the vicinity of mobile radio stations. While the dialog with the other four actors mostly takes place on an objective meta-level, the dialog with persons directly concerned and with citizens' initiatives quite often is rather emotional and



almost always related to a specific site. Experience actually shows that general discussion about mobile radio without relations to a specific site is of very low interest to citizens.

## Between evidence and emotion

However, the willingness to resist is growing as soon as mobile radio infrastructure becomes visible in the vicinity of one's own home. "Mobile radio use, yes, transmission masts, no – that is the motto of many people living in the vicinity of installations. Evidently, most people have no problem accepting the usefulness of their mobile phone, but reject the required technology in their vicinity as a safety risk and an arbitrary intrusion into their living environment.

No layperson has to have a detailed understanding of mobile radio network technology – as is eg true of the functioning of a modern anti-block system in order to be a good driver. Only when coupled with unconscious fears and insufficient or incomprehensible information given by station operators, deficiencies in technological knowledge become a communication prob-

lem. Subsequent protests then are often an expression of a massive loss of trust in the competence of participants, going hand in hand with a sense of powerlessness.

As mobile radio is a new technology, uncertainty arises, sometimes even fear and rejection. This includes also doubt with regard to reliability and social responsibility of politics, economy and the justice towards the general population. To create a new basis of trust in this atmosphere of distrust is therefore the ultimate goal of the dialog with citizens initiated by mobile radio operators. "The focus is on the trust in the accuracy of data and facts, the competence of those involved and fairness, equal opportunities, and openness between communication partners."<sup>2</sup>

## Can trust and credibility be created?

In practice, this task often proves to be difficult, but in many cases it can be solved. Credibility is especially important for creating a basis of trust. It is based on a subjective assessment of trustworthiness of companies, closely related to persons and what





they say. Normally, “credibility” is understood as a sense that, what a person says, very probably is accurate. High credibility is based on previous experience.

### Dialog or discussion?

The term “dialog” mainly refers to conversations in small groups in this article. It is generally characteristic for a fair dialog that all people involved share same eye level. The impression people have of the other is essential for their communication behavior. If the partners of a dialog, despite different opinions, feel that there is appreciation and respect, one of the essential requirements of successful dialog is met. Good dialogs allow to minimize potential conflict between the participants and to create a new, often improved basis for the relationship. Part of this is to accept the positions of others instead of “discussing away”. Moreover, the probability to find effective solutions is increased by adding the knowledge and informations of individual discutants.

Discussions, often taking place before an audience of several hundred people, may be part of dialog measures. But quite often they are contradictory to the original goal of dialog. Why is that so? Many discussions seem ritualized: The “company representative” meets the “mobile radio critic”, and the “concerned citizen” sits in the audience. All have come equipped with solid role patterns and expectations and rarely are disappointed. Involuntarily, many organizers promote this behavior insofar as they, in their sincere effort to bring together company representatives, mobile radio critics and concerned citizens, overlook that substantial results rarely are achieved by large panels. Here, every participant is striving to save face. People who frequently have been part of such events, know that authentic dialog often begins where people stand together drinking a beer or coffee after the event has been officially closed and the local press has gone long ago.

Therefore the question has to be: How can stereotypic behavior patterns that inhibit dialog be broken?

While a discussion (Latin from *discutere* = break up, take apart) is about separating, sectioning and confronting well-defended opinions, the goal of dialog is to explore communalities and to jointly search for problem solutions<sup>3</sup>.

In dicussion, we often see intensified polarization expressed in catchwords and simple solutions instead of joint reflection on complex relations and the common search for resolution. One of the most common vices is to indulge in overhasty and unchangeable assessments of environment and other people. Eventually, these constitute “reality”, which holds us hostage and prevents open discussion. From this perspective, the initial situation of a discussion panel is unfavorable, if there shall be conversation about different site options towards conflict resolution.

### Agree on rules

This is not to say that discussion should not take place, or without participation of companies. However, such events challenge organizational skills. The agreement on clear rules and an impartial moderation that may build bridges and possibly dampen excessive emotions, are part of basic requirements. At the start of each discussion goals should be agreed on and put on a list that will be checked at the end of discussion. What was achieved? What did not? This result should be documented. “Letting steam off” has a certain value – but leads nowhere in discussion. Participants of a panel discussions themselves can do much for the success of this type of dialog. It is highly recommended to show mutual respect: It is expressed in personal messages that must not insult others.

Concrete examples should be used to promote mutual understanding. Generalizing expressions, such as “never” and “always”, in turn provoke generalizing counterstatements. Constant repeating of old problems only leads to new controversy. The resolution of present difficulties is made even more difficult. There must not be generalizing critique of the behavior of

others – for generalizing critique catalyzes defense mechanisms where the self-image is in danger, and defence strategy in those that were attacked. But people will be ready to talk about individual behavior.

## Risks and limits of dialog

The risk of failure is generally inherent in dialog. The examples of bad or failed discussion will be far more than those of successful ones. The risk increases when participants instrumentalize dialog for their own goals, or if rules priorly agreed on are violated. More often, failed dialog is due though to a false assessment of the partners' goals or simply of their receptional abilities. If dialog fails, the principal willingness to discuss things should not be given up and signalled to all participants. A pause in dialog can be creatively used and be the stepping stone towards a new beginning.

## Summary

Dialog is a tool for creating understanding, and not for controversial dispute. It is not about maintaining own positions, rhetorical eloquence or enforcement, but about a search for communalities and agreement. Dialog requires critical partners and constructive, amicable critique, but also solid general conditions and commitments. It is some sort of probationary reflection. Who wants to do it in earnest, will profit from it. Positive experience shows that this is the right way to go.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup>see the study „Kind und Umwelt“, Munich, January 2004. The study compares in a ranking the risk perception of parents with objective risk estimates of science.
- <sup>2</sup>Thomas Jung and Olaf Schulz, Bürgerforum Elektromog 1999
- <sup>3</sup>see David Bohm, Der Dialog. Das offene Gespräch am Ende der Diskussionen (ed. Lee Nichol), Stuttgart 1998, at first: On dialogue. London/New York 1996



## Short presentation

Dipl. Ing. Harald Klussmann (58) studied Communication Engineering. His career began at the Mercator University Duisburg, at the Institute of Radio and Highest Frequency Technology. After that he worked with the industry. After several years at Marconi Instruments in Germerling, St. Albans (England) and Donibristle (Scotland), and then at Rohde & Schwarz, Munich, he went to E-plus 11 years ago. There he was director of department for network quality in Southern Germany until 2001.

As network expansion in Southern Germany from the start was met with the scepticism of part of the population, Klussmann also dealt with the issues of dialog and technology mediation in the public. Very soon this work was too much to be done on the side. In 2001, he therefore accepted a full-time position as a consultant for Mobile Radio and Environment at E-plus Munich. As in the years before, Klussmann gained much practical experience there in his dealings with critical dialog partners. A small part of this experience is reflected in this article.