

# Culture of dispute from the perspectives of an information manager



by Matthias Johannes, Regina Reichardt

**There is heated discussion presenting arguments either in favor or against mobile radio in the media; newspapers, the local press and even in television show of defenseless citizens, concerned physicians, and network operators in the role of profiteers. Catchwords are „electrosmog“ and „EMCE“ (Electromagnetic Compatibility with regard to the Environment). Talk shows discuss the need for mobile radio and address potential dangers. Ugly radio masts are shown, possible damage is cited. On the other hand, network operators are responsible for the provision of information about new sites – by hosting or participating in so-called informational meetings. How do these meetings actually work? And how does an information manager, as an „emissary“ of network operators, feel when he or she wants to do his/her work? To find answers to these questions we met with Matthias Johannes of O<sub>2</sub>, who does exactly this kind of work and who was ready to talk to us.**

# Culture

Mr Johannes, does it give you a headache to take part in an event where you not only are in the spotlight, but where you, in addition, are on the „negative“ side, i.e. the side of „money and profits“?

*The question suggests that people in general would be prejudiced against mobile radio. However, fact is that not more than 2 to 3 percent have this basic attitude towards mobile radio. It is the noise critics make that makes objective observers retreat mostly into the background. But I have to admit that, prior to an event, people tend to think that, as a representative of operators, I embody their interests. Initial skepticism vanishes though, as soon as I speak about my educational background and people see that, regardless of my occupational ties, I'm a normal person. On the other hand, I'm still a bit nervous prior to an event, even after more than four years of public relations work with regard to EMCE. But where else do you get the opportunity to explain the functioning of this fantastic invention to a broader public? Explain in the sense that, besides applications, also the technology behind it is made transparent, its multifold use and the need for this technology. „It's as simple as phoning“, people say. But this is not true of mobile radio technology.*

We all know that mobile radio technology is sophisticated and complicated and that special skills are required to present it in a simple, comprehensible manner to the public seeking information. Preparation of such events will strongly depend on local conditions and therefore vary across individual meetings. That's right. Preparations begin several weeks before the actual date of the event. Type, location, time and panel composition are vital for an objective, competent and purposeful information.

The role of the moderator should not be underestimated either. His impartiality and purposefulness are

*crucial for structuring highly emotional events and providing media with a platform for objective coverage.*

And what kinds of people do you meet there? What is the audience of such informational events like?

*It is always a challenge to get a clear picture of the audience and its composition. The actual status of information can be identified only in the course of the event itself. It is related to the different strata of population that are represented. But, initially, I act upon the principle that everyone who participates in such an event is willing to openly deal with the issues around the technology and wants to obtain more information.*

Meaning you think that the audience wants to obtain information on mobile radio technology?

*It is a requirement for dealing with the topic of EMCE to know more about mobile radio technology and its physical conditions: its cellular structure, related low power levels, the limited number of simultaneous phone calls and/or data services, the so-called lighthouse effect, the existing topography, and the legal framework – all this plays a crucial role in implementation of a new site.*

Do politics and municipal interest groups participate in these processes and can they exert an influence on the selection of the new site?

*The public is already involved in the siting process during the so-called communal consultations by its elected representatives. Generalizations about scope and kind of information that are provided to the public cannot be made. Individual cases differ too much structurally. It begins with general requests sent to the owners, the involvement of people living in the vicinity, churches, schools, kindergartens, municipal-*



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ities, etc.; then there are the big informational events involving several hundred persons.

However, the aforementioned parameters quite quickly show that variability of site selection within a defined search radius is limited.

Is it true that legal frameworks have a greater significance in negotiations with municipal agencies than for the population?

Yes, indeed. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the population at first does not know about adequate profiles of requirements and related regulations. In my view, more information is needed in this respect. This is the reason why the role of representatives of public authorities in creating trust is especially important.

Another question: It is not only kind of technology that is relevant, but also research and science which have to provide knowledge about established health effects of mobile radio technology, isn't it?

Of course it is. The difficulty with this is how to mediate knowledge properly, ie by corresponding publications and media coverage making the results accessible to the public resp. the population. Especially science carries much responsibility for the provision of adequate public communication. There is e.g. the need for comprehensibly prepared information on the current state of science that must not underestimate. What is pure speculation, what can we expect, what effects will there be on real life – these are very important questions, aside from the need for comprehensible presentation of the difference between proof, suspicion and evidence. For: „Nothing is so firmly believed as what we least know.“ (Montaigne, French writer and philosopher, 16<sup>th</sup> century)

(There were detailed articles in Newsletter 2/2004 and 3/2004 on „Presentation of science in the media – fiction and truth“, by Dr. F. Gollnick)

While possibilities of information have grown and the need for obtaining information is increasingly accounted for, the culture of dispute has changed. We asked Mr Johannes about this.

The broader public continues to welcome objective information. But, on the other hand, the phenomenon of „mobile radio tourism“ has grown in recent years. Thanks to wireless communication, the information flow among so-called critics has become increasingly „mobile“.

That means that mobile radio critics who publicly denounce the use of this technology use it themselves?

Yes, certainly. They use the technology, but they do not always opt for complete abolition, but sometimes trust in promises and prophecies given by extremely weird fantasy professionals.

There is also certain gullibility towards pseudo-science and sensational media, making objective information almost impossible.

In summary, what do you think of all this? What is your conclusion?

No event is like the other, and so it is always exciting to do this work. If I had on wish, I'd opt for critical discussion going in all directions, even if it does not seem appropriate all the time.

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