

Communicating Science Information Clearly

by Manuel Carmona Yebra

It happens every day: a journalist or a government official needs scientific information on a thorny subject such as dioxins or genetically modified food. They go online to look for help, and thousands of Web pages pop up in response to their query.

First, they find a long scientific assessment written in technical jargon by a research institution. Then, they come across a seemingly helpful industry report, but are unsure of its credibility because of the financial interests of the corporate author. Finally, they end up on the Web site of an advocacy group that offers a message that is overly dramatic, but at least comprehensible. By this time, the researchers' desire to obtain unbiased scientific information has faded in frustration, and their hope for a balanced article or informed political decision with it.

Fortunately, a solution is at hand. Since 2001, clear, authoritative scientific information on health and the environment has been available at <www.GreenFacts.org>. GreenFacts is a nonprofit organization based in Brussels, Belgium, devoted to communicating the scientific consensus on controversial topics such as genetically modified crops, climate change, and air pollution. In the words of Jacques de Selliers, general manager of GreenFacts, the organization "strives for a reasoned and well-balanced approach to scientific topics by publishing clear summaries of authoritative reports, in cooperation with international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the European Commission."

Communicating the Scientific Consensus

GreenFacts' sole purpose is to communicate scientific information. It does not lobby or engage in political advocacy; rather, it offers clear summaries of scientific documents on a wide range of issues—from fisheries and endocrine disruptors to ecosystem change and tobacco—free of charge to readers. The summaries are written in plain language accessible to readers without a scientific background. GreenFacts' goal is to help its

main audience—journalists and policymakers—engage in fruitful, informed dialogue on difficult topics and contribute confidently to decision-making processes.

In developing its summary documents, GreenFacts culls through a tremendous amount of scientific information, generally avoiding reports produced by organizations that may be influenced by political and financial interests and those produced by individual experts who may include personal views in their findings. Instead, GreenFacts focuses on documents that are produced by large panels of international experts and that reflect the current state of knowledge on any given scientific subject. For example, GreenFacts often draws on documents published by authoritative organizations such as WHO, FAO, or the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC).

Most of the documents chosen are extensive and are written in a technical language that only experts can easily digest. For example, the *IPCC Third Assessment Report on Climate Change—Summary for Policymakers* runs over 200 pages and is written in highly technical language. GreenFacts' summary of the report, in contrast, offers five pages of clear, readable text and easy access to both more details and the full source document.

Three Levels of Scientific Detail

GreenFacts' approach to presenting information is simple, yet innovative. GreenFacts uses a copyrighted Web-based system to communicate information in three increasing levels of detail.

- Level One presents a brief abstract of the paper's key topics.
- Level Two presents a more detailed summary of the same key topics.
- Level Three presents the source document itself, again broken out by the same key topics.

De Selliers describes the three-level structure like this: "Each paragraph can be expanded with a simple click, so journalists and decision-makers, starting at Level One, can read a short, clearly presented sentence to get the main idea, click to read more details

in Level Two on an issue of concern, and click again to verify the statements within the scientific source document in Level Three.”

GreenFacts’ process of summarizing scientific documents follows a strict validation scheme—including a scientific peer review. The process is managed by an independent board that ensures that the summaries are faithful to the source and are unaffected by politics or special interests. In addition, representatives from all of GreenFact’s member groups—industry, NGOs, and academia—are consulted before and during the process of summarizing documents.

“Our publication process may seem cumbersome,” de Selliers comments, “but it is essential, for it allows GreenFacts to maintain its credible position both in the eyes of the scientific community and with environment and health stakeholders who demand impartial, unbiased sources of information.”

Increasing Dialogue Among Stakeholders

From the beginning, GreenFacts recognized that progress in communicating health and environmental issues would need to be based on cooperation, solid scientific premises, and multi-stakeholder involve-

ment. GreenFacts was established in December 2001 with the help of Solvay, a Belgian chemical and pharmaceutical group. Initially, industry sources provided a significant amount of GreenFacts’ funding, but by 2005, they were providing only 40% of the group’s total budget. The remaining 60% is now covered by donations from international institutions, governments, foundations, and individuals.

GreenFacts was established in a period of a remarkable increase in stakeholder dialogue. For example, in 2002, at the United Nations Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, the head of Greenpeace International met with industry leaders to discuss what could be done to improve the world’s environmental and health prospects.

Building on this momentum, in 2003, GreenFacts organized a Brussels-based conference: Conveying Science into Policy. The event examined how science is communicated and how environmental decisions are made. It brought together approximately 100 representatives from nonprofit organizations, associations, industry, and government, all of whom took part in working groups that addressed three key questions: Who communicates science? What is the nature of environmental decision-making? How can governments and institutions improve the image of science?

GreenFacts subsequently organized two roundtable meetings at conferences on Communicating European Research sponsored by the European Commission. The first roundtable, held in 2004, focused on how to bring scientific information to nonspecialists. The second, held in 2005, focused on how to communicate environmental research in the media.

In addition, to further foster a spirit of cooperation, GreenFacts offers its members in industry, nongovernmental organizations, media, and government the use of GreenFacts studies and tools on their own Web sites and in their own communication strategies. One such tool, the GreenFacts Question Box (or “Q-Box”), provides ready-made HTML code that lets members easily integrate GreenFacts information on a particular topic into another Web site. This feature allows GreenFacts’ partners to improve the credibility of the information they provide by linking to a neutral source of scientific data.

Jacques de Selliers
GreenFacts General Manager





GreenFacts website provides easy access to faithful summaries in layman's terms and in several languages.

Science for the Citizens

In the wake of highly publicized health debates and health threats related to scientific issues ranging from genetically modified crops to stem cell research, the public has grown suspicious of scientists, industry representatives, and even academicians. But it is not too late to win back public trust. One way to do that is to focus on presenting scientific information in a clear, unbiased manner.

GreenFacts has embraced the challenging task of widening the dissemination of scientific information to citizens who want to know the why and how of an issue, be they professionals, journalists, decision-makers, or simply concerned individuals. Increasing the public's understanding of complex scientific issues will ultimately benefit our society at large. 🐝

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