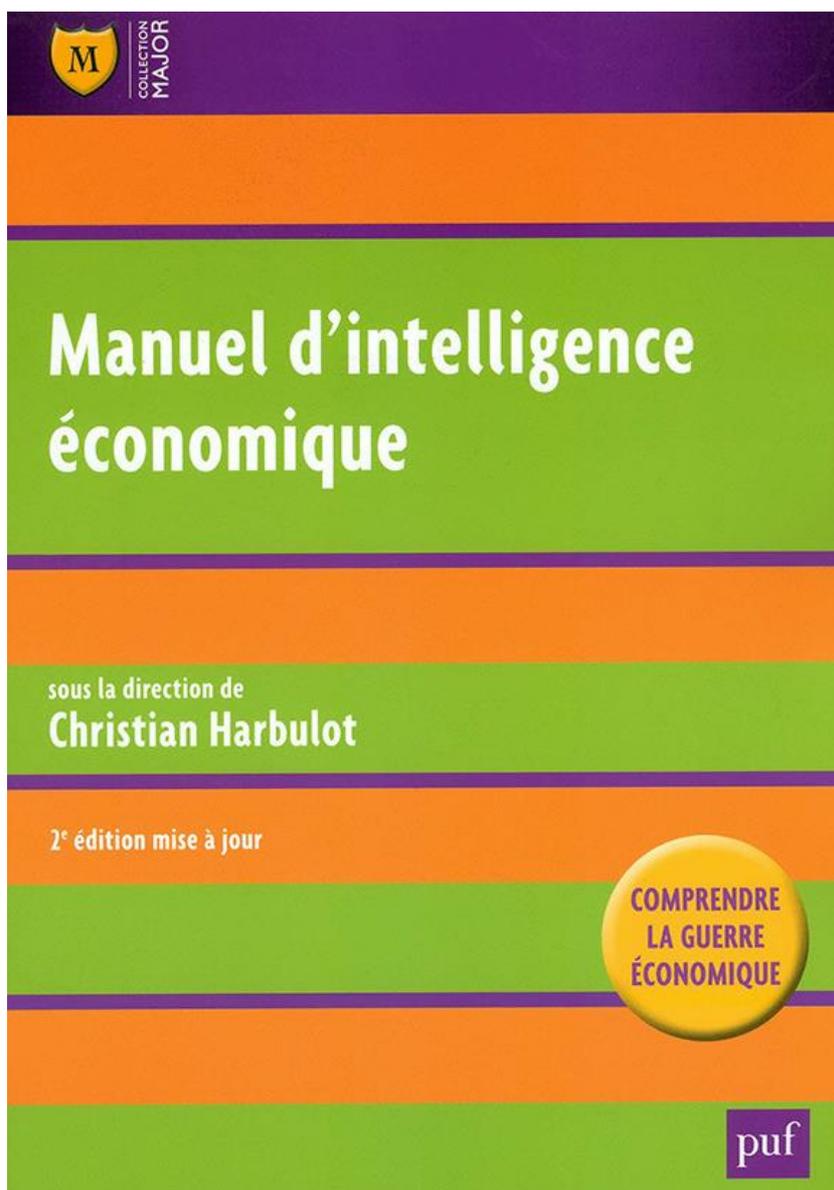




# Greenpeace facing a media trap

This case study is an extract from the second edition of the 'Manuel d'intelligence économique', published on August 2015, under the direction of Christian Harbulot.





Through the causes it supports (exclusively environmental claims), its means of actions (from lobbying to publicity stunt, always non-violent), its centralized organization and expertise, as well as its financial and political independence, Greenpeace is definitely a non-governmental organization (NGO) apart from the others.

Having learned very early the impact of image, it has professionalized its use to create its reputation of an inflexible environment defender. However, an institutionalized approach is added to this method, that is to say negotiation and expertise, which support and nourish the action of media.

But Greenpeace is facing a media constraint. As a matter of fact, the organization has the worry “to always preserve a historically decisive means: the image it conveys to its members, the general audience, and its political and economic representatives”<sup>1</sup>. Yet, this quest to reputation leads to a pernicious media process. The need to constantly strengthen its image of an upright and responsible organization can cause some drifts, not really used by its opponents.

## September 1971: a powerful action as founding symbol

The original action of Greenpeace determines the fundamental basis of the organization, and they still are implemented today. In September 1971, around fifteen activists are going from Vancouver (Canada) to the island of Amchitka (Alaska), where there is nuclear underground test taking place. This combination, unnatural at first sight, of US Army deserters<sup>2</sup> and sample of the American counterculture (Quakers, pacifists, hippies...) is the symbol of the NGO's subversive side<sup>3</sup>. To this team are added six Canadian media journalists, especially a team of the CBC television channel and a reporter for the Vancouver Sun. The group is then ready to be at odds with an entity more powerful (the American state), by playing on the media effect.

Bringing a television team is not neutral. The role of images as a transmission canal is understood by the activists. Image is directly going to the receiver (people in front of their television) and is less perverted by the journalist, as it can happen in written source. This need to directly target the individual - a potential financial and moral support - is still in action today. The control of media, and the informational sphere on the whole (container and content), is a recognized and worked on expertise of the NGO.

## The 1990's: the integration of the reality principle, moderated and calibrated media actions

Introducing Greenpeace as a sample of the protesting, or revolutionary, anti-globalism organization, can make us think of the Latin vision of the societal sphere: split into groups

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<sup>1</sup> Fréour Nadège, « Le positionnement distancié de Greenpeace », *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 54, n° 3, juin 2004, page 422.

<sup>2</sup> United States were then in the Vietnam war.

<sup>3</sup> INA, *Greenpeace : 40 années de militantisme*, 14 septembre 2011. Video available at this address : <http://www.ina.fr/contenus-editoriaux/articles-editoriaux/greenpeace-40-annees-de-militantisme>



more or less organized, and so with less chance to have an efficient systemic impact. This stereotypical analysis is refuted by split which occurred in the NGO in 1991. Indeed, the eviction of the upholders of “media action as the only effective strategy” - especially David Mc Taggart, Greenpeace International president since 1979 - validates the NGO position as a major player, leading actions of lobbying in order to make internal changes, and allowing “dotted media actions” when dialogue with the target is over and/or need to be known.

Thus, content work, less mediatized but as much redoubtable, stays the main activity of the NGO. Reports and lobbying actions add credibility to the process. The organization appears equal to companies and States, alternating confrontation and negotiation, in the creation of norms and of an economic system respectful of the environmental challenges. The NGO institutionalization is clear and “official” with the choice of the German Thilo Bode, as Greenpeace International director in 1995. As he said it himself: “*we are a political pressure group, not a hiker association*”<sup>4</sup>.

Greenpeace created an internal and external network of experts and scientists<sup>5</sup>, giving it the expertise and credibility useful to legitimate its proposals. If the target is not receptive to the message, Greenpeace then launch a media campaign, in the form of news release directed to *mainstream* media, and also via social media. The aim is to raise awareness and suggest solutions. *In fine*, the non-violent direct action is only the last solution to put pressure on the target, where the debate barely exists. Simultaneously, lawsuit can be initiated (for example, for the non-respect of rules). A few years ago Greenpeace also began a new kind of dialogue, by buying big petroleum companies actions (BP, Shell), inspired by what some *hedge funds* can do in the shareholder activism<sup>6</sup>. Parodies of advertisement or mimics of companies’ websites are also practices often used by the NGO.

The path chosen by Greenpeace (scientific expertise, lobbying, images, press relations...) is far from the usual view we have, that is a media buzz machine. The NGO is a very well-organized pyramidal structure. Each national entity is linked to the international headquarters in Amsterdam. The repartition of roles and the concentration of action and decision powers (and so the locking of information) in the hands of a few people is a guaranty of efficiency<sup>7</sup>. The organization and operational mode of the NGO drastically change the usual vision we have of society movement, combining volunteering and amateurism.

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<sup>4</sup> This evolution in methods leads to a change in permanent activists profiles: highly graduated, fields experts, using institutional and alternative (Interne) communication codes, sometimes knowing the administration and big companies apparatus...“People of files” are therefore numerous compared to the activists known from big actions.

<sup>5</sup> In Greenpeace France, individuals can become a lookout, and transmit local information concerning questions the NGO is working on.

<sup>6</sup> Roch Augustin, *Les hedge funds activistes : acteurs politiques de la mondialisation financière*, Editions La Bourdonnaye, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> A small number of executive directors have decisions taking power. From the person in charge of campaign to the activists seen in media actions, the professionalism, respect of rules, empowerment towards objectives to reach are the norm. In Greenpeace, association principles are upside down: permanent employees decide the objectives, whereas in a “normal” association, this is defined by benevolent.



Internal debates, federation of autonomous groups, dismissive delegates, collective decisions taken under dubious compromise, numerous claims, protesting and discursive actions... Those schemes of management proper to “French style” NGO are the opposite to a practical and naturalistic organization, with a focus on the protection of the environment and the emergency to do something. The pre-eminence of the action (not only through the media but also the lobbying) on the debate, as well as the legitimacy of the challenges (environment protection) are the framework of the organization. This vision is the opposite of the system legal principles - the illegality of powerful action - that the organization is fighting against<sup>8</sup>.

Efficiency is the main objective. Therefore, mediatized actions are realized through small groups (cohesion, motivation and efficiency) and not through huge crowd, too ordinary according to Greenpeace, to have an impact on the public opinion and companies/institutions. And so, police authorities, historically accustomed to the management of trade-unions demonstrations and which has nurture their know-how in terms of protection of CAC 40 big companies, are now in the haze facing subversive and secretly organized actions. The more important is the link between media buzz and precise speech that is leading the targets to always find justification, and then feel guilt.

This evolution of Greenpeace is not without consequences. Indeed, wanted to change the system by the interior means to develop its relations with enterprises and authorities, and give responsibilities to its actions and discourse. Indirectly, this also means to give credibility to its work, directed to its potential financial supports, almost exclusively individuals. The financial and political independence on which the NGO is inflexible, results in media obligation that can be synonymous to misconducts.

## Centrality of the image

Even though non-violent mediatized actions are minor compared to the investigation and lobbying work<sup>9</sup>, it is nonetheless fundamental identity element, not only used to shape the collective imaginary. On one side, mediatized buzz allow a visibility on the environmental challenges the NGO stands up for. On the other side, media actions also show the strength of the organization, as well as its reputation of an NGO that leads concrete actions. This renown is an intangible asset that can scare targets, recognized or potential, and force them to change.

<sup>8</sup> To Greenpeace, it is legitimate to launch media actions for the environment protection, because this objective takes priority over anything else. That emphasizes notion of the action legality as a judgmental criteria. Therefore, because the NGO supports non-violence, the opponent, calling a legal violence, is unsettled. The strong is then in a process of justification for the use of violence against the weak, using “soft” means - but illegal - and asking a legitimate question. See Fréour Nadège, « Le positionnement distancié de Greenpeace », *Op. Cit.*

<sup>9</sup> As Bruno Rebelle, Greenpeace France executive director from 1997 to 2003, reminds us, “confrontation actions represent 10% to 15% of our work time and are worth 20 to 25% of our budget”. Without doubt, the proportion has not changed a decade later. See de Ravignan Antoine, « Greenpeace, entre contestation et négociation », *L'Economie Politique*, 2003/2, n°18, pp. 86-96.



As well, media actions have to be analyzing like “advertising campaign” of the NGO, with goal to convert/retain supporter to donators, strengthening the financial independence of the organization<sup>10</sup>. Symbolic action, through its mediatized impact, is easier to “understand” for the population, more “sales-oriented” than the presentation of technical reports on the nuclear security or the stakes of climate change.

Regarding the operational mode, it has not changed since 1971. The mediatized action is realized with small groups, ten or so activists, increasing its effect. Greenpeace brand is at the front, through its fight against a company or state services, in a strategy of the weak against the strong in which the NGO is leading the container (place and steps, filmed images...) and the content (the cause, the message...).

The understanding by the journalistic field (TV, radio, newspapers...) is also essential, to it is added the Internet and the social media. Greenpeace asserts itself in its environment and shares images and analysis, freely accessed and at the heart of the action. Before, its strategy was to systematically target media, especially big international agencies (AFP, Reuters...). Nowadays, it is perfected by the Internet. When there are media actions, images and analysis offered by activists (through their smartphones, camera...) are centralized on dedicated websites (Facebook page, Storify...), and this in real time and easily accessed (without any journalist “deformation”). These images and analyses are then relieved by mainstream media. Faced with this cognitive and very offensive operational mode, the target answer is not good enough. For instance, when activists intrude into nuclear power station, EDF and authorities answer took several hours, and can be summarize to a simple terse press release with the prefect. The impact is therefore nonexistent; the message is not clear nor understood (when media decide to relay it...).

### **Greenpeace facing a “media obligation”, factor of drifts**

As Nadège Fréour said, Greenpeace financial supports and special means of actions - almost exclusively donation calls; mediatized non-violent actions - put two pressures of credibility on it<sup>11</sup>. Beyond convince (actual or potential) member that funds are used in an optimum way, the NGO also have to show political and economic leaders that it is a trustworthy and major player.

Nadège Fréour emphasizes the fact that Greenpeace avoids to be involved with other organizations - environmental or anti-globalism - not to dilute its message or to be linked with unnatural actions (misbehavior, violent demonstrations) but also, and this is the most important, no to lose its visibility.

However, this visibility constraint, the “media obligation” to exist, can lead Greenpeace to embellish results of studies or its position against environment damages. In the collective vision, the first action of Greenpeace in 1971 is linked with the end of nuclear tests in the United States, but they only stopped in 1992. Around the same thing, the media victory hides the fact that the action in Alaska was a failure: the nuclear underground tests occurred at the beginning of November 1971. Moreover, the action of Greenpeace is part

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<sup>10</sup> The NGO was the precursor of the professionalization of fund-raising, vital for this organization.

<sup>11</sup> Fréour Nadège, « Le positionnement distancié de Greenpeace », *Op. Cit.*, page 434.



of an American and worldwide movement against nuclear tests. The NGO is not alone against Goliath.

The use of media lever is tempting to the NGO, especially as a propaganda means. Yet in 1980-1990, Greenpeace honesty is questioned when the Icelander movie maker Magnus Gudmunsson showed the creation and falsification by NGO activists of images depicting animal cruelty<sup>12</sup>.

In 1995, Shell will to submerge the Brent Spar oil storage buoy, in North Sea, shows the NGO arriviste speech. Eager to claim the toxicity of muds and the presence of radioactive wastes inside the storage buoy, Greenpeace underlines the partisan side of scientists, commissioned by the British Government to evaluate environmental risks, as well as their lack of objectivity and guarantees in their diagnosis. The NGO conducts a media action with the boarding of the storage buoy, and the publication of its own analysis report, bringing out the unprecedented environmental disaster if it was submerged. The organization also calls for the boycott of Shell<sup>13</sup>.

But, a mistake appears in this scientific report<sup>14</sup>, Greenpeace publicly recognize it and apologize for it to Shell. But the NGO goes on with its speech, asking this time Shell to prove that the submersion will lead to insignificant damages. For Greenpeace, without any reliable data and knowledge of oceanographic system, this is impossible. As a result, the submersion will not only be a bad idea, but also intolerable. The speech, originally based on certainty of the expertize report, is *in fine* using the scientific doubts: prove us that what you are doing is irreversible and dangerous for the environment and the health of people (precautionary principle).

Greenpeace has been able to make its mistake into a counter-attack by anticipation, playing on the field of “*subjective, subversive, pseudo-scientific, representations and inconsistency*”, when Shell was developing an “*objective, concrete, factual and scientific*” speech<sup>15</sup>. The NGO scientific report, technically weak, nonetheless constrains the British oil tanker to enter into steady justification logic. The incompetence accusations, even disinformation, against Greenpeace are in the end underestimated because the public opinion see in the organizations excuses the sincerity of a legitimate fight.

A last example of the dubious means is about the tropical wood campaign launched in France in 1999. The academic Marie-Claude Smouts recalls that Greenpeace (and WWF) took available scientific information without adding any shade of difference or caution. And so, the NGOs discourse is spread by press agencies, then by ministries official speech,

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<sup>12</sup> He realized two documentaries on the NGO - *Survival in the high North*, introduced in Festival de Cannes in 1989, and *The Rainbow man* (1993) - in which he denounces the fact that seal hunting scenes are fake, with the consent of hunters.

<sup>13</sup> This boycott is well relayed in Germany, where the Greenpeace director at this time came from, and where the environment awareness is high.

<sup>14</sup> After the independent expert report, Det Norske Veritas. Brent Spar does not contain 5000 tonnes of hydrocarbon, as Greenpeace said, but more than ten tonnes of mud.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis, see: Infoguerre, *Greenpeace contre Shell*, décembre 1996.



even though the scientific mistake is proven<sup>16</sup>. Worst, scientists are relieved of their studies/expertizes, but also used to political and financial purposes. Marie-Claude Smouts even talk about disinformation via the monopoly of discourse instead of experts, and also a lack of discernment.

Thus, the media obligation experienced by Greenpeace can generate logic of “the end justifies the means”. Some people even maintain that the NGO development is characterized by survival logic, and it is probably the current driving force of the organization<sup>17</sup>. Those words echoed with those of Marie-Claude Smouts, who argue the environmental cause is an ideology and also a way of making a living. According to the academic, big NGOs are able to elaborate legitimate problematic and to make their own goals more important than universal interests, and in the same time discredit all the things that are not of their fact. And then ask the effective result question. *In fine, quid?*

### **A three-part work: argumentation, polemic, image**

It is interesting to read again the analysis of Gregory Dervill<sup>18</sup>, about the struggle between Greenpeace and the Service d'informations et de relations publiques des armées (SIRPA) (Information and public relations services of armies), during nuclear tests in French Polynesia in 1995-1996. Indeed, he reminds us that “the logic of advertisement” wished by environmentalists is opposed to the “cementing logic” of military, those are constrain to use the NGO ways to win the media battle. However, they also used strong actions (boarding of the organization boat, destruction of telecommunications material...), and this to be fully victorious<sup>19</sup>.

After a first muddled period, SIRPA was aware it could only challenge Greenpeace by simultaneously using the argumentation, polemic and image. The goal is not to stop Greenpeace but the images wave. For that, SIRPA played the transparency game and released popularized documents, technical expertise, images “ready to use”...as well as reversing the NGO questioning:

- Selective indignation NGO: why Greenpeace is not attacking China that is also running on tests? Why such inertia towards nuclear power plants in East Europe?
- Improper struggle: there are far more serious issues (at that time): Bosnia war and Rwanda genocide.

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<sup>16</sup> Smouts Marie-Claude, *Forêts tropicales, jungle internationale : les revers d'une écopolitique mondiale*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2011, page 119.

<sup>17</sup> Revue anarchiste antinucléaire d'après Fukushima, *GREENPEACE, ou la dépossession des luttes écologistes*, n° 3 (Pas de Sushi, l'État geiger), juin 2012, p. 25-31.

<sup>18</sup> Derville Grégory, « Le combat singulier Greenpeace-SIRPA. La compétition pour l'accès aux médias lors de la reprise des essais nucléaires français », *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 47, n° 5, 1997, p. 589-629.

<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Greenpeace won its bet: it broke the « not seen, not caught”, strongly present in the army and public authority mindset. For that, the NGO integrates boats of chosen journalists (big media, news agencies, televisions) as well as very modern communications devices (satellite phone).



- Greenpeace is an “against France” organization, devoted to Australia and New-Zealand, hiding economic purposes (pushing out France from Oceania). Question about its financing is asked.
- Greenpeace manipulated a bad informed opinion.

The goal is not to talk anymore about nuclear tests but about the legitimacy of the environmental organization to have a voice in the debate. As a result, message relayed by media changed. It is accepted that nuclear tests are required, realized in an all transparency way and that they do not have any effect on individual health nor on the environment. However, Greenpeace was quite successful. For instance, placing France in a defensive position, under diplomatic pressure, forced the country to reduce the number of tests (from eight to six). But this fight against SIRPA and the NGO shows that it is possible to reduce Greenpeace room for maneuver, through an information approach and targeting its most precious asset: its reputation, focusing the debate on its integrity and legitimacy. Twenty years later, some companies could be inspired by the example of the SIRPA.

### **As a conclusion: the question of Greenpeace successes**

Greenpeace give credibility to media action with perfect scenarios, through a professionalization of its activists, and giving them a clear speech to tell, symbolized by frequent reports and lobbying.

Alternating expertise and media actions that make it famous, Greenpeace shows an image of an inflexible organization in its fight for the protection of the environment, as well as the importance of its financial and political independence. Nevertheless, particular financing and means of actions create this media obligation that can appear very pernicious. Indeed, the main purpose of action is to show actual and potential donor that the NGO is active for its cause. As a result, logic “until the end” can be developed with an ambivalent discourse for the opponent. Despite that, authorities and companies find it hard to use these weaknesses and counter, in an effective way, the NGO.

It is also interesting to question the successes of Greenpeace. What are they? By taking the example of nuclear power plants incursion, Greenpeace want to demonstrate the security flaws of the nuclear energy production. But, is there an awareness of the population to nuclear risk? Or a fundamental change in the energy politic of France? Likewise, campaigns launch in the last two decades against the Arctic oil exploitation do not stop the development of this zone. Quid?

The professionalism of Greenpeace in its media campaign hides inefficiency to make the system evolve; this evolution is yet its main goal. But this assessment, which is personal and therefore can be debated, induces that the NGO has fallen into its own media trap, the one that commands to always do more with one only purpose: showing its existence and secure financial supports, mainly coming from individuals. The survival question of Greenpeace is as much important as the positive perception that is currently its own. But until when?



On the opposite side, this assessment reveals another one: the amateurism of companies and national public authorities to challenge the NGO discourses and actions. The non-violent illegality is not well-perceived and opponents carry on with denigration speech, showing the actions of the NGO are not only illegal but also unreasonable and dangerous for the safety of people, especially activists. For instance, to end intrusions in nuclear power plants, some are thinking of legal answer, depicting Greenpeace action not as a trespassing (like EDF), that is currently the case, but as an infringement of Nation superior interests. What can be the result, when Greenpeace sees it as legitimate to challenge the authority? The argument of irresponsibility of the NGO and its militants is obsolete, and it is necessary to find other solutions, particularly cognitive ones.

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