



National Aeronautics and
Space Administration

Jet Propulsion Laboratory
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Launch Approval Engineering

Risk Communication Guidelines

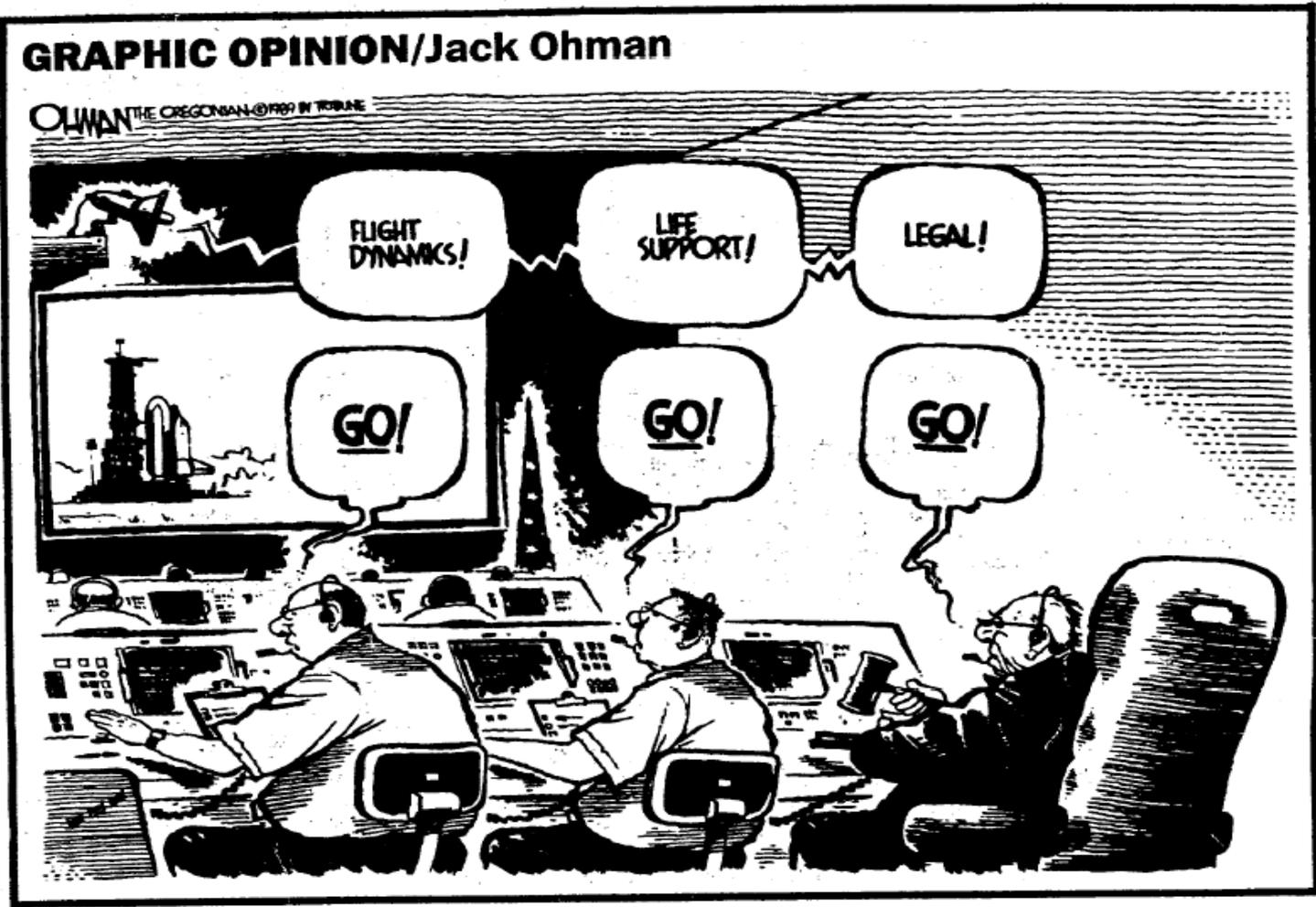
May 25, 2011

PRE-DECISIONAL INFORMATION: For Planning and Discussion Purposes Only



GRAPHIC OPINION/Jack Ohman

OHMAN THE OREGONIAN © 1989 BY TORIANE



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Risk Communication Overview

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- Risk communication planning and processes provide a coordinated approach for communicating about potentially controversial mission-related topics with the media, public, educators, legislators & governmental bodies
- The NASA Science Mission Directorate Risk Communication Plan for Planetary and Deep Space Missions (1999) is the guiding document for this activity. Projects covered are those that:
 - use radioisotope power systems, radioisotope heating units, and/or small radioisotope sources for instruments;
 - use any nuclear materials for power or propulsion (e.g., reactors);
 - return samples from space to Earth;
 - conduct experiments in pristine environments on Earth or in space; or
 - involve historic properties that have religious and/or cultural significance



Why Do Risk Communication?

- NASA charter calls for “widest practicable and appropriate” communication with the public about the agency’s activities and results
- Effective risk communications enables NASA and its partners to speak with “one voice” on issues that can be complex or frightening to some
- Helps create an informed population that is more involved, interested, solution-oriented and collaborative
- Three past NASA missions using RPS have been subject to litigation aimed at stopping them. Similarly, a lawsuit was successful in stalling the Outrigger Telescope Project, stemming from cultural issues
 - NASA’s compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) has been the instrument of litigation in all these instances
 - In all instances, NASA’s own documents were used by plaintiffs against NASA
- Programs and projects can minimize their potential legal risk and enhance their overall prospects for success by following a few basic guidelines and procedures

Risk Communication Guidelines



- Be very clear that no Final Decision on how **any** mission will be conducted can be made until after the NEPA process is complete and a Record of Decision has been published. Until then all reasonable alternatives will be considered equally
 - Use conditional language (The mission “would,” not the mission “will”) until the NEPA process is complete and launch nuclear safety approval is obtained
 - Current mission or project architecture is referred to as “baselined” or “proposed”
- Always consider the larger implications when discussing or comparing power and propulsion systems, whether solar, chemical or nuclear
 - Make no statements that imply that NASA, or its contractors, are unconcerned about mission risk factors or with public health and safety
- Speak only about RPS topics or project areas that you have direct expertise or knowledge about – refer other queries to your public affairs office!
- Discuss power source issues in terms of science and engineering factors, and overall mission requirements – not the “political environment,” etc.
- Expect public interest, involvement, dialogue, and debate
- Be sensitive to cultural differences and public science literacy
- Learn from other science & technology controversies

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More on Communications Effectiveness



- Do not extrapolate or hypothesize. No “from the hip” comments or observations. Refer the questioner to the appropriate designated spokesperson in public affairs or media relations.
 - Know that person’s name and contact info [for GRC, this is Katherine Martin]
- If you are not a designated spokesperson, do not say ‘no comment’; always refer questions to a source for an authoritative answer.
 - The response should be along the lines of: “I am not an expert in this area, for that you need to talk to _____. However, if you want to discuss (your area of expertise), I would be happy to discuss that with you.”
 - Or offer to have a spokesperson contact them.
- Do not ever downplay or belittle anyone’s fears or concerns, but indicate that NASA takes them seriously and will address their questions.
- Remember - if you are discussing any NASA program, you will be seen as speaking for NASA
- Reporters are always working (“off the record” does not exist)
- Know what messages you want to deliver before entering a public arena