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How to deal with a Public inquiry?

Views from Residents and deep geothermal energy projects Stakeholders in Alsace

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This communication'sgoal is to present the "How to deal with a public inquiry? Views from Residents and deep geothermal projects Stakeholdersin Alsace" project, ORA-Géo.This research programin communication science is conductedwithin the framework of the *labex G-EAU-THERMIEprofonde*, which is supportedby the University of Strasbourg and the CNRS.

Four public inquiries on deep geothermal projects in the Eurometropolis of Strasbourgwere held in the spring of 2015[1]. Thesewill be the main grounds of our investigations. What happened during these investigations and around them?How can this particular fieldreveal the different public perceptions on deep geothermal energy?Which spheresof representationwere mobilized bythe target audiencesin order to understand deep geothermal energyand its issues?How are these audiences and stakeholders (associations, politics, institutions, researchers) taking up the subject? Our research is exploratory and should open up on the development of a more ambitious project on perceptions and appropriation of geothermal energy by the target audiences.

Study Background

A public inquiry is an ancient and pretty traditional public consultation system.The legislation serving as its framework was rewritten and redefined in the environmental code in 2010, and the system is currently being reassessed as part of the administrative procedures' "choc de simplification" (simplification shock). It is therefore both a "traditional" system, with which the target audiences, and particularly the associations, are relatively familiar, but also politically fragile.Public inquiries are legally binding when major projects are being considered in urban planning, in classified installations for environmental protection or in projects likely to have an impact on the environment or the quality of life of local residents[2].Under Article L123-1 of the Environmental Code, a public inquiry "[...] is intended to provide information, public participation and consideration of the interests of third parties in the development decisions that might affect the environment.The comments and proposals gathered during the inquiryare taken into account by the developer and by the competent authority to make the decision".

[1] These projects involve the Robertsau district in Strasbourg and theEckbolsheim, Mittelhausbergen and Ostwald communes.

[2]Ref. http://www.cnce.fr/enquetes-publiques/ (accessed September 24, 2015).

Following the experimentation inSoultz-sous-Forêts in Northern Alsace and the implementation of the ECOGIproject in Rittershoffen, low and high temperatures geothermal power plant projects have increased in Alsace. This phenomenon is due in part to the fact that the Alsatian geological system is particularly favorable to the development of geothermal energy (network of fault lines and thermal anomalies).In addition, the political context, which is responsible for the energy transition laws, is favorable. The potential economic benefits are bringing different industrials to try and seize the opportunity it represents. In short, deep geothermal energy is, as of today, a strategic issue. Two companies are involved in the Eurometropolisprojects, on one side Fonrochefrom the private sector, and on the other ÉSG (Électricité de Strasbourg Géothermie), which has historically been involved in geothermal programs in Alsace.

Despite this favorable context, establishing this type of urban project is badly perceived by part of the population. A strong mobilization of local residents (French and German) against these projects was thus shown before and during the public inquiries. Yet arrangements had been made by both industrials and communal leaders to inform the public about these projects.And the (rather technical) documents associated with these projects were presented during the public inquiry,*de visu*at the city hall and on the DREAL(Regional Directorate for Environment, Development and Housing)website[3], were meant to be rather reassuring about the risks associated with the drilling and "cleansing" of the rock (induced seismicity, groundwater pollution, ...).However, opinions remained polarized. Despite the establishment of an ad hoc advisory committee and the organization of public meetings, a dialogue of the deaf (to borrow a sentence widely used by the players we interviewed) had undermined the interactions between supporters and opponents of the installation of a geothermal site within the Eurometropolis.
Following the four public inquiries, three investigating commissioners issued a negative opinion – in Roberstau, EkbolsheimandMittelhausbergen –, against only one favorable opinion with some reserves, which has since turned into a favorable opinion– inIllkirch-Graffenstaden.

Corpus and Method

We decided to work on three distinct grounds:

- Public Inquiries per se: advice from citizens and all the documentationthat was part of this consultation exercise.
- Local media, mainly*Les Dernières nouvelles d'Alsace* (DNA). These public inquiries have been a pretext for many articles and forums on the subject.
- Twenty interviews with all involved.

The Public inquiry is a field in itself since it is an ideal place for the expression of opinions.From a general point of view, public participationvaries from one project to another: some contributions (if any) in some cases; several hundred in others. Weak participation from the audiences in a public inquiry can be understood by stakeholders as a tacit

[3] On the webpage: http://www.alsace.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/geothermie-r415.html (accessed September 24, 2015).

acceptance of the project by the population. However,a public inquiry can become the place to express a very strong opposition to a given project, as was the case for three of the four inquiries on deep geothermal energy this spring. There was a rather high level of participation: a hundred given opinions for the Eckbolsheim and Mittelhausbergen sites, close to 900 for the Robertsausite (counting 750 contributions from Germany).

A public inquiry is also a place for exchange, where knowledge and projects are co-constructed, if not negotiated. Participants can communicate with each other at the town hall during the public inquiry, read the contributions of other participants, interact with the commissioner that tries to provide answers. This commissioner must also question the projects bearers and look for alternative expertise in order to confront them with the citizens' views when he delivers his report and his findings. This report - in combination with different expertise conducted in parallel –shall be a base on which theprefectural decision will be made.

As part of our study, we collected most of the citizens' views and all the documents related to the investigation. We thus have a wealth of material that allows us to grasp how an industrial values the potential of its project and anticipates the eventual critics. We can also analyze the construction and organization of the opposition to a project, the types of arguments that are put forward, the information sources that are mobilized, the stakeholders to which citizens or opponentsassociations refer to. Similarly, it seems important to understand how the commissioners manage to reconcile the different viewpoints (those from the experts, from the industrialists and from the public), to combine the quantitative (the mass of advices and opinions resulting from the inquiry) and the qualitative (the quality or scope of an argument). What is the weight and authority that they impart to the scientific and technical, economic, political or social arguments?

However, most of the opinions issued during the course of the investigation are polarized, mainly guided by the opposition to the projects. It is therefore appropriate to put these investigations back into a broader context and to analyze the other systemsused by the stakeholders to mobilize opinion. To do this, we undertook a parallel study of media discourse. How are the different projects discussed in local media (*Dernièresnouvellesd'Alsace, L'Alsace, Rue89,* ...), as well as on websites and blogs of the different stakeholders (associations and collectives of residents)? Who are the social actors that are put under the spotlight and thus legitimized by the media to speak about deep geothermal energy in Alsace? What are the arguments brought on by these actors? What place do they give to scientific and technical elements? How do they contextualize the projects that are on debate (reference to other geothermal experiments, political or economic implications etc.)? In this context, we also pay attention to the lexical field that is used,to the preferred themes and to the related reference fields, controversial or not (nuclear power, wind energy...).
For this part, we collected all articles published in the local media over the autumn 2014 - autumn 2015 period (i.e. the run-up to the public inquiry until the prefecturaldecision). A content analysis will be conducted on the entire corpus, supplemented by a qualitative analysis of the discursive strategies and the framing provided by the media (on deep geothermal energy and on the public inquiry).

The media selects information, especially in a logic of catering toits audience. Therefore, all stakeholders are not represented in the same way by the media coverage, sometimes they are even not mentioned. Similarly, certain topics are not addressed at all by the media: there is virtually no question onhow the public inquiries even work, or the place of deep geothermal energy in the global energy policy. In order to better understand the problem, we completed the data from the public inquiry and from the local media with a series of extensive interviews with the different stakeholders on deep geothermal energy: scientists, industrials and industry partners, associations representatives, elected officials, inquiry commissioners and experts appointed by the prefectural authorities.

The goal was to gather their opinions/analyzes on the public inquiry and the development of deep geothermal energy projects in the Eurometropolis and to highlight the imagery fields that they mobilize.How do they perceive and appreciate geothermal issues (their potential, risks, ...)? How are these different actorsconsideringto participate in consultative exercises and the resulting expectations (or non-expectations)? What representations do they have of the governance regarding techno-scientific projects? Who do they think should play a central role in this governance: scientists, politicians, industrials, local residents?

The analysis of these three distinct grounds will be made according to two main guidelines:

- the public inquiry, its uses, its representations, and what it produces into the public space;
- theimageryof deep geothermal energy, its perceived challenges and the discursive strategies used by the different stakeholders.