

## Nuclear Energy: The Reorientations of the French Public Perception

**Authors :** Aurélia Jandot

**Abstract :** With the oil and economic crises which began in the 1970's, it has progressively appeared necessary to convince the French "general public" that a use of new energy sources was essential. In this field, nuclear energy represented the future and concentrated lots of hopes. However, the discourse about nuclear energy has progressively seen negative arguments growing in the French media. The gradual changes in the perception of nuclear energy will be studied here through the arguments given in the main French weekly newsmagazines, which had a great impact on the readers, thus on the "general public", from the 1970's to the end of the 1980's. Indeed, to understand better these changes will be taken into account the major international events, the reorientations of the French domestic policy, and the evolutions of the nuclear technology. As this represents a considerable amount of copies and thus of information, will be selected here the main articles which emphasize the "mental images" aiming to direct the thought of the readers, and which have led the public awareness and acceptance to evolve. From the 1970's to the end of the 1980's, two dichotomous trends are in confrontation : one is promoting the perception of the nuclear energy, the other is discrediting it. Moreover, these two trends are organized in two axes. The first axis is about the engineering's evolutions, such as the main French media represent them, with its approximations, its exaggerations, its fictions sometimes. Is added the will to make accessible to the "general public" some concepts which are quite difficult to understand for the largest number. The second axis rests on the way the major accidents of the period are approached, including those of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Thanks to these accidents and because of the international relations evolutions, the ecologist movements and their impacts have progressively grown, with evident consequences on the public perception of nuclear energy and on the way the successive governments can implement new power plants in France. Then, in both cases, over the period considered, the language has changed, as the perceptible objectives of the communication, allowing to discern the deepest intentions of the newsmagazines editing. This is all these changes that will be emphasized, over a period where the nuclear energy technology, to there a field for specialists, bearing mystery and secret, has become a social issue seemingly open to all.

**Keywords :** social issues, public acceptance, mediatization, discourse changes

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