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## **NucNet – The World’s Nuclear News Agency**

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### **What is NucNet?**

Albert Einstein said that everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler. He probably wasn't thinking of NucNet at the time - but he might have been.

NucNet started up in January 1991. Its aim was both to increase the speed and volume of the world-wide nuclear information flow, and to communicate essential information in language that could be understood by the man in the street without compromising its scientific and technical accuracy.

At first, it was a purely European venture, which was intended to link up with similar networks in the Americas and Asia. As these did not materialise, NucNet has, over the last decade, gradually evolved into a truly global organisation.

NucNet has now established itself as the first and only global public communications venture in which all sections of the world's nuclear community have joined forces to work together successfully and demonstrate transparency. In particular:

- NucNet has helped increase the speed and accuracy of the international nuclear news flow.
- It has also contributed directly to a clear and marked increase in the quality and accuracy of general media reporting of nuclear issues.

NucNet today has two specific roles:

- To exchange news and other information within the world's nuclear community, for use by managers, executives and communicators in the nuclear field.
- To provide a balanced picture of nuclear by distributing news of interest to the public to national and international news media.

### **Membership system**

NucNet has national member organisations in some 46 countries, including more than 30 with nuclear power programmes. The only such country that is not yet part of the network

is mainland China. Each member organisation has the right to be represented on NucNet's governing bodies, the Board and General Assembly.

The national members are mostly 'umbrella' organisations. (The exceptions are the UK and Germany, where the main nuclear organisations are directly represented.) About half are government institutions - atomic energy commissions or ministries, safety authorities, etc. The rest are mostly national nuclear societies, fora, utilities or research centres. The geographical break-down is as follows:

REGION	NUMBER OF MEMBERS	% AGE OF TOTAL
Western Europe	12	26%
Eastern Europe	14	30%
Asia (plus Australia)	11	24%
Americas	7	15%
Africa	2	4%

Other organisations that are not eligible for or do not wish for formal membership may receive NucNet services as subscribers. Subscriptions are arranged either by the national member organisation or directly by NucNet Central Office.

### ***Information flow and distribution***

NucNet was founded on the principle that all network members are obliged to provide information about their own organisations in return for receiving similar information from elsewhere. While this principle has been 'watered down' over the years, as the network has grown to include more subscribers and other indirect recipients, the underlying concept of a 'free information exchange' remains central.

In most member countries, all sources of nuclear information are directly linked to the network. NucNet receives its news input from some 350 information suppliers at nuclear plant sites, utilities, research centres, regulatory bodies, ministries, etc. NucNet attributes each item of news output to at least one of these trusted sources.

The original method of news distribution was by fax. NucNet's current fax distribution list features more than 300 destinations, served several times per day. In parallel, NucNet has built up an e-mail service that now reaches some 350 recipients several times per day. Each recipient is free to choose the method of delivery.

Subscribers also have access to a searchable on-line database, containing all NucNet output for the past 10 years.

In addition, NucNet maintains a public Web site, including a special 'representative' news section that is up-dated on a regular basis.

### ***News output and classification***

News output is in easily comprehensible, non-technical English, aimed primarily at an audience of nuclear communications professionals and the general media. At the same time, a thorough internal review process ensures the accuracy and reliability of all output

from a technical point of view. News input is mostly in English, although some is in French, German and Spanish.

Typical turn-around time for urgent news is one hour from the moment input is received. Other input is processed according to urgency on an on-going basis.

There are four main output categories:

- News: The basic category for the majority of output, covering everything from incidents and accidents to major political, economic, social and technological developments affecting the industry world-wide.
- Background: Detailed background items, often related to topical news items.
- Insiders: Items of more specific industry interest, including details relating to the operation of the NucNet network itself.
- Business News: Major corporate developments, for instance strategic acquisitions/alliances, financial results, key management changes.

### *How NucNet is used*

Central Office holds regular meetings with national correspondents and other news contacts world-wide, to discuss ways of broadening and improving both the service itself and the ways in which it is used. Analysis of actual news flows and feedback from members is also a standing item on the agenda of NucNet Board meetings. The picture that emerges of industry use world-wide shows NucNet news is:

- Regularly fed into management information systems.
- Used at company headquarters and offered directly to individual NPP sites.
- Delivered directly to NPP visitor centres and posted on black-boards in central locations, i.e. company cafeterias.
- Used in nuclear journals, bulletins, newsletters and in-house publications.
- Handed out on the spot to participants in international meetings.
- Regularly translated into national languages for local distribution.

The service is also provided directly, free of charge and in personalised form to over 70 key journalists at the main international news agencies, many national agencies and a large number of daily newspapers in countries across Europe and elsewhere. In translated form, NucNet's output reaches a much wider range of national news media world-wide. NucNet has established a reputation for delivering relevant, objective and reliable information - both positive and negative.

Central Office and Board members monitor media pick-up of the network's output and have witnessed a noticeable increase in direct quotes in recent years. However, NucNet's real impact on media coverage of nuclear issues is more subtle, and cannot be measured purely in terms of direct quotes.

Central Office is often approached directly by members of the media for information on nuclear stories of public interest. Where appropriate, journalists are put into direct contact with NucNet's national correspondents.

### *Central Office*

NucNet's Central Office, in Berne, Switzerland, is managed under a service level agreement by ATAG Technical Organisations Ltd, a subsidiary of the international Ernst & Young network of auditing and business consultancy companies. NucNet is part of a larger department within ATAG that is specialised in nuclear issues, with a combined staffing level of about 20. It benefits considerably from the resulting synergies, in particular from the substantial in-house technical expertise of the Swiss Association for Atomic Energy, with which it shares offices and co-operates closely.

News items are compiled, written and edited by experienced professional journalists. Technical advice and quality assurance is provided by in-house engineers, scientists and translators.

NucNet has its roots in a feasibility study carried out by ENS in 1989-1990. It was established in late 1990 as an independent non-profit association under Swiss law. From 1991 to 2000, it was operated by ENS on behalf of the service provider under an agreement between ENS and NucNet, before entering a direct management contract with ATAG as of 1st January 2001. NucNet is completely structurally and financially independent of ENS and accountable to its own governing bodies.

### *Challenges for the future*

Broadly speaking, NucNet will have to deal with three types of future challenge if it is to continue to develop and grow. Let us look at these one by one:

#### 'General' challenges

- **Political:** Obviously, if moves to abolish nuclear in certain countries make headway, this could have an effect on NucNet's funding basis. However, new commercial imperatives notwithstanding - something I will come back to in a minute - there is still a realisation within the industry that an open communications policy will play an essential role in overcoming (or even pre-empting) such threats.
- **Reporting speed of media:** It is not the task of NucNet to compete directly with the general media or nuclear 'trade press' - rather, it is itself a key news source. It positions itself primarily on the basis of the reliability, accuracy and clear sourcing of its information. Nonetheless, network members expect information to be provided as rapidly as possible, and are bound to make implicit comparisons with other media. This poses an increasing challenge as NucNet operates under severe reporting restrictions - not least, the need to confirm all information with official sources. No question here of 'publish and be damned'. For this model to continue to work, the active commitment of network members to maintaining input standards - and speed - will be necessary.
- **New communications technologies:** This is a related challenge. When NucNet began, its fax service often provided the only publicly available source of information on key events. While this is still sometimes the case, information is today increasingly available in electronic form in something approaching 'real time'. A key challenge for NucNet is to respond to this change, by

constantly re-evaluating what it can offer network members that they cannot already get elsewhere. The key words are quality, accuracy and reliability.

### Challenges of industry transformation

When NucNet was set up, electricity market liberalisation had barely begun. Anyone associated with the industry is fully aware of the extent to which the landscape has changed in recent years, with wholesale - and ongoing - re-organisation not only of the utility sector, but of the industry as a whole.

This is truly transformational change - possibly the most fundamental upheaval ever in the electricity sector as a whole. For NucNet, as for the industry, it represents either a major threat or the basis of its future growth. The main implications are:

- **Narrowing financial base:** NucNet depends on financial contributions by members to cover its operating costs. A major consequence of deregulation and privatisation has been an ongoing wave of mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, alliances and general industry consolidation. In Germany, for instance, the number of nuclear generators has been halved - from eight to four - in recent years. The consequences for NucNet are obvious.
- **Cost-cutting:** A major driver of industry consolidation is the need to cut costs, as profits are squeezed by factors including increased competition, new entrants and greater buyer power. Communications programmes are unfortunately no exception, and the result is further pressure on all service providers - be it of fuel or of information - to cut costs in the same way. Again, NucNet is no exception.
- **Changing information needs:** NucNet began as a largely industry-internal service, with the primary goal of speeding up and improving the world-wide flow of nuclear news and information - in particular, ensuring the prompt and accurate reporting of incidents and accidents. Since then, it has both rapidly expanded its client base and witnessed radical changes in the information needs of even its original members. Nuclear operators, for instance, are now concerned primarily by commercial issues such as stranded costs, O&M costs, fuel cycle optimisation, revenue generation and plant life extension. NucNet has responded to these identified new needs by increasing the overall scope of its information output, including the introduction of Business News items. It will have to continue responding to evolving needs.

### The challenges of internationalism

- **Geography/representation:** NucNet was founded by a group of about a dozen, mostly West European countries. It has evolved into a truly international organisation, with members in nearly 50 countries, a West European (UK) president, and vice-presidents from Central Europe and the US. However, while the West European members still contribute well over half the total operating budget, the governing bodies operate on the original basis of one country, one vote. This is an obvious, and growing, imbalance, which is currently being addressed.

- Communication problems: NucNet, as a trans-national organisation, is by design an English-language service – a fact that has been fundamental to its subsequent expansion. However, while it is translated into many languages by individual members, the language barrier remains a problem in some cases.
- Cultural differences: A related issue, particularly with regard to public communications methods. While members generally recognise the need to promote transparency at a trans-national as well as a local level, the communications ‘culture’ obviously differs from one country to another. A key part of NucNet’s future work will continue to involve ongoing contacts with individual members, to discuss how they can best further their own communications aims.
- Loss of nuclear ‘community spirit’: This has been perhaps the most disconcerting phenomenon in recent years. While it may be an inevitable consequence of growing competition, it means that NucNet is increasingly the victim of the new - or renewed - imperative of commercial secrecy. NucNet’s ability to fulfil its mission in future will depend on continued recognition that the drive to commercial secrecy must not impede the common goal of building and maintaining public confidence in nuclear. The point may be banal, but it bears repeating: without public confidence in nuclear, there will be no nuclear revival.

### *Conclusions*

- To sum up, it is clear that the mature, adult NucNet is very different to the embryo information service that made its way into the world more than 10 years ago. NucNet has now evolved into a unique and genuinely global organisation with a clear sense of organisation and purpose. To paraphrase Voltaire’s famous comment about God: if NucNet did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it.
- NucNet is, above all, a network - and it is your network. We have invented it, nurtured it, and developed it - now it’s there for you all to use.