

# ESSACHES

---

Journal for Communication Studies

*Vol. 7 N° 1(13)/2014*

## Introduction

### Environment and communication – the multiple transformations of environmental issues

Environmental issues have been put upon the societal and political agendas mainly through the messages of concerned scientists (such as Rachel Carson, Ezra Mishan and the Club of Rome) and through the “green discontent” voiced by non-governmental organisations from the 1960s onwards. In the meantime, these environmental concerns and demands went far beyond mere agenda setting, as environmental issues became a constitutive factor in different societal spheres. First, environmental issues led to state initiated regulatory strategies, resulting in a variety of standards and certification schemes. In turn, this led to the institutionalisation of a newly establishing environmental policy domain with its own departments and agencies, building their own expertise community, practices and rules. Second, the environmental domain was among the first to pioneer with a variety of participatory approaches, which gradually resulted in new modes of governance in which state representatives called upon societal and economic agencies to take their share of responsibility. Thereby, and thirdly, environmental issues also affected the economic sphere, albeit varying from a constraining factor to a trigger and catalyst for innovation. The latter does not apply to a single industrial activity or sector. Rather we gradually realized that the environmental issue demands for a fundamental transformation of the techno-economic system, as forcefully represented in the claim and the efforts for a “low carbon society”.

In brief, environmental issues nowadays are ubiquitous and have gradually penetrated all spheres of society: the political, the societal, the economical. Even though the recent financial crisis may have delayed and weakened the public authorities’ role, both market and societal initiatives, in most cases under the umbrella of a quest for sustainability, assure the triggering role of environmental issues as pivotal in a purposely effort for societal change. These efforts are present at all geographical and governance scales, with initiatives at local level provoking changes at global level and vice versa.

This special issue of *ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies*, entitled “Environment and communication”, focuses on the processes of communication through which environmental issues conquer and gain their omnipresence. Even though one may largely agree on the increasing societal momentum over environmental issues, the processes of communication thereon cannot be conceived as linear or univocal. They are rife with disagreements and controversies. The gradual pervasion of environmental issues paralleled by varying conceptions and translations of their very nature, diverging ideas on their seriousness and urgency, and multiple and even contradictory strategies to tackle them. In other words, the adoption and incorporation of environmental issues in different spheres of society is mediated by ongoing communicative processes of multiple interpretations, adaptations and transformations.

The contributions to this special issue illustrate and unravel these transformation processes in different spheres: the transformation of civil society’s environmental concerns and debates, the transformation of environmental public policies, the emergence of so-called environmental economics, the reconfiguration of research resulting from environmental issues’ priority, etc. Not only do the authors report on the pervasion of environmental issues and their socially constitutive character. They first and foremost analyze how and through which processes environmental issues are defined and delineated, framed and biased, translated and transformed, and thereby accommodated, incorporated and absorbed.

Hence, it won’t come as a surprise that while the authors come from different theoretical backgrounds and apply varying methods, their contributions all build on a (critical) discourse analysis. Indeed, they all focus on the way different stakeholders define “their” environmental issue, frame it substantially and normatively, and do opt for certain strategies over others to tackle them. In so doing, the authors make clear where stakeholders’ problem definitions, frames and strategies do meet one another, give rise to negotiation or, in contrast, lead to further disagreement, or even to continued conflict. The cases comprehend such diverse issues as hydroelectric, coal fired and nuclear power, fracking, landscape policies, biodiversity, the participatory set up of an environmental observatory, sustainable port management, industrial agriculture, cross-national environmental information exchange and coastal erosion. The cases comprehend local as well as global levels, while some specifically point at the interplay between levels, e.g. the European and the local. Finally, the cases originate from multiple European countries: Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. All in all, they allow for a comparative perspective on the various ways environmental issues do have a constitutive role in societal changes at different levels and within different spheres.

In order to strengthen the comparative perspective, we present the contributions in four groups. Each of these groups focus on a more or less specific

societal sphere and its apparently corresponding set of transformations: the increasing role of environmental issues within the civil society, the pervasion of these issues into the market, the impact of environmental issues in the science-society-policy interactions, and the impact on state-initiated policy making.

While there is undoubtedly increasing civil concern, solidarity and action over environmental issues, there is also undeniable disagreement over their very character and seriousness. The latter obviously hampers concerted and largely supported civil action. Aurélien Allouche analyses the societal and political conflict over the siting of a hydroelectric power station on the Étang de Berre banks in southern France. The initial protest built on various arguments, ranging from environmental concern to NIMBY. Gradually, the protest movement constructed a common discourse, building on a more “universal” and therefore more largely shared set of arguments. The article illustrates how the social construction of this common discourse went parallel with an increasing societal support for the civil protest movement. From a comparable perspective, Mikaël Chambru analyses over 40 years of anti-nuclear civil protest in France, and illustrates the diversity and divergences within this movement. The author makes clear that and how the institutional constraints of the debate, as these were set by by the CNDP (“Commission Nationale du Débat Public”), in a way facilitated the various parts of the movement to find a common ground. In their analysis of the debate on fracking in Spain, Teresa Mercado, Àngels Álvarez and Jose Maria Herranz take the media coverage thereof as their starting point. They illustrate that the media debate had not been dominated by a cost-benefit approach as one might hypothesise, yet by a discourse in which environmental and health risks were predominant. In so doing, the Spanish media in fact contributed to the establishment of a community of societal protest against the application of fracking technology.

As stated above, environmental concerns increasingly pervaded the market and are, either à contrecœur or con amore, adopted and internalised, or blocked and perverted. Dario Colombo and Manuela Porcu build their contribution on three case studies, from Italy’s central, regional and local level respectively in which market agencies incorporated environmental concerns. All three cases display the transformation of environmental issues into rather limited cost-benefit approaches, through which environmental goals and demands were framed quite ambiguously. In the end, these transformations even risked to circumvent the environmental stakes. In a comparable vein, Gérald Lachaud investigates the role and function of the concept of biodiversity in the internet communication of 40 important French enterprises, all of them quoted on the Paris stock exchange. His discourse analysis emphasises the typical way these companies did interpret, framed and demarcated this concept. Then, of course, the question arises as to whether these interpretations could have affected the actual behaviour and attitude of these enterprises, or whether they rather disarmed the concept allowing economic stakeholders to get rid of biodiversity while embracing it.

The increasing civil concerns over environmental issues has, as stated at the very start of this introduction, been paralleled by an increasing concern among scientists. However, this does not imply that these communities and their respective environmental discourses easily converge and give rise to self-evident coalitions. Recently, we witnessed the emergence of new efforts and strategies to further the mutual understanding between these social and epistemic communities, mostly advocated under umbrella's such as "action-research", "participatory research", "transdisciplinarity" and related concepts. In their contribution, Denis Salles, Bruno Bouet, Maja Larsen and Benoit Sautour present an illustrative case of co-production of research in France's Bordeaux region. The crisis in the oyster culture facilitated the option for a co-governed research platform and programme. From their analysis of this science-society interaction practice, one learns how technical, managerial, natural sciences and democratic discourses compete, and what efforts were put in place to overcome and bridge these divergences and conflicts. From a similar perspective, Anne Bergmans, Frédéric Vandermoere and Ilse Loots analyze another participatory initiative that attempted to bridge between scientific, civil and political communities in the port of Antwerp, Belgium. Again, one sees diverging conceptions on what a sustainable port is and should be, and what indicators should be defined and observed to assess the strategy towards it. Gradually, however, conceptions and indicators were commonly shared, leading into some kind of "sustainable port community".

Finally, then, a set of articles addresses the way public policies are affected by environmental discourses and, in turn, the extent to which these policies indeed contribute to a societal change towards a more environmentally friendly society and economy. With the controversy over so-called mega-stables in the Netherlands, Lummina Horlings and Jules Hinssen illustrate the ongoing debate on the impact of the agricultural industry on the environmental quality in general, and on the potential and actual role of technology thereby in particular. While some regarded technology as the key factor in decoupling economic growth from environmental pressure, others were far more skeptic and looked at mega-stables as yet a new step in the industrialisation and in fact "denaturalisation" of agriculture. Sietske Veenman and Duncan Liefferink address a quite different aspect of state initiated regulation: with two environmental policy domains that thus far are hardly constrained by any European regulatory initiative, airport noise pollution and soil pollution, they elaborate on the role of informal and voluntary cross-national communication. The latter took place in venues where experts, be it state representatives or experts from the air industry or NGOs, met and discussed their respective approaches. In so doing, they more or less spontaneously had built a common discourse as to how to tackle these problems. These voluntary mechanisms of exchange seem as important as the formal and established ones we most often think of when it comes to cross-border communication. For their part, however, Edouardo Basto and Laura Centemeri report on much less effective communication: taking integrated coastal management as a policy domain and taking Portuguese coastal erosion as an object

thereof, they observe an almost complete lack of communication between these two levels. Local people, while clearly stakeholders, were not involved in any policy development, whereas the policy developers use a discourse that is strange to local people. While non-implementation is a well-known phenomenon, this contribution highlights the role of completely divergent discourses as a major cause thereof.

In conclusion, all contributions to this special issue deal with the multiple transformations of environmental issues. They all illustrate how these latter issues pervade and spread into our civil society, our economy, our scientific practices and our politics. Throughout these processes, the environmental issues at stake continue to be discursively translated and transformed. In some cases, these translations help to bridging different spheres and communities and to pave the way onto a shared discourse and action. In contrast, however, other cases illustrate how environmental issues might be reframed and demarcated in a way that blocks any further communication and action. It is up to the reader to draw conclusions on the conditions that facilitate the former and the latter outcome respectively. With an environmental issue that is increasingly associated with and even embedded in yet another discourse, that of sustainable development, the question arises as to what extent this latter framing has opened or closed new communicative opportunities.

*Pieter LEROY and Marie-Gabrielle SURAUD*

