

# Public relations and lack of transparency in the environmental debates

Review

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## Abstract

We often hear that this century is about information, but is it information or disinformation, we will see it below. Once one could knock on the doors of our institutions and get the information by quoting the source, or by writing "from internal sources". Today, the institution is a closed door for journalists. There are no journalists who go to get the news, but the news is served to journalists through "communication experts". The door "opens" to the journalists only when they are persons who have proven that "do not write bad things" about the institution. For years, our institutions have been employing in public relations Media Advisers, Communication Specialists, spokespersons, a whole supporting staff to communicate with the public, but very often for issues of great interest to citizens there is no information provided. Why is this happening in more than two decades in Albania? Environmental issues are in many cases directly related to the citizens, but they are not disclosed to the public, either through the media or public hearings, so that the community understands the importance and feels less pain for a certain decision. In Albania, is it that decision-makers do not understand how important it is to communicate with the public, or are they afraid of communication? This was the case with chemical weapons. No one explained to the people the benefits and disadvantages of that deal with the US. The government does have all the means of communication to exhaust this kind of conversation. If people were informed about the methods used, maybe that deal could be viable, always if people were persuaded about that. The same thing happened with the Municipality Entertainment Corner. The Ministry of Environment itself had been notified of such intervention in the park. No mentioning was made from the Municipality's until the public suddenly saw in the media that they the work had started. Somethin similar happened with the Law on Waste. While all the experiences show that the more open and honest a minister or a government are, credibility and popularity increases. Despite efforts to hide information, lack of communication becomes "an impossible mission" at this time of technological boom in the field of information. In institutions, there is an army with PR and highly articulated people that have the ability to activate a campaign of clarification and sensibilization of the public, before things happen. When things occur, it is very difficult to clarify. Thus, the public's trust is lost little by little. Today, in the concept of sustainable development, we are talking more and more about the participation of local communities in decision-making. Public hearing before a decision-making is set by law, but such hearings are either formally made or not made at all. Meanwhile, the Public Information Law provides a set of sanctions on employees that impede public information, but this law is not recognized by citizens or communities. Only journalists have started to use it in order to provide material for their investigations. Information is credibility and this relationship is not placed only by posting achievements every day, but by listening to the concern, even of a single individual.

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**Keywords:** Environment, Public Relations, information, institutions, media, communication, decision-making

## 1. Introduction

We often hear that this century is about information, but is it information or disinformation, we will see it below.

Once one could knock on the doors of our institutions and get the information by quoting the source, or by writing from internal sources. Today, the institution is a closed door for journalists. There are no journalists who go to get the news, but the news goes to journalists through "communication experts". The door "opens" to the journalists only when they are persons who have proven to "not write bad things" about the institution. In Albania, for journalists, it is often used the term "mobile microphones", and it's a pity.

For years, our institutions have been employing in public relations Media Advisers, Communication Specialists, spokespersons, a whole supporting staff to communicate with the public, but very often for issues of great interest to citizens there is no information provided.

The Media Advisers in our institutions "produce the news" in all its forms: press release, official word from the minister, and edited video (where certain parts that are not good to seen by journalists or the public are removed), and then they are distributed in the media by uploading the relevant link in emails. These news accounts for nearly 80 percent of our news editions or newspapers. George Orwell says: "Journalism is printing what someone else does not want published; everything else is public relations"

## 2. Who runs the debate for environment issues?

As in any other field, the debate in the field of the environment is lead by this army of "Media Relations and Public Relations Experts", employeeed in our institutions. This army, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, dictates the "policies" not just of the institution, but of the leader, the politician who leads the institution. Pierre Bordieu says<sup>1</sup>: "It is true that there is political interference, political control (which is particularly exercised through appointments to leading positions), and especially at the moment when, like today, there is a waiting army and a very eager race for positions in television and radio, and the tendency towards political conformism is high. People are self-censored, whether consciously or not, without the need for someone to ask for it. But in a few cases, "this army situation" gets out of control, and this often happens in debates in the field of environment.

Environmental issues in many cases are directly related to citizens, and when a public- interest decision starts becoming a reality, civic revolt and media debates starts, and the situation is difficult to keep under control. But, in most cases, these debates do not have their starting point from a television chronicle made by a journalist, but by civilian revolt driven by civil society. since addressing an "environment" issue needs a lot of work, journalists often work with "ready-made ideas". Bourdieu says: "They work with ready-made ideas; Flaubert's ready-to-use ideas are general common ideas but are also the ideas that you've got before therefore their perception is not a problem at all ". Bourdie explains that if we are antagonistic in the media, then the dismantling of common, ready-made ideas starts, and construction begins to demonstrate such ideas, and here is the real communication, but the media are afraid of this communication, they

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<sup>1</sup>Piere Bourdieu "On television and media", Belina Budini, Polis Unniversity, 8, Winter 2009

are sufficed with "fast food" culture and thought. Let's go back to environmental issues, tackled by the media.

In order to avoid all media debates and negative feedback from citizens, or social wounds, the Law on Information contains a legal obligation that public hearings should be organized for every public - interest decision.

In cases where an environmental issue triggers debate, it enters the media agenda, the news edition, and becomes the subject of evening shows. But there is another danger. When environmental issues enter the "agenda" of the media, we note that our media aims to resolve disputes, while the role of the media is to highlight disagreements, not to reduce or resolve them, as here we face another problem "the media pressure" that Bourdieu<sup>2</sup> explains. "Through the media acting as an information mobilizing instrument, a perverse form of direct democracy is installed, which is not distanced from the urgency, the pressure of collective passions, which are not necessarily democratic, and all this happens because of the not so autonomous logic of the political field ..... thereby the journalists by not keeping the necessary distance to reflect, play the role of the one who blows the fire".

Today, in the concept of sustainable development, we are talking more and more about the participation of local communities in decision-making. Public hearing before a decision-making process is set by law, but they are either formally made or not made at all.

However, to "save" this media communication (since legal and political logics have been created precisely to escape such a logic), the "mechanism" of public hearings is legally established, which is an information and widespread social communication, whose emerging remarks should be reflected in decision-making, which rarely happens. In this case, public administration ensures partial communication, violating the right of information, circulation of information and the right of communication.

But it should be understood that the right to information (which is provided by a public hearing) is different from the right to communication, which is the circulation of this information and its reflection in decision-making. Decisions with an impact on the environment are not thrown into the public, either through public hearings or through the media, so that the community understands the importance and feels the least of the pain of that decision. In Albania, decision-makers still do not understand how important it is to communicate with the public or they fear communication with the public?

This was the case with chemical weapons. No one clarified to the people the benefits and disadvantages of that deal with the US. The government has all the means of communication to exhaust this conversation. If people were informed about the methods used, maybe that deal could be viable if people were persuaded. Same happened with the Law of Waste, same with the Municipality Entertainment Corner, same with HPPs and so on. Why this fear? Many would say that "an open procedure" would clearly show corruption, but beyond this is the fear of facing something new that you are not used to. Mounier deeply explains in his book *Personalization*<sup>3</sup> "The problems of the organism and the human problems are inseparable: the great test of the century will certainly be linked with the avoidance of the dictatorship of the technocrats, of the right, or of the body, which forget the human; but it is not easy to get a connection between the

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<sup>2</sup> Piere Bourdieu "On television and media", Belina Budini, Polis Unniversity, 8, Winter 2009

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Mounier "Personalization", ISP&Drita 2000, Tirana 2006, page 130

two issues. Some tend to build an economy in their view of man, but behave like the first carmakers who apply their horse carriage image to a structure that is trying to find its shape".

### ***2.1 Law on Waste – the case when the debate is lead by the bussines and civil society***

Something similar hapenned with the Law on Waste. A debate that lasted for years and our screens turned involuntarily "into public hearings" where interest groups threw their theses. The law was approved and annulled several times with different "constraints" and "concessions" and finally reapproved with "some changes". So, after all, this nearly 10-year-long debate was "won" by the business with the help of politics<sup>4</sup>. The Law on Waste was approved and there was no media coverage like in 2010-2013. Civil society was alone in its struggle. Bourdieu<sup>5</sup> writes: "It is a horrible circle of controversy that makes you run after the scoop. To be the first in dealing with or transmitting something, they are ready to do almost everything, and precisely because everyone alike strives to pass on to others, to stand before others and to do otherwise, end up doing similar things, the pursuit of exclusivity, which in other fields produces originality and peculiarity, in this cases brings about uniformization and banalisation. This hectic, unusual quest may have political effects, as much as direct political interference or self-censorship inspired by fear of loosing positioning.

And so journalists, when the "war" becomes lengthy and "loses" the interest and curiosity, they let the politics win. Along with the Law on Waste in 2015, green light was given for three incinerators in the triangle Tirana, Durrës, Fier. Residents of areas where incinerators are set up have been constantly protesting and this is reflected in TV chronicles, civil society, AKEP<sup>6</sup> continues to make meetings and statuses on social networks but these actions have not been raised at the level of a debate, they are reflections of common - place events of the day. According to Emanuel Mounier<sup>7</sup>, "The economy can finally solve its problems solely in the perspective of politics, which has a duty to formulate them according to ethics".

### ***2.2 Granting of permits for construction of Hydro Power Plants (HPPs)***

In order to understand who runs this debate we can take as example the lase case about granting of permits for two HPPs in the Osumi Canyons. While for HPPs in the Valbona National Park or other areas, protests have been made by residents, associations, sensibilization performances including public figures, the case continues in the courts without any response from the Government. Meanwhile, the construction of a HPP is canceled, exactly one of HPP's in Osum. This problem came out for the first time in mid-February. A local business<sup>8</sup> damaged by the construction of two HPPs, after having filed a complaint with the open portal the "co-governing" of the Prime Minister, brings the issue to the investigative show "Fiks Fare", along with all the documentation, including documents exchanged within the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and the National Agency of Protected Areas, since HPPs are in the Protected Area. Reaction comes from a former deputy of the area, exposing objections within the majorance.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gazetatema.net/2016/11/01/meta-meets-representatives>

<sup>5</sup> Piere Bourdieu "On television and media", Belina Budini, Polis Unniversity, 8, Winter 2009

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LevizAlbania/videos/531767713963112/>

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Mounier "Personalization", ISP&Drita 2000, Tirana 2006, page 113

<sup>8</sup> <http://top-channel.tv/2018/02/07/shkelja-e-dyfishte-me-hec-et-akzm-ka-mosperputhje-te-vendndodhjeve/>

Immediately thereafter, the Minister of Tourism requests the cancellation of permits for the construction of two HPPs (the file including MT's opinion, is approved by the Ministry of Energy), because the Ministry of Tourism has other projects in that area, related to tourism and rafting school building, and in the midst of the debate, a reportage for this business, was published by the Ministry of Energy website, which has granted the HPP permission initially. Here it is clear that the business close to the Minister of Tourism and the Environment has requested annulment of the construction of this HP, using all media channels. This is the business that initially filed the complaint on the portal of the Government, and the same one that was presented all the documentation of the opposing party, the HPPs on the show. The ethical question is how has this documentation reached the complaining business?

Further an 'Opinion' sequence on this topic was organized, where the parties shared their thoughts concluding that the permits for these two HPPs had to be canceled. Even, the Prime Minister reacts against the HPPs. However, after that the Ministry of Energy, the authority granting development permits, brings only one of the HPPs to the Court, claiming that one was in a protected area and the other at the border, while the environmental impact of both in the Protected Area is the same. On July 31, 2018, the Minister of Tourism and Environment<sup>9</sup> gave a triumphant announcement that the Administrative Court took the decision to ban the construction of the HPP in the canyon of Osumi. But whilst all media without exception introduced the news as a win of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment, only Top - Channel presents the key - players in inverse, failing to air the briefing from Minister Klosi and presenting the news as court news won by the Ministry of Energy. This is the typical case of directing the environmental debate from business to politics. No one entered into details and asked why was the other HPP not brought before the Court?

### ***2.3. Institution are keeping information from each other.***

The same thing happened with the Municipality Entertainment Corner. The Ministry of Environment itself had been notified of such intervention in the park. No mentioning was made from the Municipality's until the public suddenly saw in the media that they the work had started. While all the experiences show that the more open and honest a minister or a government are, credibility and popularity increases. Despite efforts to hide information, lack of communication becomes "an impossible mission" at this time of technological boom in the field of information. In the framework of the Law on Transparency, it is a legal obligation that any institution discloses the documents it drafts. The National Procurement Agency had published on its website all the documents for the tender for the construction of the entertainment corner (children's playground), including a master plan, clearly marking the establishment of a bar-restaurant building. The ACP published the CRT's decision and the remarks made, where one of the remarks, the "Achilles heel" of the case was the lack of an environmental permit. At this moment, the institutions, with all the efforts to delay the delivery of an answer, come up against one another. "There is no request for environmental permission by the Municipality," says ACP ..... and this was the subject of the media editions of that day. This is the case when "public hearing" is done by the media, not by the institution.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52cSNsEeLjM>

## **2. Removing attention from "environmental debates" and producing propaganda news in this area**

In institutions, there is an army with PR and highly articulated people to make campaigns clearer for the public before things happen. But they are focused on reflecting on day-to-day activities in propaganda. But when events happen, it is very difficult to clarify. Thus, the public's trust is lost little by little, while "environmental issues" are hidden. Meanwhile, the Public Information Law provides for a set of sanctions on employees that impede public information, but this law is not known to citizens or communities. Only journalists have used it to provide materials for their investigations.

### ***2.1 Professional status of public relation***

In recent years, public relations is increasingly being recognized as a management discipline. Professionalism in this area is becoming more and more evident over the last decade, with an ever-growing tendency.

It seems that 2018 will be an important year for the professionalism of public relations, through joint efforts on a number of fronts.

## **3. Debate has moved to internet**

Institutions are communicating where the public communicates, on social networks, but one is only served "good news". This is something obvious but often forgotten. Meanwhile, debates on environmental issues are developed in social networks by civil society and ordinary citizens. Facebook has a powerful and ever-growing platform of services, including Instagram and WhatsApp. Any post, click or comment we leave on a social media platform leaves an audit trail.

### ***3.1 Changes in the course of work of institutions' officers***

Public relations operations have become more transformed into traditional media operations over the last decade. The difference lies in the fact that public relations practitioners do not have a certain hour to answer an issue.

As mentioned above, the skills, technology and workflow used in the media and in public relations are converging. People often pass from one channel to another. If there is a change in rhythm. The media works through 24-hour cycles, while public relations usually follow the rhythm within the institution. But this is changing day by day. Institutions are realizing that they need to work in real time if they want to be part of the online communication.

### ***3.2 Leadership is becoming more and more social***

Officers who are serious in their decision to run a modern organization in 2018 will undoubtedly invest in their social media. Ten years ago, such profiling meant targeting general or business media. Modern media today is more likely to seek support in the optimization and content of social networks.

Each passing day officers are aware of the great potential of social networking as a tool to engage directly with a variety of players, including civil society, employees, parallel institutions, subordinate institutions, the majorance and the opposition, and to the simple citizen. Each actor publishes and disseminates his ideas by thinking of the whole process as a means of building his own social capital, which is the most powerful means of learning and developing public relations.

We see the leadership that aims to be present with its own status in social networks, in the group of friends of its "big family". Nik Couldry<sup>10</sup> says: "This family, after my suggestion, is "present", so I have a whole spectrum of media-supported paths through which individuals groups and institutions put into circulation information but also representations about oneself with the broad intention to support a public presence".

We have an ever-present leadership at the same time in all channels, the associated presence "as Couldry said. According to him, <sup>11</sup>"The demand to be "available" shapes an easily recognizable, emergent, practice of early media consumption, based on interpersonal communication, as a clear distinction between mass media and inter-personal media."

Political actors have adapted to the features of media events to create a new type of symbolic policy, as Couldry would say.

Leadership aims to create fame and positive fame, seeing it as a growing capital. In this way, the "arm of public relations" aims to distribute only the good news, and to show the leadership and the institution that he leads as the "resolver" of environmental issues and these cases are usually small issues that are of interest to the public and do not produce debate. Leadership communicates through classical and modern media, social networks by serving their own news, making propaganda in view of creating a positive image and gaining a growing audience. But not always things are easy. Occasionally this beautiful landscape is disrupted by "debates on environmental issues," where lack of information is clearly revealed.

Leadership and the executive forget that information is credibility and this relationship is not decided by posting every day achievements but listening to concerns of a group of people, or a single individual.

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<sup>10</sup> Nick Couldry, *"Media, Society, World"*, Virgjl Muçi, Albanian Institute of Media, Tirana, 2011, , page 72

<sup>11</sup> Nick Couldry, *"Media, Society, World"*, Virgjl Muçi, Albanian Institute of Media, Tirana, 2011, ,page 80

## 4. Conclusions

Debates in the field of environment are governed by business, although civil society is up against this and the citizens' revolt has been present.

The political class has always been alongside the business and rarely forced the public administration to revoke decisions firstly in violation of the law and secondly to the detriment of the ordinary citizen. Politics fails to provide a sustainable development of the industry, protecting the environment.

Media has been used as leverage for debating, some have simply mimicked these "interesting" debates and mostly followed the politics messages in these debates by ensuring the "sustainability" of their business while the journalist is censored and self-censored.

## References

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