The Role of Communication Media in Socio-Environmental Conflicts. Insights from the Case of the Basque Country

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In recent decades, certain environment-related issues have come into the public eye. This article aims to analyse socio-environmental conflicts from both a democratic and a communication policy perspective. Given that these socio-environmental conflicts are the response to public policies, this article seeks to study the role played by the media in shaping them. The study focuses on the Basque Country, where many socio-environmental conflicts arise due to the implementation of public environmental policies. The methodology includes quantitative analysis using the data obtained from conducting a press analysis, and a qualitative approach using information obtained from in-depth interviews and the analysis of documentation. The results suggest a communicational and democratic deficit in the socio-environmental conflicts analysed, since the media do not help to build public opinion in a dialogical and dialectical way. To address this, we need a more diverse field of communication beneficial for environmental issues, so that we can work on information, considering the perspectives of all actors and the main topics of discussion. Environmental issues should go beyond traditional representative policies, inviting a broader range of actors in debates.

Keywords: socio-environmental conflicts, media, democratic quality, public opinion, environmental policy, environmental communication, Basque Country.
Environmental issues, problems and conflicts are increasingly space and importance in our society and especially in the media. In other words, interest in the environment and policies has increased. These are issues that have gained prominence in our social life and as a result, citizens have a demand for information on environmental issues. However, little or partial information on the subject limits public debate on environmental projects. As a result, this lack of public debate facilitates the possibilities of generating socio-environmental conflicts.

In the Basque Country we find another outstanding feature. As a result of the implementation of environmental public policies (Crespo, 1999, p. 1; Beristain, 2010, p. 24; Martínez Palacios and Barcena, 2012, p. 39), there has been an increase in socio-environmental conflicts. Empirical data presented in different studies (Barcena et al., 2003, Bergantiños et al., 2011) confirm that there are a large number of socio-environmental conflicts in the Basque Country.

OBJECTIVES

This article is based on the analysis of productions of environmental policy information strategies. The general objective of the study is to know how information is collected and produced in environmental conflicts: through what channels it is dispersed and how it affects the agents involved in the socio-environmental conflict. In the same vein, the specific objectives we aim to explore in this study include understanding where and how information regarding the production of energy and transport infrastructure policies is generated in connection to the material sample we are utilizing. The study aims to identify the information, discourse, and discursive strategies channelled from different sources in two specific socio-environmental conflicts. In other words, we will analyse the characteristics of the information strategies that arise in these socio-environmental conflicts, both from institutions and political parties, as well as from companies or groups within civil society.

In short our objective has been to analyse the information and communicative dimension of socio-environmental conflicts from a socio-political perspective. To this end we have carried out two cases of study of socio-environmental conflicts: the High Speed Train, specifically the New Railway Network of the Basque Country and the plant of Fuel-oil Reduction Unit of Petronor located in Muskiz, Biscay, also known as Coke Plant. At the same time we have chosen the written press as the object of study to carry out a thorough analysis of the information.

Our main hypothesis is that clearer information management can allow relations between economic actors, politicians and social movements to be placed in parameters that are more appropriate.

MEDIA AND SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

The media plays a vital role in disseminating environmental information and constructing our attitude and behaviour towards the environment, which makes
the work carried out by the media decisive. Hannigan (2006, pp. 79-94) highlights the role of the media and journalists as creators of news crucial for the social construction of socio-environmental issues. Thanks to the latter, most people become aware of environmental information —either through the public realm or through political manipulation—, which would otherwise go unnoticed. In other words, without media coverage there would be very few options for environmental issues to enter public discourse and the political process. Lederach develops further this idea by explaining that the media do not merely disseminate new issues but also formulate and shape themes (Lederach, 1991, pp. 6-7). He argues that the goal of the media is to provide unbiased information and to inform the public, although in a critical situation the concealed function of this task may be to create a larger framework for understanding conflict and the actions by agents within it. In a similar vein, Macassi has underlined the specific influence of communication and the media in socio-environmental conflicts (Macassi, 2009, 2011, 2015). According to him “currently the dark light of the dynamic of struggles is the role of communication and its agents in socio-environmental conflicts” (Macassi, 2015, p. 118).

Furthermore, Anderson explains (1997, pp. 107-135) in order to understand the significance of the definition of environmental risk and conflicts it is necessary to analyse who produces this definition and how. She argues that experts play a very important part in the definition of conflicts, as they are often the ones who produce the initial description of the issue at stake. Research on the coverage of new environmental issues as conducted by Anderson has revealed that official sources (specifically government departments and scientists) are increasingly capable of attaining media coverage, which becomes an excellent opportunity for them to become privileged stakeholders in environmental conflicts.

1. **Providing visibility**
When the media report on a conflict, they furnish it with a public dimension: conflicts appear on the media agenda and thus they become “public”. On making citizens aware of the issue, they facilitate options and dynamics to communicate these concerns within the public realm. Hence, the role played by the media within the public domain is especially significant whenever the role of mediation and negotiation is taken into consideration as social agents capable of influencing public decisions about the environment (Cox, 2006, pp. 18-20).

2. **The media channel demands and positions**
The media space is one of the tools deployed in order to know, disseminate and highlight the position held by agents in a conflict (Echave *et al*, 2009, p. 211). The media become one of the main spheres for explaining the different positions in the conflict. It is the stage used by actors involved in the conflict to express their interests and their stances. As Macassi (2015, p. 119) outlines, these motives are apparent in the case of social agents in minority, that is, when they are in a weak position to reach the government. In these cases, the media becomes the only channel for these agents to enter
the decision-making sphere. Likewise, those agents participating in the conflict will utilize the media in an aim to gain both influence over public opinion and legitimacy and to promote currents of opinion in favour of their objectives. In the same vein, Strohm (1999, p. 59) explains: “Leaders of conflict groups may set those media to gain attention, create and reinforce an image of credibility and mobilize resources such as time, money and commitment for group members and sympathetic others”.

3. **The media frame the conflict**
   This function, known as *framing*, has a direct relationship with framing theory. This theory focuses on how the information is framed; that is the importance of the framing used by the media regarding public opinion and the influence on the meaning given to public issues by those receiving the information. In research into *Framing* (Entman, 1993, Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, Scheufele and Tewskbury, 2007) the initial framing of the issues is outlined as being of great significance. The way the conflict is first presented will affect the public perception of the conflict and consequently the options for the resolution of the conflict. Entman outlines that framing not only defines the issues but also presents the underlying causes behind the issue, making judgements on the sources of the issues and proposing solutions to resolve the issue (Entman, 1993, pp. 51-58). This way, the framing employed by the media when writing the news affords both social perception and causality. As interpretive schemes that we use to assimilate external reality and generate thoughts, both are analysed “thanks to the isomorphic relationship that exists between them” and because this relationship “is also created through frames” (Sábada *et al.*, 2012, p. 110).

4. **The media change the interpretation of conflicts**
   As outlined previously, the media provide visibility to conflicts, channel the positions and demands of the stakeholders and frame the conflict. As a result, they change the interpretation of the conflict. The media does not merely frame the conflict with news but also defines the issue, adds causality, provides value judgements and stereotypes the stakeholders (Macassi, 2009). In other words, the media defines the “public image” of the conflict. Entman (1993, p. 52) states: “The media selects some aspects of reality to reinforce their explanation, subsequently they encourage a specific definition of the issue, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and a recommendation for the resolution of the conflict”. Therefore, the media do not only generate a vision of the news but also organize discourse to guide interpretation, cause, consequences, and recommendations.

5. **The media influence the dynamics of conflicts**
   The media influence the evolution of socio-environmental conflicts by defining the public image according to Strohm “through selective processes, they may accelerate, slow down, clarify or redefine conflicts” (Strohm, 1999, p. 60). Essentially, the media can play a useful role in the evolution of conflicts.
When outlining the role played by the media in conflicts, some authors outline how, by providing information on the actors in the conflict, the media also “intervene” in the conflict (Botes, 1996, pp. 6-10). Basically, this exterior intervention changes the dynamics of the conflict irrespective of the aims of the media. This way the media are part of the conflicts and often the work they carry out in conflicts is a form of social intervention, seemingly similar to the work done by intermediaries and facilitators (Botes, 1996, p. 46).

On analysing the conflict, they identify the stakeholders participating in the conflict and they frame the two sides in the conflict. Moreover, they analyse the underlying reasons for the conflict, what type of issues are created and the possible outcomes. As occurs with intermediaries and facilitators, they publish all viewpoints. Yet on doing this work, normally they are based on a two-sided reality, that is the media analyse reality using black and white parameters, instead of demonstrating the different agendas (Hieber, 2001, p. 131).

Apparently, there are only two sides to the information: one version and another version negating this version. Hence, good information is not what pays attention to complexity but just what simplifies the conflict into two opposing versions. As Yankelovich has stated (1991, p. 75), this approach tends to omit the intermediate positions of most citizens.

6. **The media is the stage for the conflict**

Through the media, socio-environmental conflicts are made public. On gaining visibility, they have the opportunity to influence the sphere of decision-making and this way through currents of opinion they also influence citizen’s choices. Castells (2009) outlines how communication becomes power. The person communicating most and in the best way wins the symbolic battle and the conflict is the driving force in this symbolic battle.

Power has a part to play in the communication network and all agents take advantage of the opportunity to communicate. Subsequently, there is the increasing presence of a “media policy” that is creating politics through the main media. This way the media becomes the stage for the conflicts.

The visibility of socio-environmental conflicts is not only the responsibility of the media and journalists but, as has been outlined above, they play a significant role within the issue. Often what creates the conflict is not the project itself but the silence existing around the implementation of the project, the covering up of information and the “lack of transparency” (Aguilar, 2003, pp. 25-33; Beristain, 2010, p. 36). The media cannot pretend to ignore this issue and they cannot forget their responsibility as the intermediaries for social reality (González Alcaraz, 2012, p. 128).

A significant part of the social awareness of citizens is conditioned by the image of the world transmitted by the media. It should be taken into consideration that the media fulfils an important duty for a wide section of society as mentioned previously, since it is the primary source of information for this section of society on environmental issues.

The media not only helps to shape public opinion regarding an event but also may influence citizen behaviour or response. Some authors (Neuzil
IZARO GOROSTID, ANDERE ORMAZABAL GASTÓN, GUILLERMO GURRUTXAGA REKONDO

and Kovarik, 1996) outline that the media fulfils the function of helping to control the direction of social change. This way, under specific conditions, the media could sustain social change (Lema Blanco, 2007, p. 487). Finding solutions for socio-environmental conflicts is not the responsibility of the media yet the media should enable public awareness to be raised in an aim to find a solution to the conflict —at least creating the right atmosphere— such that the search for a solution becomes the responsibility of one and all.

CONTEXT AND DEFINITION OF THE STUDY OBJECT

The spatial framework in which the research has been developed has been Basque Country (officially the Basque Autonomous Community, is an autonomous community in northern Spain, it includes the Basque provinces of Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa) and in particular we will expose two cases of socio-environmental conflict analysis that we have detected in it.

On the one hand, the High Speed Train, specifically the New Railway Network of the Basque Country and on the other hand the plant of Fuel-oil Reduction Unit of Petronor located in Muskiz, Bizkaia, also known as Coke Plant. The media that we have chosen to carry out a thorough analysis of the information has been the written press.

The time frame for this study has been placed at the beginning of the selected socio-environmental conflicts: the year 1989 in the case of the High Speed Train and 2004 in the case of the Coke plant. The final limit for conducting the research has been 2017. The socio-environmental conflicts analysed are energy and transport infrastructure.

To explain the reasons for the choice of the sample used, we might ask two main questions:

1. Why did we choose socio-environmental conflict to conduct an analysis of information on environmental policy?
2. Why did we select the two case studies related to transport and energy policies?

Conflict is the backbone in the interaction between all actors that affect public policies. For this reason, there are quantitatively more opinions and discourses, to the extent whether there is a possible response and/or reaction by a public regulatory policy in the socio-environmental conflict. In these cases, we aim to reveal the shortcomings and degenerative processes arising within environmental conflicts and in the information issues, to propose potential modifications and for this reason to be able to say what is the most significant aspect of this that information/debate on the conflict.

We aim to analyse the socio-environmental conflict from two different perspectives. The root of these conflicts is different: in the case of the High Speed Train this is a transport infrastructure-related issue and in the case of the energy Fuel-Oil Reduction Unit this is a waste-related issue. Both the scope and
the framework of the conflicts are different. On the one hand, we have local opposition to the logic of a private company in the case of the Petronor Coke plant in Muskiz and on the other hand in the case of the High Speed Train “presenting the output produced as a response from the public authorities to an issue” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, p. 66).

For our research, we have also taken into consideration the specific spatial framework for the two case studies selected. We have chosen a project, which affects all the provinces in the Basque Country, the High Speed Train, and we have taken into consideration the provincial level of the other case study, that of the Coke plant which is a local conflict. The High Speed Train is a conflictive macro-project affecting all provinces although it should be made clear that although it has been counted as one single conflict, protests have emerged area by area throughout the Basque Country since the 1990s. The Coke plant is located in Muskiz and the clashes arising from this socio-environmental conflict have all taken place within this area.

Likewise, selecting the written press to analyse the information strategies created concerning the socio-environmental conflicts was not a random selection. The print press plays the main role in intermediation between reality and the public in any opinion-making process. The press transforms the events into news by facilitating comments between the truth and reality “between what is intelligible per se, and what is susceptible to be explained or understood” (Sánchez, 1998, p. 154).

In fact, it is considered that what people say is more spontaneous than what people write. The written word is supposed to be the product of the writer’s reflections and on a research level this is also understood to be the case. As Postman outlines, “in the academic word, the written word carries more prestige and authenticity than the spoken word” (Postman, 2001, p. 25). For this reason, we selected the print press to conduct this analysis on the media sources in this research work.

METHODOLOGY

Within the research work, three aspects have been taken into account in terms of methodology:

1. Gathering original data: In-depth interviews were conducted with the social and political agents (institutional and social agents).
2. Documentation: Newspapers, books and magazines were gathered and analysed. Press analysis.
3. Content and discourse analysis.

Likewise, in this analysis dealing with the two different aspects, the quantitative aspect, related to the quantification of data, and the qualitative aspect, relating to the treatment of the information produced from in-depth interviews and the analysis of documentation.
Therefore, among the quantitative aspects, we have highlighted the data obtained from conducting a press analysis. Among the qualitative techniques used, we may highlight the analysis of secondary sources (mainly newspapers and technical dossiers) and in-depth interviews with the agents participating in each case.

Concerning secondary sources, in the two case studies chosen, we selected 20 strategic moments related to two major events; on the one hand, the moments relating to a decision by the administration that particularly affected the project, and on the other hand, we focused on social protests. These twenty moments relating to information take into account the initial, intermediate and present stages of the conflict. With this selection, we aimed to provide a reliable picture of the whole conflict. We identified the 20 selected communicative events in each of the socio-environmental conflicts, considering both time (date of news reception) and space (media outlets where they appeared). Regarding the temporal localization of the selected communicative moments, it has varied in each case, as the chronological development of the 20 selected moments has been adapted to each specific scenario.

In order to carry out a systematic study of these twenty strategic information-related moments in each case, we have dealt with the dual dimension of each information sample. Hence, for each issue, on the one hand we received a systematic report, where we focused on its structural dimension; in other words, we examined the location of the edition, the number of pages, the number of columns and the section of the newspaper in which it was published. On the other hand, we also focused on the content; in this study we analysed the source of the news, the level of predictability of the news, the creation of the news article and the information sources.

We also used in-depth interviews to analyse our research, focusing (in depth on only one subject) and targeting (all the initiatives for dialogue, the interviewee directs, decides and specifies). This way, in-depth interviews with political, institutional and social agents played an important role in our research as sources of information and analysis. We conducted descriptive interviews to receive information for the analysis of these cases and this way we tried to provide stances for and against in each case.

Through in-depth interviews, we analysed the relationship between the agents involved in the conflict, the initial stages and the definition of conflict, the relationship between the agents and their discourse, and the relationship between the media and the agents.
Table 1. Interviews conducted for the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-speed train</th>
<th>Coke plant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors in favour of the project</strong></td>
<td><strong>Actors who are against the project</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Former senior official in the department of transport of the provincial council of Gipuzkoa: TAE1</td>
<td>• Pretonor senior management: KAE1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Former senior official in the Basque Government’s public works and transport department: TAE2</td>
<td>• Senior official of Muskiz town council: KAE2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Former senior official in the Basque Government’s public works and transport department: TAE3</td>
<td>• Senior member of the Petronor works council: KAE3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Senior city council official: TAE4</td>
<td>• Councillor of Muskiz town council: KAE4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Former senior official in the Basque Government’s public works and transport department: TAE5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors who are against the project</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Member of the environmental group: TKE1</td>
<td>• Muskiz residents’ association: KK1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Member of the Stop the High Speed Train group: TKE2</td>
<td>• Councillor of Muskiz town council: KK2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Town councilor: TKE3</td>
<td>• Member of the coordinator against the Coke plant: KK3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Member of the anti-high speed train assembly: TKE4</td>
<td>• Member of the group Meatzaldea bizirik: KK4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trade union member: TKE5</td>
<td>• Member of an environmental group: KK5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

At the same time, we also carried out a thorough analysis of press articles, that is, a press analysis. We used the format of methodological file to conduct this analysis. Using each file, we tried to measure the media impact of the environmental conflicts in the societies we investigated, namely how the different environmental policies were reported.

When selecting the newspaper, that on selecting the communication space, the characteristics of the press in the South Basque Country were also taken into consideration (Idoiaga and Ramírez de la Piscina, 2002, pp. 32-33).
Table 2. Methodological file

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>1/3 a page</th>
<th>Less than 1/3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Full page</td>
<td>Half a page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First page</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protagonist/Second levels’ mentions</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characterization of the headline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterization of the image</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis of the news</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>Protests</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of news production</td>
<td>External (agencies, press release…)</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of information</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Institutional (who?)</td>
<td>Political leader</td>
<td>Social agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Newspapers selected for the hemerographic analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation type</th>
<th>Publishing group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El País</td>
<td>Spanish State level</td>
<td>Prisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berria</td>
<td>Autonomous Community of the Basque Country and Navarre</td>
<td>The Media Association of the Basque Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gara</td>
<td>Autonomous Community of the Basque Country and Navarre</td>
<td>The Media Association of the Basque Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Correo (Coke plant case)</td>
<td>Bizkaia</td>
<td>Vocento</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diario Vasco (AHT case)</td>
<td>Gipuzkoa</td>
<td>Vocento</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deia</td>
<td>Bizkaia</td>
<td>Grupo Noticias</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.
RESULTS

In the case of High Speed Train, the function of the print press has been to legitimize the parties in this environmental conflict and this has increased the social polarization in society. As we have explained, the information developed the bipolar representation of reality instead of showing the dialogue. Agenda setting theories say that at the beginning of the day, if the media set the topics of information by framing and priming, they establish images and perspectives to influence public opinion. And, in this case, in the analysis of the press analysis, the attitude of the written media has been marked, most of them, because they tend more to be in favour of projects under the control of the authorities and the governing institutions. There have been, of course, those who have not seen opponents’ attitudes and perspectives. However, the exception in our study is Berria, the only newspaper written entirely in Basque, in that there has been a well-balanced attitude, keeping the voices and arguments of the opposing parties alive.

In the case of the Coke plant, the opposition movements have complained about the coverage by large media groups and their alignment with the company. Looking at the press analysis, the best selling newspaper of the Basque Country, El Correo, has been the newspaper that has most commonly only used Petronor’s sources when creating news articles on this socio-environmental conflict. That is to say, in view of the capacity of the media to limit the interpretation of the conflict, by selecting that aspect of reality, has influenced the “public image” built on this socio-environmental conflict. However, the social agents that have appeared against the Coke Plant have expressed a lack of trust in the media; due to the fact that, as we have shown in our research, the media with the largest readership have silenced their messages and given the private Petronor project publicity or almost propaganda treatment. It has published most of the news in the Economy section and has emphasized favourable arguments, that this is a necessary financially viable project to create jobs and wealth.

In fact, it may be concluded that the press has not played the role of mediation and negotiation (Cox, 2006, pp. 18-20) that is should among the social agents who wish to influence the environmental concerns of the public. As part of the media agenda, social-environmental conflicts are “public”, citizens are aware of conflicts, which allow dynamics and opportunities to bring social concerns in the public domain. The media provide the public existence of conflicts, they build a public image of the conflict, and they also influence conflict development because as we said, they can operate selectively, accelerate, slow down, clarify or redefine social conflicts. In the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts, we can conclude that the press has not helped to slow down, clarify or redefine conflicts. In general, they have chosen to take a position on the confrontational dynamics occurring in socio-environmental conflicts.

Often the conflict is not the project itself but the silence involved at the start of the project, the news coverage and the lack of transparency. From a general democratic point of view, “transparent communication” is a mandatory requirement for environmental matters (Cox, 2006). The clear starting point for environment-related projects, the origin of the initiative of public policies, the
initial initiative, of course, should be known and, if possible, shared, in order to prevent the monopoly of parties and, at the same time, to influence the hidden influence of interest or pressure groups.

In the case of the High Speed train, this project is now over twenty years old, since this transport infrastructure project has already proposed by European, state and regional institutions, a project that is being “later” conceived and designed in that sense. There are two main reasons, on the one hand because they could not work without a funding agreement between the central and autonomous institutions, and on the other because there was extensive far-reaching opposition to this infrastructure. These two aspects have been highlighted by the opposition by co-ordinating and contrasting the interests of the respective institutions and the opposition of many socio-political agents to the project (a majority of Basque trade unions, town halls, citizen groups and environmentalists).

Since the infrastructure is a long and complex linear project, with a high budget and many technical and bureaucratic difficulties, public opinion has received information on the conflict, but many, as shown by the empirical analysis, have lacked information. That is to say, those with an opposing or critical attitude appear to have less knowledge and information about the project.

Unlike politicians and ideologists, they are confident of trusting or mistrustful political authorities, with the knowledge of the project and various aspects of the information (economic, technical, number and location of the stations, impact and damage to works, etc.), in this case, with political and ideological readjustment have been missing, obviously. There was also a lack of information and transparency at the heart of the opposition’s criticism and mobilization.

In the case of the Coke Plant, the construction project was promoted by a private agent, Petronor (the largest oil company in the Basque Country), which led to a lack of information and knowledge, as the company itself does not want to inform in a transparent way about the impact of the project on public health and the environment. Institutions have also not been involved with providing public knowledge about the project arguing that the project is private but always maintaining a close supportive relationship with the developers. Those who have experienced this lack of information have been the opposing agents; political opponents, but above all, citizens of the surrounding area.

Therefore, our research has revealed that public opinion is not disclosed in a transparent way, since the business promoter has chosen an information strategy on the environment and health issues regarding the Coke Plant. Regarding the level of knowledge, especially in neighbouring towns, this has been high but mostly due to the work carried out by opposition platforms and grassroots movements.

One of the main demands of the movement and citizens in the past has been to demand transparent information, both from the company and from the institutions supporting the project (Muskiz Town Council and the Basque Government), above all, the impact that the Coke Plant could have on public
health. Although often requested, exchange of information was not carried out and this intensified the protests from the opposition in order to publicize the project itself and other issues.

Therefore, we have seen clearly that there is no specific two-step project reporting in both cases analysed. Regarding the socio-environmental conflicts, the same idea has been repeated in both cases, that is, the initial stages of the project were found out about through the press. The effect of the projects was like an “information bomb”. Therefore, in the High Speed Train project, repeated statements were made such as: “When did we find out? From the press”. In the case of the Coke plant, a similar situation was detected: “We learned from the press and from that moment on we started trying to get information from the Town Hall, but there was a lot of secrecy”.

Creating no specific information aimed at citizens, having no specific information mechanisms and receiving news of the project only from the media increases the feeling of “imposition” and has become an element used by the promoters in the cases analysed.

In addition, in both cases, barriers to information have been detected, and social agents have stressed in both cases that they had difficulties and limitations when requesting public information: “We began to ask, not in writing, in council meetings for information but all the time, there was nothing, nothing”. In the case of the High Speed Train, they refer to the same obstacles: “Decisions were taken, in that sense, without any participation, without any participation or public information, that is, from 1988 to 1991, they make great progress, although (the project) does not officially exist”. This is why social agents have promoted the dissemination of the information public sphere by means of informative channels due to a sensation of lack of information. In the cases analysed, social agents opposing the project have created informative tools; websites, blogs, automated magazines and books. On the one hand, to create and disseminate information about the project, and on the other to provide information on the activities that they organize. Therefore, the lack of information, in two of the cases analysed, this has led opposition agents to invent IT-based mechanisms. In addition to the material generated for the management of project information (magazines, reports, documentaries and books), the Internet and Web 2.0 tools have also been created to disseminate to the public sphere from the opposition groups.

The final finding is related to the relevance of opening a public space for debating and contrasting opinions. We have focused on the effects of communicative interactions between actors or agents, that is, we have looked at the existence of this public space and its reach and other characteristics. For this, we have observed the different debates and interests that have aroused in that deliberative field, in order to conclude if that debate has been conducted in within rational parameters.

In the case of the High Speed Train, as far as the autonomous community’s authorities are concerned, there has been sufficient debate and opinion, especially for the institutions whereas, the viewpoint of the organizations opposing the High Speed Train is that the most expensive project ever to be implemented in the Basque Country has not had enough public debate. There have been many
protests with this tagline, in favour of debate and democratic participation. In several town councils affected by the route of the High Speed Train where there has been public consultation, there have been clear quantifiable opinions and results against the High Speed Train. The response to this from the Basque Autonomous Community authorities was that in the Autonomous Parliament in Vitoria-Gasteiz a large majority (80%) was in favour of the project and that once the works had commenced (October 2006) there was no place to continue the debate. Therefore, the issue of public participation and debate has had a significant presence in the case of the High Speed Train.

In the case of the Coke plant, as we have seen from our analysis, there has been no debate or contrasted opinions regarding the plant. From the start, the attitude of the company promoting the project was to implement its project with no debate among citizens or opposition movements. Once the company had received the license from the institutions (2008) Petronor deemed the case closed, arguing that they had respected the law and that the project would create employment. Despite all this, the company’s immovable attitude has not meant that there has been no debate in terms of public opinion (particularly in and around Muskiz). Movements opposing the project have facilitated the opening of specific spaces to deal with the environmental and health issues even though the company and the institutions have not participated.

For this reason, there has been no debate among the different agents. To create debate, communication channels are required and for this to occur agents must first recognise each other. Yet in both cases the agents in favour of the project have not taken the opposition into consideration. In the case of the High Speed Train (AHT in Basque) those promoting the project have not referred to either the platform opposing the project AHT gelditu! (Stop the HST!) or the trade union majority opposing the project. In the case of the Coke plant, it was a similar situation. The aim to avoid the identification of the opposition by those supporting the project is clear as they refer to: “An unspecified group of citizens”. The Platform Against the Coke Plant (Kokeren Aurkako Plataforma) is never mentioned.

If there is no appropriate communication channel, it is impossible to conduct rational public debate. In both cases, debate has been stifled. In the case of the High Speed Train, the agents behind the project are legitimizing political representation in order to deny the need for debate. As a high office of the Basque Government says the framework in which it is decided whether this type of infrastructure is needed is the Basque Autonomous Community, and the representative party in this area is the Parliament, “this has granted 80% support and, therefore, we have made the decision to protect the majority of citizens”. In the case of the Coke plant the legitimacy of the debate is based on the compliance with the law, so there is no room for debate here. Current laws, whether they like it or not, must be respected. At the same time, by providing the licenses for the Coke plant, the political representatives (the Basque Government and Muskiz Town Council) legitimize the decisions that stifle any debate. In the words of a Petronor’s executive: “With the decision of the environmental authorities, the need for debate has been overcome”.

CONCLUSIONS

Socio-environmental conflicts usually begin with the appearance of rumors or pseudo-environmental information about a possible project or plan. Rumors reach the public, but not spread by the project’s promoters, but through the media. It is important that all actors who may be interested be informed by political institution or by the project’s promoters.

The media can be a mirror and a stimulus of socio-environmental conflicts. In recent years, the media has become large communication conglomerates, while new forms of information emerge through the network (Castells, 2009). However we need a field of communication with a greater diversity, which is useful for environmental issues, in order to work on information, the perspectives of all actors and the main topics of discussion. It is clear that the media, which are privileged channels of information, must be required to demand ethical rigor to provide the most and closest information, far from all stubbornness and scandalization.

In this sense, contrasting the information generated by the media, showing conflicting visions about the same information and validating the veracity of the information is of great help. It would be about building public opinion in a dialogical and dialectical way on everything related to the environment.

If we look at the dynamics of conflict, we will realize that in addition to being healthy, public debate and democratic deliberation processes can provide simpler and closer solutions to environmental issues. The issues that provoke a deep debate should not leave the political sphere but “politize them more”. Environmental issues should go beyond classical representative policy and open up to more actors in debate.

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