



ORIGINAL PAPER

Reporting Environmental Pollution: Media and Public Discourse vs. Political Discourse in the Republic of Macedonia

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Abstract

This paper analyses the news media discourse about the issue of air pollution in the western part of Macedonia caused by *Jugohrom Ferroalloys*, an old communist-epoch factory for chromium products and ferroalloys. It focuses on news reports made by the only bilingual national television *Alsat-M* during the last seven months over this environmental issue which became a salient public discourse topic and was followed by massive protests. They ask the government to take urgent relevant measures concerning this major air polluter which does not meet the ecological standards but benefits from a strong political support. The goal of this paper is to inquire the correlation between media discourse and public discourse *versus* political discourse in an unusual context. The context includes political, ethnic and media freedom aspects. The main objectives of this paper are to provide evidence of the mission of news media to drive public opinion in countries with low media freedom, low level of democracy and an ethnically divided audience, as well as to highlight the low impact that media and public discourse have on policy making in authoritarian political systems implicating ethnicity. The methodology chosen for this deliberation is complex. The *Agenda-setting* and the *Framing* theories coupled with the content analysis and discourse analysis methods, are used to inquire news coverage of this topic by *Alsat-M*. The results of the analysis give clear answers to the research question. They are interpreted by means of a historical approach in order to draw conclusions about the role of the news media in Macedonia. The main conclusion is that news media may act as a social factor for awakening social movements and promoting progressive social change even in inconvenient circumstances such as in ethnically divided countries.

Keywords: *media, public, political discourse, air pollution*

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Introduction: A complex reality for media to represent

The issue this paper raises is composed by two levels of discussion. The first one concerns the air pollution in a certain area of the country and how the media, public and politicians dealt with it. The second level of discussion goes deeper in this issue and concerns the ethnic and political aspects of the solution of this ecologic problem. The Republic of Macedonia is an ex-communist country, part of the former federation of Yugoslavia. As such, by its independence in 1990, it inherited some industrial capacities which are still working nowadays. The most important entity in the country is a metallurgic combine known as *Jugohrom*, which so far doesn't meet the ecological standards for the heavy industry. Furthermore, it causes a high level of air pollution, which is about six times higher than the allowed norms. All the old factories from the socialist epoch are allowed to continue to work under the condition to reach the ecological standards in order to gain the ecological permission for industrial work, according to the Law for Protection of the Living Environment in the Republic of Macedonia since 2004. From that time, a period of nine years was given to them in order to meet the criteria for getting the ecological permission. 2013 was the year of deadline to fulfil this process. Finally, the combine *Jugohrom* has not respected the deadline of renewing the whole system of air filtering and still continues to work without the ecological permission.

This metallurgic combine is located in the heart of Pollog Valley, the western part of the country, near the city of Tetovo, which is populated mostly by inhabitants of Albanian ethnicity. Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country composed by several ethnic groups and Albanians are the second biggest ethnic group (Ramadani, Abdullai, Tresi, 2014: 217). They are about 35% of the total population, after Macedonian with about 60%. The Albanians are of three religions: most of them are Muslims and less Orthodox and Catholics (Jashari, Raimi, 2013: 32). Tetovo is one of the biggest cities inhabited by Albanians. It is the most polluted city in the Republic of Macedonia. In Tetovo are located the two Albanian speaking universities, one public and one private, which mostly serve the Albanian speaking population in Macedonia. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Albanians in Macedonia are still asking for more equal rights within the Macedonian state. During this 25 years period of time since then, several governments have been dominated by Macedonians while Albanians are still not able to get any crucial leading positions within the state institutions (Ndrilo Karameti: 2011). From 2005 Macedonia is running the process of membership in the European Union (Soin, 2008). The country has to accomplish the standards of the European Community (Meyer, 2014). During the last 7 years (from 2008 until now) a nationalistic and populist way of governing has deepened the gap between the two largest ethnic groups, the Macedonians and the Albanians. More than ever, Albanians are feeling treated bad in all the aspects of the everyday life. One of them is the poisoning caused by the mega factory *Jugohrom* against which they are protesting, asking the government to make it use filters for the gas emissions from its chimneys, or to force close it. During the two last years (from 2013 to 2015) this request has been persistent but it is still facing the persistence of the government. The air pollution in Tetovo has become a complex political issue. Interests of populist policies are clashing between the Macedonian and the Albanian political parties that are in power (Alsati-M, 2014a).

In Macedonia, the biggest Albanian media is the national television channel *Alsati-M*, which broadcasts in both of the most important languages of the country, the Macedonian and the Albanian languages. Actually, *Alsati-M* is basically an Albanian funded medium, created with the aim to bring together both Albanians and Macedonians

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for them to better and further know each other and to improve the intercultural exchanges, the harmony and the coexistence of those two most divided ethnic groups in Macedonia (Ndrijo Karameti: 2014a). The profile of *Alsat-M* is generalist but the agenda of this television is focused mostly to the improvement of the situation of Albanian ethnic group in Macedonia and all the issues concerning that such as the right to use the mother tongue in public spaces and public institutions, the right to use the national symbols, the right representation in terms of proportion of Albanian employees in all the public sectors etc. (Ndrijo Karameti, 2014b).

Theoretical framework and methods

The question this research paper raises is: How may the media and the public discourse influence the policy making in a specific post-communist country such as Macedonia, when the public opinion is divided according to the ethnic lines and when the leadership of the country is conducting a populist and nationalist policy? To answer such a complex question, a complex methodology should be put in action (Laramée, Vallée, 2002). Therefore, the research focuses to the media agenda in both levels: agenda of salience and agenda of attributes. It inquires the correlation between the media coverage and the media framing of the issue of air pollution in western part of Macedonia, as well as the public opinion discourse about it, which may eventually be at the origin of social reactions and social change. The final goal is to understand if all this fusion between media and public discourse may impact the policy discourse and get followed by political actions.

Using the first level of *agenda setting theory*, this paper probes all the evidence of media, public and political voices. McCombs and Shaw confirm that “*the information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics*” (Protest, McCombs, 1991: 17). Yet, mass media serves as the only reliable source for professional information. At the same time, mass media remains the only contact for many who don't use the social media. In this context, this research is made possible through an analysis of all the information published by the television channel *Alsat-M* about this topic, coming from all the parts involved such as civil society, political and government representatives, because “*for nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists reports about these events and situations*” and it is exactly this role of the mass media that serves as a bridge between the reality and the pictures we create about it in our heads (McCombs, 2004: 1, 21). For our purposes, the archives of the television channel *Alsat-M* served as a source of material for analysis (published as texts on its official website and as videos on YouTube). In addition, two of the most popular social media in the country, Facebook and YouTube, are exploited as well for all contact to alternative news and eventual group organisations about the issue and can be sources of information.

Furthermore, the second level of the *agenda setting theory*, known as well as the *framing theory*, is used to analyse the discourses made by all the actors involved in the issue of air pollution. This further analysis is necessary for this research because after the first moment when an issue had place in the media as an important one and becomes *salient*, the media effect continues to influence the public opinion. Through the *attributions* that media wares to certain aspects of the issue, it influences the way people should think further about that issue. The media actually “*shape our perspectives and our opinion*” about it (McCombs, 2004: 125). According to Entman, while repeating certain terms, the media help framing an issue in the news (Entman, 2004: 1). By doing so, the

media “*promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and / or treatment recommendation for the item described*” (McCombs, 2004: 89). So, for the purposes of this research, media discourse is analysed first. After that, the public discourse and political discourse are analysed in order to find any eventual evidence about the correlation between their discourses, which may drive to the answers for our research question.

This theoretical platform is supported by two research methods for collecting the data and for analysing them. The methods of quantitative and qualitative content analysis are used to collect the data from the archives of the news media being examined. Through a careful reading of all news items related to the issue of air pollution in the larger region of Pollog Valley and especially in the city of Tetovo, we could extract all the relevant news items concerning it, available for both qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods. As Klaus Krippendorff concludes, both of them are indispensable for the analysis of written and spoken texts (2004: 87). These methods do allow best to test the hypothesis about the policies or aims of media producers and comparing media content with real-world indicators (Jensen, 2007: 220). All selected news reports on this topic and all quotations from people connected to the issue, reported in the news texts, are the body of material analyzed here. The discourse analysis is used to interpret the data and generate conclusions. A historical approach allows to best deduce from the discourse and the events in the light of their historical and social context. As Guldi and Armitage propose (2014: 15) “by combining the procedures and aspirations of both the humanities and the social sciences, history has a special (if not unique) claim to be a critical human science: not just as a collection of narratives or a source of affirmation for the present, but a tool of reform and a means of shaping alternative futures”. Thus, in order to reach the goal of this research paper, the historical approach is used as a tool to best master the analysis of the data in their context as well as their interpretation in respect to the bigger picture of the events.

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Our analysis is effectuated in three levels. It starts with the quantitative aspect of the news agenda of *Alsat-M* television. The total quantity of the coverage of the affair *Jugohrom* and the air pollution is shown at the *Table 1*. It is expressed in number of news items produced and broadcasted by *Alsat-M*. In the second place, we analysed the content. The total number of this news production is presented in five columns of *Table 1*, according to the content of each news item. This content is assigned in accordance to the main subject of any news report. After a careful reading of all news items, we classified the news report in five main groups of interest relating to the issue such as: the civil society organisations (NGO) and associations (“Eco guerrilla”, “Mothers and Children”, “Mothers of Tetovo”), the news report items containing investigations and analysis of the television channel, citizens participating in massive protests, European diplomats representing international institutions and governments of European countries in the Republic in Macedonia, Macedonian government officials responsible or connected to the issue.

In *Table 1*, these five groups are described shortly such as: 1. civil society, 2. investigations, 3. Protests, 4. international reactions and 5. Government reactions. The third level of analyses is the discourse analyses of all news items that every category contains. In this phase the analyses is dedicated to the main discourse lines of each news item under each group. This stage allows us to draw conclusions about the position of all

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those groups towards the *Jugohrom* issue. Findings are expressed in the second line of *Table 1*, as short descriptions such as “Against” or “Pro” to the continuity of *Jugohrom* combine. At the same time, this third level of analysis makes possible to expose the correlation between actions of all groups, in terms of the impact that one group’s position has to the reaction of the other groups. The most relevant correlation of them, for the purpose of this paper, is the one between media, public opinion (civil society and protesters) and government in order to conclude about the impact that medias may have for promoting social change and improving the democracy (Bennett, Entman, 2001). This analysis is shown as following, describing the discourse made by media (news report items of *Alsat-M* Television), public opinion (civil society and protesters) and international (government and other politicians).

Table 1. The quantity of coverage of the affair *Jugohrom* and the discourse content of the parties involved

<i>News reports</i>	<i>Civil society</i>	<i>Investigations</i>	<i>Protests</i>	<i>International Reactions</i>	<i>Government reactions</i>
<i>Number of news items</i>	8	8	5	2	7
<i>Pro or Against Jugohrom</i>	Against	Against	Against	Against	Pro (5) Against (2)
<i>Total number of news items</i>	30				

Source: Author’s own compilation

The hottest period of news about *Jugohrom*-air pollution started in October 30. A news item of *Alsat-M* made an extended analysis about the expected event concerning a government decision for the expiration of the deadline of the combine *Jugohrom Ferroalloys* to meet the ecological standards and to gain the integrated ecological permission to work (Alsat-M, 2014b). On October 31, day of the deadline expiration, two news reports were broadcasted by the television about the decision of the government to extend the deadline with two more years (Alsat-M, 2014c). The first news item reports about the compromise made by the government. The second news item reports about the threat of the civil society NGO *Eco Guerrilla* etc. for massive protest against any government decision that may allow *Jugohrom* to continue to work without filters and to continue to contaminate the whole region around the city of Tetovo. On November 1, another news report of *Alsat-M* had in focus the threat of the civil society for massive protests. On November 2, another news report as well holds a discourse against the decision of government for extending with two more years the deadline for ecological standards by the biggest polluter in Macedonia. The news about this event was published in all the news media in Albanian language in the country such as the national television *Alsat-M*, some local television channels, daily newspapers *Koha* and *Lajm*, news portals *Portalb* and *Almakos* and other media.

After these news, the first part of November 2014 was marked by massive protests in Tetovo. The social media such as Facebook and YouTube were full of individual and group invitations to participate in those protests. The invitations were in the form of texts

and often coupled with photos and videos from the heavily polluted air in the city of Tetovo. The motto of protest was “Let me breathe”. Some thousands of people protested peacefully in the streets of Tetovo asking the government to close the metallurgical mega factory. The Albanian television channel *Alsasat-M* fully covered these protests. A main news report program on November 14, 2014 from Tetovo concerning the event, interviewed some of the well-known personalities of the city such as artists and intellectuals who were participating in the protest. The whole discourse concerns the urgent need to stop the activity of this combine which acts as a contaminator for the environment in Tetovo. Its discourse is constructed based on the terminology: “cancer caused from the pollutions”, “the government is poisoning the habitants of Tetovo” and “the arrogant government protects the interest of a private business and kills its citizens” (Alsasat-M, 2014d). On February 6, another massive protest was held in Tetovo when relevant speakers called the activity of *Jugohrom* like “massive poisoning” and referred to the article 43 of the Constitution and international relevant documents for humans rights about the fundamental right for a healthy environment. On February 8, *Alsasat-M* released a news report about the consequences of air pollution in Tetovo, entitled “The number of illnesses caused by the pollution is increasing” (Alsasat-M, 2015a). The journalist asked the health professionals about the correlation between air pollution and the deaths caused by malign diseases. The discourse raised the issue of air pollution in general, as the prime factor for the increasing number of cancer cases in Macedonia, especially in the capital Skopje and the city of Tetovo. According to the interviewed professionals, there are several factors causing the air pollution in these parts of the country such as the old heating systems with wood, car gas and most importantly the factories and enterprises.

On February 13, 2015 *Alsasat-M* investigated about this issue and reported in a news saying that the mayor of Tetovo is visiting all the factories and enterprises which may cause air pollution in the region, but not the hugest polluter, *Jugohrom* (Alsasat-M, 2015b). This visit was supposed to inspect and see if the toxic gases were filtered before they were let out through the chimneys. The discourse alludes that the Mayor of Tetovo, who in the same time is the vice president of the Albanian political party member of the government, was intentionally avoiding to visit *Jugohrom*. Through the voice of the civil society, the news text calls the political representatives to fairly do its job: “while the municipality of Tetovo continues with visits to enterprises which meet the standards and do not pollute the environment, civic movement Eco Guerilla, asks the Mayor to visit more the enterprises that do not possess the ecological permission in order to encourage them to get equipped with it”. The non-governmental organisation “Mother and children” from Tetovo organised on March 20 a protest against the indifference of the government towards the air contamination in the region. They used the motto “we change the toys for filters” in order to sensitize the government about the huge damage the air pollution has on the lives of their children. The protesters kept placards with slogans “Stop the ecologic genocide”. This placard is shown in the photo which accompanies the news of *Alsasat-M* on its online version in the official website of the television.

On April 4th 2015 the prime minister of the country came to Tetovo. He is met with protest by the citizens of Tetovo. In a news report of *Alsasat-M*, entitled “Mothers and children in Tetovo meet Gruevski with protests”, the discourse was constructed over the claims of civil society “Eco guerrilla” and “Mother and child” who showed to the prime minister “*the drawings of children about the air pollution*” and “*air filters that Jugohrom has not fixed yet*” (Alsasat-M, 2015c) It had the same angle of news treatment as the protesters had. At the same time, the news text ironizes the local government for hypocrisy

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towards the central government. It tries to show that the local government (the municipality of Tetovo that is led by an Albanian politician) is holding the same position towards the topic just like the government that is led and dominated by Macedonian politicians. After this discourse involved the public opinion, the media and the government, some foreign reactions appeared. Since Macedonia is a South East European country aspiring to be part of the European Union, it is asked to fulfil some European standards even in environmental issues. Thus, the government paid attention to the environmental affair involving *Jugohrom* during a press conference on the occasion of a European project funding for Macedonia (Alsat-M, 2015d). The minister of environment declared that the government will pay more attention to the respect of the pollution norms. But, more relevant than the minister seems to be the reaction of the Head of EU delegation in Macedonia who declared: *“I assure you that the European Union will continue the financial assistance in the field of ecology, however, we cannot achieve anything, if the state itself does not invest in appropriate human resources, infrastructure and does not contribute to raising public awareness”*.

Concerning this topic, the social media such as Facebook and Tweeter have been used by intellectuals and civil society organisations to help raise the awareness of citizens and even of the Macedonian and Albanian political classes. A Facebook group called “Jugohromm” is one of the pages providing information details about the air pollutions in Tetovo, commenting the situation and inviting friends to participate in the protests. As a result, thousands of people joined the protests in Tetovo. On Tweeter, the British ambassador in the Republic of Macedonia wrote on its profile an ironic comment concerning the air pollution *“We stopped to respire a little of fresh air outside of Jugohrom factory. It is not the best place. You should see it to believe”* (Alsat-M, 2015e). Sequences by the pique of air pollution in Tetovo are published by citizens on YouTube. NGOs have published cartoon animations ironizing the ecological-political situation of western Macedonia.

Discussion

In a post-communist and multi-ethnic country like the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the political discourse is focused in general on the political crisis, the failure of implementation of the Peace Agreement, the deepening of inter-ethnic division, the corruption involving the political class and public administration and less in the economic crisis. Erwan Fouéré from the *Centre for European Policy Studies* and former Special Representative of European Union in Macedonia during the 2005-2011 periode wrote in an article in *Balkan Insight* on March 23, 2015, entitled “Gruevski Must Resign and Make Way for Transition Process”, that the country has *“a government which, over the nine years that it has been in power, has strengthened its repressive grip over the country [...] ethno-nationalist and populist brand of politics”* (Fouéré, 2015b). Currently in Macedonia ecological issues are not in the political agenda, except during electoral campaigns. Comparing to Western Europe where the so called “political ecology” started from the early 20th century (Bozonnet, 2000:11), in Macedonia these ideas are more than tardive. It is clear than environment is not the first concern of politics nor of the public opinion. As Bazonnet and Jakubec say *“the pressure of the opinion pushes the political parties to integrate the environmental themes in their programmes: “écologisation” of the politics or more simply recuperation of an electoral clientele?”* But in Macedonia, the ecological issues are not even seriously considered as an integrated part of the political programmes. They are only mentioned in the electoral discourse in the form of electoral promises and

not as real environmental platforms or in the form of real projects. In Macedonia, this problem is duplicated because of the ethnically divided political class. Ethnicity may serve for different purposes (Coakley, 2012). In Macedonia, it serves to the government to better control the citizens with less efforts. Macedonian and Albanian political parties make different electoral promises to their divided electorate. This lack of coordination causes clashes in the electoral promises and their later fulfilling. So, both ethnic sides of political parties avoid to resolve such issues and prolong them for decades, from a governing term to another. The case of air pollution caused by *Jugohrom* is one of those clashes. Environmental issues are taken in discussion only in ecological catastrophic cases, such as the case of *Jugohrom*. The reason is the non-coordinated politics. The Macedonian political party in power has promised to its electorate, during the campaigns, that the mega metallurgical factory will not be closed. Most of the 1200 of its workers are Macedonians from the village of Jagunovce of Tetovo and if the factory gets closed they will be unemployed. From the other side, the Albanian political party in power promised to its electorate during the campaigns that the problem of *Jugohrom* will be solved at best: either it will use filters or it will be closed. Many other more emergent issues are emerging in the meantime such as corruption, economic crisis etc. and the attention of the public opinion on the air pollution gets shifted to them.

As seen from the analysis, television has produced a total of thirty news reports about the air pollution in the region of Pollog Valley. These news reports are produced in a six months period, from October 2014 to April 2015 which means the issue had a high priority in the news agenda. It started when the government giving to the enterprise two more years in order to work further to meet the ecological standards, even after nine years of such a deadline. The news frame chosen by *Alsar-M* was “the air pollution from *Jugohrom* is killing the citizens of Tetovo and the government is protecting it”. The content analysis shows strong correlation between the news coverage of the topic and the intensity of the reactions of civic movements. From November to April, the reporting about the functioning of the factory was followed by a strong activity of non-governmental organisations. As a consequence, their activity mobilised the citizens who organised in massive pacific protests. People from all the Pollog region, including the cities of Tetovo and Gostivar, as well as the suburban areas, joined the protests.

At the same time a certain level of correlation is detected between news coverage and political reaction. The content analysis shows that only seven news items have as subject a political reaction. However, the discourse analysis shows that the political discourse about the topic is constructed in terms of justification and not at all in terms of a solution to the problem. As first, having in consideration the whole stage of weakened democracy in Macedonia where “*the ruling party does not tolerate any minority or dissenting views, and uses fear and intimidation to exercise its repressive authority over society*” (Fouéré, 2015a) and the stage of media freedom that is “*the worst media freedom record in the Balkan region; the latest Reporters Without Borders index ranks it in 123rd place, just above Angola, a drop of almost 90 places from 2009, when it was ranked 34th*” (Fouéré, 2015a), this politico-ecological discourse is coherent with the whole. As second, having in mind the whole interethnic and political relationship in Macedonia, this discourse is coherent as well. So, from both perspectives, the democracy and the multi-ethnic harmony, the political discourse about air pollution by *Jugohrom* in Tetovo is not a professional one and as a consequence it may not be as much influenced by the media and the public discourse as it may have been in a normal democratic country. A strong argument for this reasoning is the political context in Macedonia. Since February 9 a mega

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political scandal has born in the country. A large telephone wiretapping is effectuated on “over 20,000 people - including ministers, judges, business people, journalists and even foreign diplomats - in a country of only 2 million” (Fouéré, 2015a). The content of recordings are being published by the leader of the political opposition. The conversations are exposing corruption, organised state crime and ethnic discrimination against the Albanian part of the population.

The public discourse about the *Jugohrom*, initiated by the news media, strongly influenced the massive social movements and in a certain degree the political reactions from both government and foreign officials who are present in Macedonia such as ambassadors and European Union high officials. We analysed the news media agenda, content and discourse rigorously. We did not analyse the social media in the same way (Kovach, Rosenstiel, 2011: 93-115), nevertheless, we were able to notice the main discourse line. The discourse of news media follows the same line as the comments on the social media. Facebook texts, YouTube videos and caricatures contain terminology and symbols which directly and indirectly suggest the government as the protector of the air pollution creator. Political interests as well as populist and nationalist policies are denounced as the reason to the compromise between the Albanian part and the Macedonian part of the government.

Conclusions

This paper investigated the correlation between media discourse and public discourse versus the political discourse in Macedonia, concerning an ecological and ethnic issue, taking it as an example of the power of the mass media and the social media, even in a country with not good democratic political systems. Macedonia is not only a post-communist country but it has also experienced a quasi-inter-ethnic war, a country in transition which pretends a membership in the European Union but to which the membership in NATO was refused, a multiethnic country with many unsolved issues concerning the equality of human rights among the two largest ethnic groups. The analysis in this paper showed evidence that in such a country, the news media agenda may influence the public agenda more than the political agenda. The news framing helps citizens orientate their priorities even in a social, political, ethnic and economic context as Macedonia's. News media discourse as well as the social media influenced the discourse of the public opinion at a certain degree. Concerning the influence on the political discourse, the analysis shows a lower degree. This means that the media and the public are in the same side, in front of government that stands in the very opposite side of society. In a country with an injured democracy like the one Macedonia has presented recently, media may survive and even influence the public discourse to a certain point. However, it remains difficult to influence as much as to build an alliance between media and the public opinion in order to force the government make changes even for issues such as environment, ecology and health.

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