

Media Coverage of the EU Regional Policy Funds.

Insights into Communicating Sustainability

ELENA ABRUDAN, ADELA FOFIU

Introduction

AS THE global financial crisis fluctuated and even deepened recently, since it began in 2007-2008, more and more interest was given to how our economies and cultures affect the future, and how sustainable development can be managed. The voices that advocate sustainability have grown diverse after the wave of street protests of 2011 (Fofiu, 2015), but the movement for sustainability has yet to grow and to acquire strength. One reason for this is that sustainability, just as happiness, truth or justice, is hard to define and to grasp in concise terms (Simon, 2003). In the following pages, we explore several media discourses regarding investment funds for regional development in the European Union, with the intention to observe how sustainability is communicated. We start from the premise that media communication, and storytelling in particular, reproduce cultural values and have a deep socializing effect in the larger public sphere. As such, the way sustainability is communicated plays a fundamental role in how sustainability and the vision for sustainable futures are perceived, understood and, further on, adopted by various social agents, from bureaucratic institutions to individuals.

In the simplest sense, sustainability is the ability to sustain—sustain-ability—a healthy economy, an ecological balance and social progress: “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). This vision is more than timely in addressing the challenges and risks of the Anthropocene, the geological age deeply and irreversibly affected by humanity’s impact on the planet’s ecosystems (Waters, Zalasiewicz, Summerhayes, Barnosky, Poirier, Gałuszka, Cearreta, Edgeworth, Ellis, Ellis, Jeandel, Leinfelder, McNeill, Richter, Steffen, Syvitski, Vidas, Wägreich, Williams, Zhisheng, Grinevald, Odada, Oreskes, Wolfe, 2016; Vaughan, 2016). Until recently, sustainability has been approached by the academic community in a fragmented, isolated, project-based fashion, which clearly fails in exploring and providing

solutions that can be applied locally and globally. In the Anthropocene, the amount of plastic, concrete, carbon, nuclear particles, phosphorus and nitrogen in the geological layers of the planet have had an irreversible effect on humanity's living environments. These substances are generated, used and dumped based on a particular cultural and economic model that is now under scrutiny and assessment, due not only to suspicion, but also to growing evidence that it is not a sustainable and viable model. Indeed, voices from the humanities and hard sciences have for some time now advocated the necessity of a paradigm shift that would push humanity in the next civilizational stage—that of global intelligence and planetary wisdom that can bring our world into a renewed state of cohesion and integration (László, 2008; Sprirosu, 2004; Capra, 1996). A broader shared understanding of our impact is still very low and our bureaucracies and democracies need better practices regarding development. As such, several attempts at defining sustainability have a scope that goes beyond the necessity to measure what is sustainable and what is not: the development of decision-making tools that have sustainability indicators at their core and, thus, in the guidelines of our future (Waas, Hugé, Block, Wright, Benitez-Capistros and Verbruggen, 2014).

The indicators that Waas et al. (2014) bring to the attention of various stakeholders—from the academic community to politicians, entrepreneurs and practitioners—are holistic, integrated and outline a circular mode of doing economics and social progress, while fostering a healthy natural environment:

(1) equity (refers to justice/fairness in the way we develop and includes inter/intra-generational equity, while not compromising the ability of future and current generations to meet their own needs/aspirations), interspecies equity (environmental stewardship that refers to the survival of other species on an equal basis to human survival), geographical equity (global responsibility in a spirit of shared but differentiated responsibility), and procedural equity (democratic and participatory governance); (2) dynamics (sustainable development is a process of change because the environment and society change continuously, entailing uncertainties and risks that need a precautionary approach); (3) integration (of the different sustainability principles in a harmonious manner to reconcile development objectives with environmental ones); and (4) normativity (sustainable development is a social construct and basically amounts to making normative decisions and choices, which are ultimately based on the values we maintain about the way we develop, now, and in the future) (Waas et al., 2014, p. 5513).

With this attempt to define sustainability, we still need to note that despite the growing popularity of this concept and the momentum of the social movement for sustainability, the practical implementation of sustainable approaches is quite unsuccessful (Waas et al., 2014; Karunasena, Rathnayake and Senarathne, 2016; de Vos, Janssen, Kok, Frantzi, Dellas, Pattberg, Petersen and Biermann, 2013). The reasons fall under the tensions of cultural and social change that always create a lag between the various elements that constitute society and culture. Given that our shared beliefs about the world are the foundation for how the world actually is—and the reader might recognize the construc-

tivist perspective in this phrase—we advocate the necessity of carefully analyzing how sustainability is communicated, even before studying how it is practically implemented. Furthermore, the complexity of sustainable and unsustainable practices and decisions can be revealed once we understand how decisions are made and how action is taken based on what social agents, such as the media, say about issues and not necessarily based on how these issues present themselves in the social and historical context of choice.

As such, our study aims to explore how sustainability is communicated on various media channels that refer to, or report on the Regional Policy and the associated funds of the European Union, with a case study on Transylvania, Romania.

1. Our Exploratory Design

THE RESEARCH design that we used for this study is exploratory. It implies the exploration of source material with the aim of observing how sustainability is communicated, as later in the process we compared the observed narratives to the taxonomy of indicators elaborated by Waas et al. (2004).

Our approach will use Norman Fairclough's 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis represents a methodology which has already built a tradition in assessing how social change is discursively constructed. The innovative character of CDA lies in how it enables the researcher to place the text under study into a larger social, cultural or historical framework, thus illustrating how the discursive sources of power are maintained and reproduced throughout history and in specific social, cultural and historical contexts. Our choice of using CDA in the analysis of media discourses on sustainability is determined by precisely the capacity of this methodology to place the discourses of study into the complex context of the European and global financial crisis. By regarding the discourses of the chosen bodies as texts that can be explored and usefully understood in the context of their production, dissemination and consumption, on the one hand, and in the larger socio-economic and historical context of the crisis, on the other hand, we are enabled to identify and explore relationships and determinations that are otherwise opaque to analysis. In this sense we employ Fairclough's definition of CDA: a method that aims at exploring subtle, opaque relationships of determination and causality between texts, events, discursive practices and wider social and cultural structures, political relations and processes, economic phenomena (Fairclough, 1993; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010; Kettle, 2005).

CDA has already been employed in analyzing discursive reactions to the global financial crisis. In Fairclough and Fairclough's 2012 book, CDA is illustrated as a potent methodology for analyzing and understanding discursive responses to the crisis in the British media and politics. The book develops a framework for analysis and evaluation based on practical reasoning. Namely, political discourse, on any given topic, is seen as a form of practical argumentation for or against particular ways of acting, as a form of argumentation that can provide reasoning for decisions. In this sense, CDA is also the most appropriate approach to media discourses on the complexity of sustainable and unsustainable practices and decisions, because it can reveal opaque relationships between

texts, practices and contexts to the point of illustrating how decisions are made based on what agents and institutions say about issues and not necessarily based on how these issues present themselves in the social and historical context of choice. We should, thus, be able to identify the discursive argumentation that can lead to a decision, policies that disregard the negative ecological impact of particular development projects, the more or less intentional ignorance of decision makers towards the importance of sustainability, as latent dynamics from media texts to discursive practices to social practices.

For this purpose we have used a composite sample of media products, collected from three different sources.

First, we used the policy learning data base on the Regional Policy Best Practices website of the European Commission¹, where we performed a search for the key word “sustainability.” As a result, we obtained a sample of 6 case study reports, from 2009 to 2015, submitted by beneficiaries of the Regional Policy Funds in Finland, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Great Britain and North-West Europe. The search did not turn out any results regarding the absorption of funds in Romania, so we decided to include a separate set of 10 press releases available on the website of Agenția de Dezvoltare Regională Nord-Vest (the Agency for Regional Development of North-Western Romania) from 2014-2015.

Second, we explored the local media in Transylvania, Romania, through a sample of 86 online newspaper articles published during 2014-2016. These were retrieved from the newspaper aggregator Ziare.com.

Third, and finally, we included social media in our composite sample, by exploring the #EUMyRegion photo contest. As a result we included in this third sample all the photos subscribed to the contests of 2014, 56 images published on Pinterest², and 2015, 103 images published on Facebook³.

Before our critical discourse analysis of these texts, we performed a basic content analysis on the source material that aimed at observing word frequency and theme frequency, as further elaborated.

2. Data Analysis

2.1. Communicating sustainability in regional case studies, a fragmented vision

IN THIS stage of our study we used “Voyant”, an automated, online text analysis tool made available by Sinclair and Rockwell⁴. We first observed how frequently the words “sustainability” (Figure 1) and “development” (Figure 2) are used in the case study reports.

As the graphs show, the beneficiaries of the EU Regional Funds in Germany use the word “sustainability” the most often, while the beneficiaries from Romania do not use it at all. In comparison, the country that writes most about “development” is Hungary,

FIGURE 1. FREQUENCY OF KEY WORD "SUSTAINABILITY"
IN THE SAMPLE OF REGIONAL POLICY BEST PRACTICES CASE STUDY REPORTS, 2009-2015



FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF KEY WORD "DEVELOPMENT"
IN THE SAMPLE OF REGIONAL POLICY BEST PRACTICES CASE STUDY REPORTS, 2009-2015

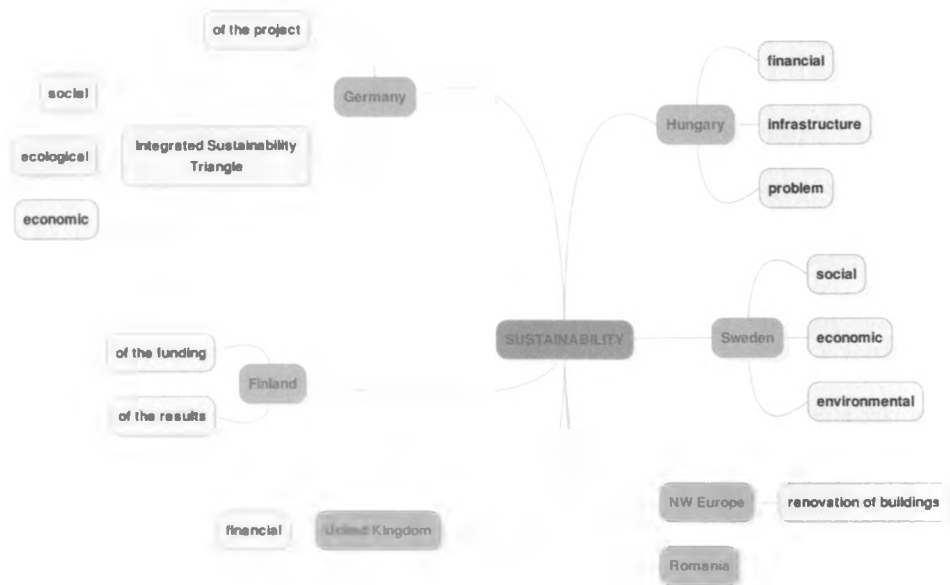


while the team of beneficiaries from North-West Europe never use this word. Romania's team from Transylvania, in its turn, does use this term with a significantly higher frequency than "sustainability."

A more detailed analysis of these two keywords in context leads us one step closer to the aim of this study: it shows how sustainability is communicated. As such, we instructed Voyant to perform a key word in context analysis on "sustainability." The result is illustrated by the concept mapping of Figure 3. It shows that, out of the seven countries, only two represent sustainability in their discourses as an integrated and complex factor. Indeed, Germany and Sweden discuss sustainability and sustainable development as threefold: social, economic and environmental or ecological. The German team goes a step further and includes in their report a project assessment tool that is made available for other

projects and development initiatives. This tool is the Integrated Sustainability Triangle, which can be used to evaluate the stake of a project and how it can be positioned in relation to the three dimensions—social, economic, ecological—in the corners of the triangle. This case study also elaborates on how sustainability needs to be assessed and envisioned in an integrated and cohesive manner, rather than fragmented and isolated in its focus.

FIGURE 3. CONCEPT MAPPING OF THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSIONS RELATED TO SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SAMPLE OF REGIONAL POLICY BEST PRACTICES CASE STUDY REPORTS, 2009-2015



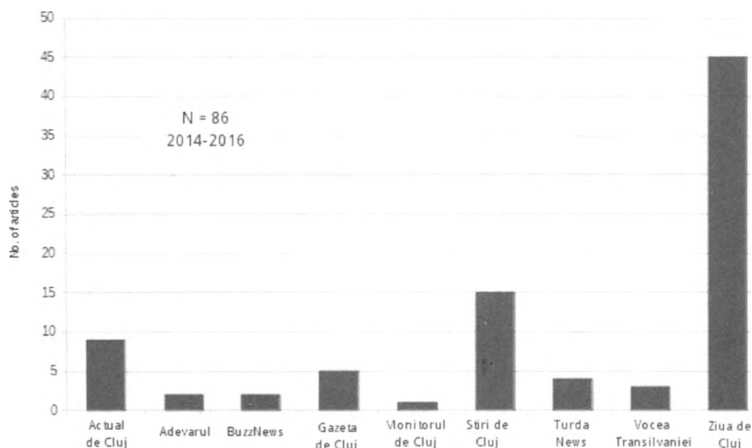
UK, Finland and Hungary discuss sustainability as a financial concern, while Hungary also represents the issue as problematic and challenging. The team from North-West Europe have a technical approach on sustainability and do not discuss it beyond the architectural scope of their project. Meanwhile, Romania, as mentioned above, has no position on sustainability and does not discuss this concept in any of their texts.

With this summary, it turns out that the Regional Policy Best Practices case studies have an integrated vision and discourse of sustainability in only 2 out of 7 reports, while 4 out of 7—more than half—regard sustainability as a technical or economical issue only, and one out of 7 reports does not consider the issue.

2.2. Communicating sustainability in the local media in Transylvania. The role of watchdogs

In the second stage of our analysis, we performed a basic content analysis on the titles of the 86 news articles included in the sample. The newspapers aggregated by Ziare.com

FIGURE 4. THE AMOUNT OF LOCAL NEWS COVERING THE REGIONAL FUNDS IN TRANSYLVANIA, BY NEWSPAPER, 2014-2015



covered the Regional Funds in Transylvania in an unequal fashion, with the most coverage in *Ziua de Cluj* and the least coverage in *Monitorul de Cluj* (see Figure 4). The coding of the titles showed that more than 50% of the news were advertising and disseminating funding opportunities, as well as accomplished results in regional projects in Transylvania. The rest of the news covered topics related to urban development—the Someș River vs traffic lanes, the ticketing system in public transportation, bicycle lanes, specialized vehicles and modern hospitals. On rural development they covered the renovation of county roads in Râchițele-Ic Ponor, the installation of cash machines in villages with high unemployment, the renovation of cultural sites, tackling soil pollution and the development of farmers' cooperatives.

Out of these topics, we will focus on the main case, with the higher incidence in the local newspapers, which illustrates the mainstream media trend in covering the absorption of Regional Funds in Transylvania: the modernization of the banks of the river Someș in Cluj, Transylvania. The modernization of the banks of the river Someș in Cluj, Transylvania is funded through European Regional Funds, based on a contract signed in 2013 with the local administration. The practical implementation of the project started in the late summer of 2015, not without problems. The urban plan of the project envisioned the demolition of the green space along the southern bank of the Someș River in the city center of Cluj, along Central Park, in order to create more space for street surfacing and additional lanes for cars. The local media and the civil society responded swiftly when the excavators began digging the dirt around the osiers on the side of the river, clearly aiming to uproot the trees in the process. The media played the strong and clear role of watchdogs, as a public inquiry was started through the real time news published in the local newspapers. Meanwhile, citizens of Cluj protested on site against the excavations and stopped the destruction of the greenery along the river. Both the gen-

eral public and experts expressed their concern regarding the renovation of the area, given that Cluj, the largest city in Transylvania, has a very low quota of green space per capita, lower than the European average. These reactions halted the intervention on the space and stimulated a series of public debates between the local administration, the civil society and the media, on the topic of sustainable urban development. It is our argument that the role played by the media in this particular case has illustrated how the absorption of European Regional Funds is designed and implemented by local authorities with a manifest disregard towards the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability and a keen interest in the economic sustainability of urban development.

2.3. Communicating sustainability through social media, a bottom-up phenomenon

Every year the European Commission launches open calls for picture submissions of EU co-funded projects by EU citizens. This happens through the “Europe in my Region” Photo Competition. As mentioned earlier, this sample includes all the photos entered in the contests of 2014, 56 images published on Pinterest, and 2015, 103 images published on Facebook. We used a basic coding system on the images, relying on the integrated vision of sustainability: social, economic and ecological.

As a result, in 2014, 20 images submitted to the competition had a predominantly social character, 13 economic and 20 ecological, while 3 could not be identified or could not be coded with the elements of this system. In 2015, 35 pictures had a mainly social dimension, 9 economic and 25 ecological, while 34 could not be identified or coded with the elements of this system. Of course this coding system is simplistic and reductionist. It was not our objective to perform an elaborate analysis at this point, as we aimed to assess the predominant weight of the visual discourses. This is why this approach invites further analysis and interpretation of the visual messages that the EU citizens sent via social media. Still, what we can already observe is that the submissions to the two competitions weigh first on the social aspect of sustainability (55 images), second on the environmental aspect (45 images), and last on economic sustainability (22 images).

For instance, one of the winning images in the 2015 competition portrays two citizens in a friendly posture, sitting on a bench by the river crossing the municipality of Szczawnica, Poland. The predominant dimension of sustainable development through Regional Funds in this particular image is social and secondly environmental, as the background reveals a rich green landscape. It is remarkable, at this point, that there is no visual cue for the economic or financial aspect of sustainable development. Another example is a second winner of the 2015 competition, an image from a development project tackling cyanobloom in Lake Bled, Slovenia. Similar to the previous example, this image weighs primarily on the ecological aspect of sustainability—as the blooming of cyanobacteria is an effect of global warming—and secondly on the social aspect, as it illustrates community efforts. Again, there is no visual indication of the economic sustainability. The third, but not last, winner of the 2015 competition is an image from Thessaloniki, Greece, which illustrates the efforts of the local community to renovate a school in the city center. This image weighs down in our analysis on the social aspect of sustainability.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

THE THREE types of media discourse that we analyzed in this brief study have illustrated significant differences according to who the conveyors of these messages were. In brief, the case studies on best practices in regional development through EU funds show a tendency to focus on the financial sustainability of the projects, although the two exceptions in this sample offer an integrated vision on sustainability, valuable as a practical example and assessment tool for further use. The local media in Transylvania plays a double role: to disseminate the funding opportunities, on the one hand, and to watch over the implementation of the projects—particularly those initiated by local authorities. In this sense, the watchdog role of the local media reveals a low capacity, or even the absence of the local authorities' ability to envision sustainable futures and to absorb the EU funds for sustainable development. As the newspaper articles point out, this generates a divide between the desires of the civil society—the EU citizen—and the local administration. Furthermore, the voice of the EU citizen is even more active on social media through the “Europe in my Region” Photo Competition, in which the accent falls heavily on social and environmental sustainability and just briefly on financial sustainability.

In order to make sense of these first findings, we use Fairclough's 3D model of Critical Discourse Analysis. This 3D model implies the contextualization of the media discourses under study in a threefold frame of interpretation. First, we need to consider the three types of media discourse—beneficiaries of funds, local media and social media—as text without a prior significance (the first dimension in the 3D model), as Fairclough states that the meaning of communication arises from the context in which the text is placed. As follows, the second dimension refers to the discursive practices or, in other terms, the communication processes that generate the messages: what the authors of the messages did in order to communicate—case studies of best practices, watchdogs and bottom-up communication. Third and most important is the social and historical context in which these communications take place and what we identify as the global crisis of the environment, resources, power and corruption. As stated by Waas et al., “despite various political commitments and popularity of the sustainability discourse among various stakeholders its practical implementation falls short” (Waas et al., 2014, p. 5513). Placing the chosen discourses in Fairclough's critical 3D perspective brings more detail to the observation of Waas and his team: three different channels of mediated communication show a pronounced tendency of the civil society and the mainstream media to consider sustainability in an integrated manner, in most cases acknowledging the social and environmental impact before economic gains. These attitudes are transparent in two communication processes: the watchdog local media and the bottom-up expressions in social media. On the other hand, the formal reports of regional development case studies on the website of the European Commission show a manifest preoccupation with the financial and economic sustainability of the projects, under the pressures and requirements of institutional authority. In the larger context of the global financial crisis, we interpret this difference in discourses as a symptom of the growing distance between the bureaucratic governing apparatus of the European Union and the other active agents

of European society and culture: the citizen and the local media. It is our interpretation that this discursive difference will increase the tension of the symbolic distance between these agents, further stressing the urgent need for cohesiveness and holistic thinking in the design of the future of our society and culture. If this distance is not bridged and even diminished, the European crisis will deepen and grow acute, to the discontent of all social, cultural and economic agents involved. Our recommendation for going beyond these shortcomings of the global crisis, with the larger aim of urgently developing an integrated vision of sustainable futures, is for the European Commission and the organisms collaborating in the governance of Europe to maintain and possibly increase the communications focus on bottom-up reports on sustainability at local, regional and continental levels. If our critical discourse analysis shows that what the institutional discourse considers as important for the development of the European Union is to maintain the interest in financial and economic sustainability, the same analysis also shows that there are some more dense layers of citizen and media visions that demand a fairer and more sustainable approach to the development of our environments. In this sense, our analysis shows that continental, regional and local authorities need to increase their efforts to implement sustainable practices, under the urgency of the global financial crisis and the precarious nature of the Anthropocene.



Notes

1. http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/projects/best-practices, accessed on 10 February 2016.
2. <https://www.pinterest.com/eucommission/eumyregion-photo-contest>, accessed on 10 February 2016.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanCommission/app/386310531430573>, accessed on 10 February 2016.
4. www.voyant-tools.org, Stefan Sinclair, Geoffrey Rockwell © 2016.

References

- Capra, Fritjof, 1996, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, Anchor Books
- Chouliaraki, Lilie and Norman Fairclough, 2010, *Critical Discourse Analysis in Organizational Studies: Towards an Integrationist Methodology*, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 47, issue 6
- de Vos, MG, PHM Janssen, MTJ Kok, S Frantzi, E Dellas, P Pattberg, AC Petersen and F Biermann, 2013, *Formalizing knowledge on international environmental regimes: A first step towards integrating political science in integrated assessments of global environmental change*, *Environmental Modelling & Software*, vol. 44
- Fairclough, Norman, 1993, *Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketisation of Public Discourse: The Universities*, *Discourse & Society*, vol. 4, issue 2
- Fairclough, Norman and Isabella Fairclough, 2012, *Political Discourse Analysis: A Methods for Advanced Students*, London: Routledge

- Fofiu, Adela, 2015, *Perceptions of Time in the Sustainability Movement: The Value of Slow for Sustainable Futures*, Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Social Analysis, vol. 5, issue 1
- Karunasena, Gayani, RMNU Rathnayake and Dushan Senarathne, 2016, *Integrating sustainability concepts and value planning for sustainable construction*, Built Environment Project and Asset Management, vol. 6, issue 2
- Kettle, Margaret, 2005, *Critical discourse analysis and hybrid texts: Analysing English as a second language (ESL)*, Melbourne Studies in Education, vol. 46, issue 2
- László, Ervin, 2008, *Quantum Shift in the Global Brain: How the New Scientific Reality Can Change Us and Our World*, Inner Traditions / Bear & Co
- Simon, Sandrine, 2003, *Sustainability Indicators*, International Society for Ecological Economics. Internet Encyclopaedia of Ecological Economics, accessed on 10 February 2016, available online at <http://oro.open.ac.uk/151/1/SustIndicator.pdf>
- Spariosu, Mihai I., 2004, *Global Intelligence and Human Development. Toward an Ecology of Global Learning*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- United Nations, 1987, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future A/42/427*, Geneva, Switzerland, accessed on 10 February 2016, available online at <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>
- Vaughan, Adam, 2016, *Human impact has pushed Earth into the Anthropocene, scientists say*, The Guardian, accessed on 10 February 2016, available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jan/07/human-impact-has-pushed-earth-into-the-anthropocene-scientists-say>
- Waas, Tom, Jean Hugé, Thomas Block, Tarah Wright, Francisco Benitez-Capistros and Aviel Verbruggen, 2014, *Sustainability Assessment and Indicators: Tools in a Decision-Making Strategy for Sustainable Development*, Sustainability, vol. 6
- Waters, Colin N., Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin Summerhayes, Anthony D. Barnosky, Clément Poirier, Agnieszka Gąsuzka, Alejandro Cearreta, Matt Edgeworth, Erle C. Ellis, Michael Ellis, Catherine Jeandel, Reinhold Leinfelder, J. R. McNeill, Daniel deB. Richter, Will Steffen, James Syvitski, Davor Vidas, Michael Wagemich, Mark Williams, An Zhisheng, Jacques Grinevald, Eric Odada, Naomi Oreskes, Alexander P. Wolfe, 2016, *The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene*, Science, vol. 351, issue 6269

Abstract

Media Coverage of the EU Regional Policy Funds. Insights into Communicating Sustainability

The media plays a fundamental role in shaping and maintaining a European public sphere that evolves through the interaction between institutional actors and their audiences and through the discursive practices and styles that these actors use in the media. In this article, we study the discursive practices that envelop sustainable practices in the absorption of European Regional Funds, with a double-fold focus on member countries and on Transylvania, Romania. We analyze three types of discourse: case studies of best practices on the website of the European Commission, news in the local media in Transylvania, and the Europe in My Region Photo Contest, spanning two years, 2014 and 2015. Our aim is to interpret the visual and textual discourses through the lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Keywords

sustainability, media, regional policy, European Union, critical discourse analysis